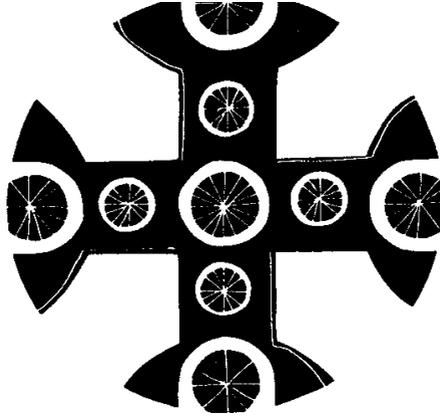


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ANGLICAN CHURCH
CAMBERWELL



*Praying
through silence and Scripture*

Two addresses given by
Father Ken Hewlett

at the
Lent Quiet Morning
24 February 2018

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Praying through silence

In a world full of noise, more and more people are searching for silence, silence in which to find peace, silence in which to get in touch with self and with God. Throughout the centuries the teachers of prayer have taught the central place of silence in the journey with God. Today Christians of every variety are coming together to learn the prayer of silence.

Clearly complete silence is not absolutely essential for prayer – otherwise how would we who live in cities ever be able to pray? The importance of silence is that it is conducive to prayer –the silence gets us in touch with what is going on inside. For all of us there is usually more going on inside of us that what our conscious minds can grasp – yet it is influencing the way we see reality, and the way we act, and the way we react. This situation leads us to ask ourselves from time to time, ‘Why did this happen? What came over me?’ Silence allows to rise in our consciousness all those things, which are lurking in our subconscious, memories particularly.

The point of this for prayer is that in order to know God, we must know ourselves. It is in God that we have our existence. What we are reflects God. So what we do not know of ourselves that corresponding knowledge of God is with-held from us. If there is a great deal in us that is buried/hidden, not only is our knowledge of God poorer, but also the ministry of the presence of the love of God to us in those buried memories or attitudes cannot be openly received. When we are silent it is more difficult to hide those buried areas, which God wants to bring to our notice. As they are brought to our attention through silence, then we can get to know God in those areas where God has been previously

hidden for us. In this way silence then gives us a chance to get in touch with what is really going on in our lives.

Silent retreats and quiet days can be days of revelation – in these specific times of silence we give God the chance to show us our inner selves and to address us. We live in a very busy and stressful culture – we have to run to stand still. There is pressure of work and the pressure of family life; it has us constantly asking ourselves, ‘What will I do next?’ It is possible for the Church to make us busy with many responsibilities, even giving some of us the chance to hide behind the busyness and avoid meeting God. As Christians we have the responsibility to make space in our lives for silence. The inner silence, to which the outer silence contributes, is about allowing God to be God in us and to be the source and mover of our prayers. As St Paul says, ‘Unless the Spirit within cries, Abba Father’. True prayer is not something that we do on our own. It is something that God does in us, by God’s Spirit. Our approach, then, must be to be still and to try to let God pray in us, rather than feel that it is all up to us.

Advice on coming into silence

It is easy to speak of an inner silence in which God is praying in us; it is much harder to begin to experience it.

We need to be careful – not to force it – therefore we need to avoid those things in prayer, which distract us away from silence. Like trying to work things out, or by too much intellectual activity.

We need not to leap at silence because there is the very real possibility that the more determined we are to get into silence the result will be that silence will elude us. We need not to try too hard, but rather to listen. God is with us in all our

aspects of existence; we can find God by beginning to listen to them. It is important for us to have confidence that God will lead us into inner silence, albeit gradually. The wonderful thing is to reach the point where we can really be still. God gives this stillness to us, but there are certain ways we can open ourselves in prayer, making it more likely that we can reach an inner stillness – never complete, but relatively still.

So-called distractions

Teachers on prayer, like Ignatius, have helped us to see that before we reach stillness we must go through a process of engagement with the things which are clamouring within us. It is as though we are a great big house with many rooms. The rooms are full of screaming children – tantrums all around, hammering on the door. People who are seeking to enter into silence can become upset about the so-called distractions. Yet these so-called distractions are the raw material on which God is working in us. They are therefore to be looked at, even prized and not dismissed in frustration. Whenever we are approaching silence something important may come to light through what seems to be a distraction. God cannot be met outside of our existence. The thoughts, which flood in, must be looked at, because they may be central to what God is trying to do with us.

In order to help quieten the ‘screaming children’ of our minds there are some well-tried steps given by Ignatius which can be very helpful:

Step 1

Before starting to pray, stand for a moment or two a little way from where you are going to pray and just bring to mind what you are about. The pause for reflection helps.

Step 2

Preparatory prayer; ‘Grant that everything within me may be directed to your service and praise.’

Step 3

Consider what is going to be the focus of your prayer or meditation.

Step 4

Petition for prayer. Ask that God will meet you and pray in you as you meditate.

Step 5

Begin seeking to focus as you have decided. If you are trying an imaginative contemplation from a gospel story, then start by putting self in the scene. Who is present? What are they saying? What are they doing? The questions take their course, as we become part of the scene in our imagination.

