

**15<sup>th</sup> January 2017**

**Luke 18.1-8**

Last week I started a sermon series on prayer. I suggested that there were two kinds of prayer in scripture: communion prayer and kingdom prayer. Communion prayer emphasises that prayer is a means to experience God's love and to know oneness with him and be aware of his presence. Kingdom prayer is more of a wrestling match, calling on God to bring in his kingdom. It is prayer for justice, for wrongs to be righted, for the hungry to be fed for evil to be delivered from. The aim of this type of prayer is obedience to God's will and purposes rather than trying to experience an inner state of peace or God's felt presence.

I went on to stress the importance of praying scripture, because otherwise we could be praying to an imaginary God. Scripture reveals God's nature and revelation to people of faith through Israel, Jesus and the early church. It is how God addresses us and calls us into conversation and encounter.

I suggested that my sermons on prayer would be a balance between theory, looking at what the bible defines as prayer

and biblical prayers and practice: an honest sharing with you of my own joys and struggles in prayer.

This week has been a case in point. On Monday afternoon I received a phone call from my brother to say that my mother who had been taken in to hospital in Blackpool was seriously ill. She had recently moved into a care home up there to be near my brother. She was admitted last weekend with an infection but it had taken a turn for the worse. The nurses were suggesting that we should prepare ourselves that this could be the end. I rushed up to her bedside first thing on Tuesday morning. I found my brother Andrew and his wife Judith there and they told me that the medics had said her kidneys had stopped working and the outlook was bleak. They gave her only 2-4 days.

Mum was slipping in and out of consciousness and was a little restless. It was a sombre and pensive time sat around the bed. We stayed there until the evening when visiting times ended but at the end of the day she was moved into a private room from the eight bed ward she was on. We went home to prepare for the next day and prepare for the worst.

I was mindful of this passage that I had to preach on this Sunday. I usually read the scripture set for the forthcoming

Sunday at the start of the week in order for God to speak to me through the week's events. Pondering on this passage that evening in Blackpool a number of reactions came to me. I was struck when Jesus encouraged his disciples to always pray and not give up. I was struck by the widow who kept coming back to the judge and kept pestering him.

Since my mother had been diagnosed with dementia a few years ago I'll be honest I have been praying for the Lord to take her home. They say you lose someone before you lose some one with dementia and we have seen the slow decline in her ability to remember who we were and who she was. We have been blessed in that the type of dementia she has had has not made her too anxious or agitated. But I have felt like that widow going back to the judge and asking when, when will you end this? I know many of you are in similar positions and pray the same thing for your loved ones. When will this be over? When will it end? We keep bothering the great judge.

But I was also challenged by the words of Jesus: always pray and don't give up. And at the end of the parable he asks the question: when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the earth?

I spoke last week about letting God speak to us first through his word and letting prayer be our response. So I felt I had to put my own words into practice.

What was the faith I needed to show in this situation? Certainly another word for faith is trust. We can ask the question, we can bother God with the same old requests, we can wrestle in prayer but faith is ultimately trust that God knows best. In God's timing. My mother is still with us having confounded the medics.

But faith is also 'the faith' – what you believe and hold dear. What values and hopes do you hold and trust in.

I had travelled up to Blackpool on the train so I was able to read during the journey. I have been reading Timothy Keller's book 'Making Sense of God' in preparation for a talk I'm giving on Thursday. The book is about the sceptical age in which we live and how our society places such faith in empirical reason, historical progress and heartfelt emotion that's it is easy to wonder why should anyone believe in Christianity? The book explores what role can faith and religion play in our modern lives?

I had been reading a chapter entitled: *Faith can give you a meaning that suffering can't take from you*. Keller reflects on the need for meaning in our lives. Most people wonder sometimes what is the point of life and whether their lives

have any meaning. The materialistic and atheistic response is that we are all the products of evolutionary chance and when we die we cease to exist. They often then say something like ‘so celebrate life in every moment, admire its wonders and love without reservation. Life is what you make of it. You create your own meaning’.

Keller finds some inconsistencies in this view. If there is no afterlife, if all we are is strictly matter without any soul and we were not created for any special purpose nothing we do here, be it kind or cruel will make any difference in the end. But then they say ‘so’ - indicating a logical sequence – so we should live a life of celebration and love? It doesn’t necessarily follow.

Why shouldn’t we live as selfishly as we can get away with? How do beliefs in human rights and freedom and equality arise or align with the idea that human beings came to be what they are through the survival of the fittest. They don’t really. ‘Man descended from the apes, therefore we should love one another’: the second clause doesn’t follow from the first. If it was natural for the strong to eat the weak in the past, why aren’t people allowed to do it now? I’m not arguing that we should not love one another by the way, but I was getting in touch with my faith which gives me meaning and direction.

Most people don’t think too deeply about the meaning of life. It’s a bit clichéd. Most people just get on with living it: trying to have a good time, experience love, find health and prosperity. The problem is that if you focus your meaning and satisfaction in life on finding love, or family, or having a good career, or being healthy you are likely to end up being disappointed or dissatisfied. You may end up thinking maybe I can do better. Or if you did achieve your dreams you may think is that it? Is that all there is?

Secularism is the only worldview whose members must find their main meaning within this life. All other ways of understanding the world hold that ‘this life is not the whole story’ but with secularism it is. When secular people create their own meanings it must be round something located in their material world. Which can leave you radically vulnerable to the realities of how life goes in the world.

