

8th January 2017

Luke 11.1-13

Taking with God

The most watched TV programme over Christmas was the new episode of Sherlock; a modern adaptation of Sherlock Holmes with the lead played by Benedict Cumberbatch. In the programme he was invited by his colleague John Watson to be godparent at Watsons' daughter's christening. Sherlock's response was 'God is a ludicrous fiction dreamt up by inadequate people who abdicate responsibility to an imaginary friend.'

Sat on our sofa I let out my usual resigned sigh – the kids are used to me doing this – resigned at yet another attack by the media on people of faith who believe in God, with no opportunity to put the other side of the argument.

If you think I'm being prejudiced then ask yourself the question – when was the last time you saw a positive portrayal of someone of faith in the popular media? When did you last see someone expose the fallacy of secularism or atheism on a popular TV programme and be allowed to do an alternative Sherlock?

If you wonder how you would reply to a smug sophisticated Sherlock then come along to a talk I am giving to the men's group, but its open to all, in a couple of weeks' time, Thursday 19th January 7.30pm in the Vibe entitled Making Sense of God. Based on Timothy Keller's book I shall be looking at how to answer back to these widely held assumptions that faith is a fiction, it has had its day and is only held by inadequate people who abdicate responsibility to an imaginary friend.

Maybe you have colleagues at work, members of your family, friends who quietly or loudly share those views. What would you say to them? The Bible encourages us to give a reason for the faith we hold (1 Peter 3.15). If we don't, no one else will. If we don't stand up for our faith then it will further confirm the prejudice and opinion of our growing secular society.

We are at critical levels of unbelief in God now in our country. A recent survey found only 28% of people in Britain believing in God, down 4% in just a year. The all-pervading faithlessness of our society will affect us too and squeeze us into that view point unless we know what we believe and why we believe. We are called to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. The heart will not worship what the mind has rejected. So our thinking about God is as important as what our heart says. So I

invite you to come and engage in these issues on the 19th January.

In my sermons his month I am looking at the topic of prayer. I want to be as honest as possible in preaching on this topic of prayer. For Sherlock, prayer would be an act of escapism. Talking to an imaginary friend so as to give you some comfort or pretend that someone cares. A psychological crutch to help us stay sane in the chaos and competitiveness of the world. But of course imaginary friends don't talk back and don't answer back. It is all a fiction according to Sherlock.

Well let's be honest. Sometimes it does feel like a fiction, talking to an imaginary friend. I can well understand why some people take that view. There are many times when I am just distracted in prayer, I lose my thought, my concentration, it seems like I'm talking to the wall, it's all a waste of time. I feel very inadequate to talk about prayer because on the whole I don't feel very good at it.

My only consolation is that I'm not alone in feeling small and helpless on this topic. Martin Lloyd Jones one of the most famous preachers of the twentieth century once said that he had never written on prayer because of a sense of personal inadequacy in this area. The early twentieth century Congregational theologian PT Forsyth said 'it is a

difficult and even formidable thing to write on prayer, and one fears to touch the Ark....'¹

Forsyth's comments reminds us that the nature of prayer is about relationship to God. The Creator and Lord of all. It is by definition, an awesome undertaking. Who are we that we can talk with the Almighty? If we bump into a celebrity or famous sportsperson, or even get the opportunity to meet the Queen, I'm sure most of us would be lost for words, tongue tied or prone to the odd gaffe. How much more then in our invitation to converse with God? Yet that is the invitation Jesus gives his followers. In this well-known passage in Luke's gospel he has been praying to his heavenly Father in solitude and when he returns to his disciples they ask him 'Lord teach us to pray?'

I feel inadequate to say I will teach you to pray, but I hope over these next few weeks to reflect on scripture and how it teaches us to pray, what biblical prayer is and give an honest sharing in the struggle to put theory and belief into practice. For despite times when prayer seems empty and a fiction, God has blessed me with times when prayer has been intimate and vital and answered. Enough of these moments to make me doubt my doubts and hold to the belief that prayer matters, prayer changes things, prayer is essential for the life of faith.

In the Lord's Prayer we can see two broad categories and understanding of prayer: communion and the kingdom.

Some Christians emphasise that prayer is a means to experience God's love and to know oneness with him. It promises a life of peace and of continual resting in God. Calling God 'Father', and personalising that by saying 'Our Father' suggests that prayer is about communion: an oneness and felt experience of God's loving presence, like a parent to a child. The highest aim for prayer in that view is therefore to feel the presence and love of God, to know in prayer that assurance of his care and concern, mercy and grace.

Another essence of prayer you can see in Jesus' Prayer is a calling on God to bring his kingdom. Prayer is viewed here as a wrestling match, often – or perhaps ordinarily – without a clear sense of God's immediate presence. The prayer for justice in the world, for wrongs to be righted, for the hungry to be fed, for people to be delivered from evil, for God reign, God's kingdoms to be done on earth as in heaven. The aim of prayer here is obedience to God's will, not the contemplation of his being. Prayer is not mainly for an inner state, or a feeling of inner peace, but is about conformity to God's purposes.