Objects as a focus of prayer

Many people who practise silent prayer find it helpful to use an object as a focus of prayer. This is usually visual, but could be something to touch, held in our hands. It may be that we light a candle, look at a crucifix, or hold a cross. Silent meditation on the suffering of Christ can also help us to focus and pray with those who suffer today.

Praise.

At the heart of silent prayer is this appreciation of God. Our praise can take many forms, yet in silent prayer when we reach that stillness of mind and heart, and when we are really open,

then our praise would simply be our adoration of God – words not being necessary. In the Revelation to John we are told that in the worship of heaven the living creatures cry out continually; ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God the Almighty, he was, he is, and he is to come’. (Rev.4.8). All our faculties are involved in our relating to God. God made them all and is in them all.

The source of all true praise is appreciation, valuing, cherishing, a person for what they have done and achieved. So similarly we praise God, when we praise his creation. This means we should always be encouraged to reflect on good memories when it comes to praying.

Listening

If praise is not exactly the flavour of the month in our culture, then listening is. In our busy world many people long for someone to listen to them; even in church life there has developed an awareness of our need to listen to God. Many Christians would say that they know what God has said to them. For some it is in the form of general awareness or direction. For others it is in the form of words, usually sensed rather than heard audibly. However the scope for self-deception is obvious. Many people sense God speaking to them, not in words, but in a moment of realisation. Listening to God is about listening to ourselves, so that we know what is going on inside.

To practise the art of being still, then, in order to listen, is to provide a rich playground for real relationships with God to grow. We can discover who we are and who God is. As we listen to our moods and feelings, our anxieties, ambitions and frustrations, we can present them back to God, asking that we might be shown what it all means and where our thoughts are

leading. Listening enables God to interpret our expectations for us. It gives space for change and our attitudes can be changed.

Intercession

As we think about intercession in the silence, an issue that arises is that of lists. I think there is every reason to be as relaxed about intercession as listening – that we should be open to follow the prompting of God rather the discipline of working with lists of people to pray for. Some people ask what is the point of lists ‘When God knows all this’. The problem of lists is that control is kept in our hands so that we can be diverted from allowing God to be God, and do God’s praying within us. The complementary truth, however, is that God has called us to relate to him as children to a father, and children ask their parents in a natural way, about those things they are concerned about. Children however learn to share in the particular concerns of their parents. This brings us back to God as the author of prayer. God is concerned for all people and we learn to share that concern with God. Or as Jesus taught us to pray to God the Father in the Lord’s Prayer. ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done.’ Lists may help us share the concern intelligently, whether our intercession is silently holding people before God or praying in words, silently or out loud. However we use our silent prayer for intercession, we must remember that God is the author of our true prayer, and we ought not to behave as if it all depends on us.

Intimacy

Any praying through silence will require us to contemplate the love of God and our response to it. A lighted candle to focus on can evoke a sense of the bond between God and us.

Candles are helpful in prayer because they are full of symbolism – Christ the light of the world. Candlelight touches something in us. People throughout the world are fascinated by candles, particularly candles in the dark. The candlelight dispels the darkness, it does it gently, and it gives warmth.

Finally in our silent prayer the intimacy we strive for with God requires us not to delude ourselves or to put on an act. God wants to meet us as we are, and true prayer must proceed from complete honesty with ourselves. Silent prayer spreads before us a rich tapestry woven by God. Important and natural though words are, just to pray pouring out endless words can place obstacles in the way.

Praying through Scripture

To travel the pathways of prayer, we need direction. We need to be able to hear God's voice. The journey is about coming home to God, and God must direct us there. The voice of God is not an audible voice, but the unmistakable sense that God is calling us, guiding us.

The voice of God addresses us in a significant way through Holy Scripture. At the end of a reading at the Eucharist we are challenged by the reader to 'Hear the word of the Lord'. God has not only acted powerfully to rescue the world, but God wants us to interpret these acts of salvation correctly. So God has spoken to us through the acts of salvation recorded in the scriptures, and God continues to speak through them today. The most important thing about praying through the scriptures is that we need to let God speak to us. In handling the scriptures we are opening ourselves to the voice of God, and it has great power to change us.

A glimpse into the control room.

One of the things I learnt when I lived in a religious community was that praying and reading the Scriptures go together. Therefore in that sense, the scriptures form the framework within which I pray. One of the important points one learns from reading the scriptures is that God is the focal point, not me. If God is central to all that is going on in the world, then the scriptures take us into the control room where, 'the voice of God' introduces us to something of the way things are in God's creation. But if God is the Centre of everything, why is God interested at all in our prayers?

It does appear that the creation is the extension of the life of God, Creator, Christ and Spirit, to include lovingly,

everything that God has made. And within that context there is a freedom of relationship. God has a vision of the world as it is and how it should be. But it isn't yet complete. It is established as things develop. We play our part and make our contribution. This is what I think praying is all about – playing our part in God realising the best for creation.