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish doctor who survived the death camps during World War II. His famous book ‘Man’s search for Meaning’ explored the reason why some people under those horrendous conditions seemed to stay strong and kind whilst others simply gave up or even become collaborators in order to survive. His conclusion was that it had to do with a person’s meaning in life. Many people had made career or social status or family their meaning.

These meanings were based on things in this life that the death camp swept away from them completely. Some collapsed spiritually and psychologically and often died by simply ‘giving up’. Some collapsed morally. They were prepared to use every means even brutal force, theft, and the betrayal of friends, in order to save themselves’. Those who did not crumble often had a different reference point that transcended the circumstances of this life. Many prisoners turned back to a depth and vigour of religious belief that surprised the new arrivals.

One women in the camp said ‘In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously’. When Dr Frankl spoke to prisoners, in order to infuse their suffering with dignity and meaning he would say that ‘someone looks down on each of us in difficult hours – a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or God – and he would not expect u to disappoint him’.

Frankl discovered that the only way for the prisoner’s humanity to survive was to relocate the main meaning of their lives to some transcendent reference point, something beyond this life and even this world. Something suffering can’t take from you.

Keller goes on to say that Christians do not side step the question of meaning by saying ‘oh stop thinking through

the implications of what you believe about the universe. Just try to enjoy the day’. No, if a Christian is feeling downcast and meaningless, it is because, in a sense, she is not being rational enough. She is not thinking enough about the implications of what she believes about the universe.

Christians believe that there is a God, who made us in love to know him, but that as a human race we turned away and were lost to him. However he has promised to bring us back to himself. God sent his Son into the world to break the power of sin and death, at infinite cost to himself, by going to the cross. Christian teaching is that Jesus rose from the dead and passed through the heavens and is now ruling history and preparing a future new heaven and new earth, without death and suffering, in which we will be with him forever. And then all the deepest longings of our hearts will find their fulfilment.

It is fair to say that if you are a Christian with those beliefs – about who you are to God and what is in store for you – but you are not experiencing peace and meaning, then it is because you are not thinking enough. Or your thinking is being undermined or corrupted from other sources.

There is a kind of shallow, temporary peace that modern people can get from not thinking too much about their

situation, but Christianity can give deep peace and meaning that come from making yourself as aware and as mindful of your beliefs as possible.

That Tuesday morning as I was praying before I returned to the hospital to sit with my dying mother I was reflecting on this gospel scripture and also praying through Psalm 8. I think I said last week that one of my New Year resolutions was to pray through a psalm a day. Psalm 8 tells us '*what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them. You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour. Lord our Lord how majestic is your name!*'

I don't have any problems with evolution. I could well accept that God used evolutionary processes to create us but we have been created and are a little lower than the angels, cared for and cherished by the God in whose image we are created.

And as I prayed and recalled what I'd read on the train the other day I realised that we were going along with the secular godless narrative that death was something to be feared, the end of your dreams, just nothingness.

My mother has had a strong and unwavering simple faith all her life. Now of all times I realised it must mean something. Now of all times we must celebrate it. If we

were feeling downcast and meaningless we were not being rational enough. We were not working out the implications of what she believed and what we believed.

*You should always pray and not give up. When the Son of Man comes will he find faith?*

My mother loved playing the piano. She played it for church and fellowship meetings. She sung in the choir. She loved the traditional hymns and she loved the modern songs. Her copy of Mission Praise Music edition has disintegrated because she has thumbed it through so much. I can recall how she would sit at her piano and just play one song or hymn after another going through the book. Having taken my iPad with me I downloaded a copy of Hymns ancient and modern through my kindle app.

We went into hospital and Judith my sister in law and I formed a scratch choir. My brother who doesn't really do singing just hummed in the corner. We went through hymns ancient and modern all day singing praise to God round the bedside of mum. She stared to join in, humming at first and then as her spirit grew stronger even managed some of the words.

I have to say that the version of hymns ancient and modern I downloaded was a corrupted version. The spelling could trip you up. So for example there is a line in the hymn

Praise my soul the king of heaven that should read ‘in his arms he gently bears us’. In this version it read ‘in his arms he gently beats us’. We would be singing along and scanning the line and then burst out laughing.

But singing hymns is singing your faith and reminding yourself of what we believe and hold dear. It transformed the atmosphere in that hospital. The nurses kept dropping in to get a bit of the spirit. The chaplain came and we celebrated communion. I read passages from the bible. My mum kept saying ‘isn’t this exciting?’ The next day she was even more alert and told us ‘this is a joyous day’.

It was a blessed time with her because we didn’t succumb to the despair of the world around us. We had a hope to celebrate. Death is defeated Christ has the victory. When my mother does eventually die we will celebrate her going home, going to be with God, finding that eternal rest and peace, changed from glory into glory. I reminded her of the inscription that she had written in the bible she bought me for my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday: ‘One life to live will soon be past, but to live for Christ will always last.’

Friends I had to pray this through this week. Not give up, keep going back like the widow to the judge, keep going back to what we believe and remind yourself until it sinks in and you live out the implications of those beliefs and

don’t let the world squeeze faith out of you. Keep going back because we believe that justice will be done, like that widow who believed that justice would be done. She had faith to keep hoping. We believe that the suffering and decay of this world is not the last word. We don’t deny them, we don’t believe we will be spared them but we don’t believe they have the last word.

Always pray and not give up. When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the earth?