What accounts for these two views – what we would call 'communion centred' and 'kingdom centred' prayer? One explanation is that they reflect people's actual experience. Some discover that their emotions are unresponsive toward God and that by paying attention in prayer for more than a few minutes is extremely difficult. Others regularly experience a feeling of God's presence. Some are more concerned at the state of the world. Some are more caught up with their own state of affairs. Which view of prayer is the better one? Is peaceful adoration or assertive supplication the ultimate form of prayer? Well as you read your Bible you will find both types of prayer and as I have already pointed out Jesus frames his prayer with elements of both communion and kingdom prayers.

When you read the psalms, and one of my New Year resolutions is to read a psalm a day and pray and meditate in them, you get both experiences of prayer represented. The psalms are of course the prayer book of scripture so if you want to learn to pray, pray the prayers that Jesus would have used.

Our psalm for today Psalm 138 starts by saying 'I will praise you Lord with all of my heart. I will bow down. When called you answered me and greatly emboldened me.' Words of close communion and relationship to God.

Then the psalm prays for the kings of the earth, that they may hear what God decrees. The psalmist then prays for the lowly that God may be kind on them and that the psalmist may be vindicated in his time of trouble – prayer of the kingdom, for God’s righteousness to prevail.

A little reflection will show that these two kinds of prayer are neither opposites nor even discreet categories. Adoring God is shot through with supplication. To praise God is to pray ‘hallowed be the name’, to ask him to show the world his glory so that all may honour him as God. Seeking God’s kingdom must include prayer to know God himself.

The Westminster shorter catechism, a founding document for the Reformed Church tells us that our purpose is to ‘glorify God and enjoy him forever’. In this famous sentence we see reflected both kingdom prayer and communion prayer. These two things, glorifying God and enjoying God – do not always coincide in this life, but in the end they must be the same thing. We may pray for the coming of God’s kingdom, but if we don’t enjoy God supremely with all our being we are not truly honouring him as Lord. Prayer is both conversation and encounter with God. Awe and intimacy, struggle and reality.

The criticism of prayer by some is that it is too subjective and often engages in wish fulfilment and fantasy.

The prominent Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar warned against turning inward too much and relying too much on our feelings. He said ‘contemplative prayer neither can nor should be self-contemplation, but rather a reverent regard and listening to ... the Not-me, namely the Word of God’ⁱⁱ.

At this time of year many people will be offering you yoga sessions, mindfulness courses, Buddhist meditation and relaxation to calm your inner self and give you peace. From a biblical point of view we have no chance of peace until we have the fundamental peace with God. Last autumn we looked at Paul’s letter to the Romans where Paul describes the world in rebellion to God. We want to be God. We want to be the centre of our universe. If God exists we have to readjust our vision. The transcendence of God, the otherness of God, the holiness of God, calls us to account.

That’s why Sherlock, many people want to believe that god is a ludicrous fiction because they don’t want to be held to account for their actions, their lifestyles and the values of the world. They hope there is no God because the consequences of there being a God would be damning.

Our individualised and person centred society, where it’s all about me, means that often writers on prayer and

meditation and spirituality talk about wonder and praise and supplication but miss out on confession and repentance. Guilt has been psychologised out as something not helpful, something that implies there is a right and a wrong, something ultimate and absolute and we don't do absolutes anymore in our secular society, supposedly.

The Lord's Prayer doesn't of course overlook guilt: Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Christian prayer brings you up sharp that you pray to God 'the Not me' in Von Balthasar's phrase. God in Christian understanding is not the 'same as me' (in other words too familiar), nor 'far from me' (in other words remote and austere) – but personal yet other – 'Not me'. (Immanent and transcendent to use the big theological words)

Christian prayer is prayer to the God revealed in scripture. People pray to all sorts of gods. They can pray to the god of their imagination, a god of fiction even. The Bible is our revelation of the person of God over the centuries and millenniums, to Israel, through Jesus, to the early church. We pray to God as revealed in scripture. Which of course requires us to be soaked in scripture and know our scriptures.

I drop my wife off most mornings at the rail station to catch a train to work in Gloucester. Most mornings there are a couple of Jehovah Witnesses, sat shivering recently by the ticket machine with their magazine rack. Their Watchtowers magazines offer to help people understand the Bible. Well at least their Bible. I admire their courage and persistence and their zeal in believing that this book is so important for life. Inspired by them I am holding a Bible class this year linked in to our daily bible reading notes. So once a month or so I will offer a one off meeting looking at a different book or theme in the Bible that the IBRA notes has been covering, to help increase our biblical literacy – so that we can get to grips with what the Bible says. I'm not letting the Jehovah Witnesses have a monopoly on offering to tell people what the Bible says. If you want to get hold of either a copy of the IBRA notes, and you can get it on kindle or iPad now, or have the daily scheme of bible readings then Tab news has details. I will also offer some short reflections on our face book page week by week.

It matters greatly the type of God to whom you pray and whether you focus on God in prayer or your own perceived emotional needs. People from western cultures want a God who is loving and forgiving but not holy and

transcendent. Without prayer that answers the God of the bible we will only be talking to ourselves.

Eugene Peterson puts it very bluntly:

'Left to ourselves, we will pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing, or to the part of God we manage to understand. But what is critical is that we speak to the God who speaks to us and to everything that he speaks to us... there is a difference between praying to an unknown God whom we hope to discover in our praying, and praying to a known God, revealed through Israel and Jesus Christ, who speaks our language. In the first, we indulge our appetite for religious fulfilment; in the second we practice obedient faith. The first is a lot more fun, the second is a lot more important. What is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves, but that we learn to answer God.'^{xiii}

If we leave the Bible out, we may plumb our impressions and feelings and imagine God saying things to us, but how can we be sure we are not self-deceived?

George Whitfield, the great evangelist and preacher of the eighteenth century whose ministry founded this church had in late 1743 a son born to him and his wife Elizabeth. Whitefield had a strong impression that God was telling him that the child would grow up to also be a 'preacher of

the everlasting gospel'. In view of this divine assurance, he gave his son the name John, after John the Baptist, whose mother was also named Elizabeth. When John Whitfield was born, George baptized his son before a large crowd and preached a sermon on the great work that God would do through his son. He knew that cynics were sneering at his prophecies, but he ignored them.

Then at just four months old, his son died suddenly of a seizure. The Whitefield's were of course grief stricken, but George was particularly convicted about how wrong he had been to count his inward impulses and intuitions as being essentially equal to God's word. He realised he had led his congregation into the same disillusioning mistake. Whitefield had interpreted his own feelings - his understandable and powerful fatherly pride and joy in his son, and his hopes for him - as God speaking to his heart. Not long afterwards he wrote a wrenching prayer for himself; that God would 'render this mistaken parent more cautious, more sober minded, more experienced in Satan's devices, and consequently more useful in his future labours to the church of God'.

The lesson here is not that God never guides our thoughts or prompts us to choose wise courses of action, but that we cannot be certain he is speaking to us unless we read it in scripture.

Christian prayer is prayer learnt from the vocabulary of scripture. None of this should surprise us since we see this basic dynamic played out in the development of every human being. Eugene Peterson reminds us that *‘because we learned language so early in our lives we have no memory of the process and would therefore imagine that it was we who took the initiative to learn how to speak. However that is not the case. Language is spoken to us; we learn language only as we are spoken to. We are plunged into area of language... then slowly syllable by syllable we acquire the capacity to answer: mummy, daddy, bottle blanket, and toy. Yes, no... Not one of those words was a first word. All speech is answering speech. We were spoken to before we spoke.’*^{iv}

Peterson draws the analogy of the overwhelming perviousness of God’s speech to our prayers. We plunge ourselves into the sea of God’s language, the bible, until there is an answering response in our hearts and minds. It may be one of shame or joy, or of confusion or of appeal – but the response to God’s speech is then truly prayer.

Prayer is a conversation with God but also an encounter with God. Conversations can remain just a mere exchange of information that do not lead to true personal encounter

and relationship. Many if not most of our conversations are superficial without much self-disclosure. Some conversations however go deep and we sense that both of us are revealing not just information but our very selves. The conversation then becomes a personal encounter, a true connection.

God is the only one who knows you through and through. There is nothing you can hide, although we pretend we can. We do not just want to know about God but to know God, to seek his face and presence. Then you get caught up doxology, transformative praise: thine be the kingdom the power and the glory, forever and ever. Conversation with God should hopefully lead to an encounter with God. Prayer turns theology into experience. Through it we sense his presence and receive his joy, his love, has peace and patience and thereby we are changed in attitude, behaviour and character.

When your prayer life finally begins to flourish, the effects can be remarkable. You may be filled with self-pity and be justifying resentment and anger. Then you sit down to pray and the reorientation that comes before God’s face reveals the pettiness of your feeling in an instant. All your self-justifying excuses fall to the ground in pieces. Or you may be filled with anxiety and during prayer you come to wonder what you were so worried about. You laugh at

yourself and thank God for what he is and what he's done. It can be that dramatic. It is the bracing clarity of a new perspective. Eventually this can be a normal experience, but that is never how prayer starts. In the beginning the feeling of poverty and absence usually dominates but if you press on through duty, delight comes.

As we look at prayer in the coming weeks I pray our pursuit of God may bring us delight and bear fruit in our

lives; that we may hallow his name and bring his kingdom into our lives and the world around us.

Bibliography: Tim Keller, Prayer, Hodder, 2014

ⁱ PT Forsyth, The Soul of Prayer, 1916

ⁱⁱ H Urs von Balthasar, Prayer, Ignatius Press 1986 p28

ⁱⁱⁱ E H Peterson, Answering God, The Psalms as tools for prayer, Harper and Row 1989

^{iv} E H Peterson, Working the Angles, Eerdmans 1987