Some might then ask: if God knows our needs, ‘Why pray?’ But prayer is not primarily about what we need – prayer is about being drawn into the way God wants the world to be. God calls each one of us into partnership with God; prayer opens up the partnership. God has infinite patience with humanity; any glimpse of human history would suggest this. A helpful way of thinking how God continues to work with us is to think about a tapestry. On the front it all looks very neat, ordered planned, even creative. But when you look at the back of the tapestry we see broken bit, bits tied in – all very untidy and seemingly chaotic. The scriptures teach us that God is at work in Creation, lovingly calling people to service, to partnership, to work – to play their part in the making of the will of God come about.

Only from the scriptures can we begin to grasp the great world purposes into which God is calling us. Our hearing and responding to the voice of God in prayer will be formed by our reading of the Scriptures. As we read the scriptures our prayer will be informed that God has very loving purposes for the world, and is longing for us to share this divine mission.

Praying through Scripture, then, we see the world through the eyes of God. We cry out that the people of the world might find their peace in Jesus we cry out for all things to come to their coherence in Jesus, the environment and the

whole universe, that everything might find in Jesus its unity and its peace.

The sweet words of love

The words of scripture are our own personal invitation to take our place in God's design. We are to read these words carefully and slowly just as we would a love letter. There is a well-known Benedictine tradition in which the slow reading of scripture is an encounter with God. If we say a phrase of Scripture slowly and meditatively, it opens the way for God to speak. We need to pay attention to posture, location, silence, to be able to use this method effectively – once we are still then we can begin to say a section of scripture slowly and meditatively using the same text over and over again. E.g., 'Be still, and know that I am God'. Or 'I am the good shepherd; I lay down my life for the sheep'. After a period of repeating the chosen section of scripture, just let the silence take over. In that silence rich encounters are possible

The map which guides

Using the scriptures in our prayers requires us first to understand what the scripture is saying, then expressing it in our own words. This is the sense in which the Scriptures are a map for our prayers. An example of what I am trying to get at – If I have just been reading that section in the gospel where Jesus talks about losing one's life in order to find it and if I am also considering the day ahead, my prayer might be something like:

'God, I thank you that I have read again what I have known for a long time, that it is by offering my life in the service of you and others that I will have the possession of it. As I look at what is ahead of me to day I can see that there will be

moments when it is likely that these same challenges are going to be made of me. I will try to be intentional with those I meet with and be willing to give of myself in every situation.’

The ‘voice of God’ in the scriptures calls us into specific action, often making us answer our own prayers!

The mirror

Home is the place where we are faced with ourselves. Those closest to us, because they love us, will help us to see ourselves as we really are. Then we can address the need for change. The voice of God, similarly, is a voice, which faces us with ourselves that we might admit our wrong, receive God’s word of forgiveness, and allow ourselves to be changed. There is no question that God always accepts us as we are. God’s voice about our faults is only that might live in the truth with both a godly sorrow that this is the way we are, and a holy joy that all is truly forgiven. The scriptures are then, amongst other things, a mirror for us to look into as we come to terms with who we are and who we could be.

The arrows

There are many occasions when a sentence of Scripture is ready to hand as the ideal prayer, able to lift heart and mind to God. One of the most well-known is the Jesus prayer, originally developed in the Orthodox church, but now widely used all over the world:

‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner’.

The traditional use of the prayer is to repeat it many times. It is recalled instinctively at any time of the day or night. When repeated many times, in a strange way, it seems that the Spirit begins to pray it in us. It is pure gospel.

Any section of scripture can be used in this arrow form. Carefully chosen they will usually reach their target.

Raw human emotions

Any presentation of praying through the scriptures would be incomplete without mention of the psalms. In the Psalms, God is affirming a whole range of human emotions. There is great joy, and there is raw pain. All moods find their place in the psalms. There is reflective wisdom, there are laments. There is poetry full of wonder at creation. There is the recitation of the history of God's people, sometimes the positive strands, sometimes and the negative. There is confession of sin. We are provided with a kind of God given hymnbook. It is very reassuring. All of us need to make friends with the psalms.

Scripture, then, offers us a great many ways in which, on the one hand, we hear the voice of God, and on the other hand, we are provided with words and models for every kind of mood and situation, to take and use in our prayers. Prayer is a relationship with God, a partnership. God is the good companion and more. God is the Centre of everything, yet caring for creation. God seeks to draw out our responsibility, calling us out to work with God and to pray prayers which are closest to God's will. God is always forming us along the way, guiding us to our true home.

This journey cannot be undertaken profitably without learning to hear the voice of God, which means listening and praying through Scripture. Let us take to heart the psalmist's words for our Pathways of Prayer:

If only you would listen to him today,
'Do not harden your hearts.' [Psalm 95:7]

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*St John's is an Anglican church in the contemporary catholic tradition.
Our mission is to bring people into communion with God and with each other.*

Worship at St John's

<i>Sunday:</i>	<i>8:00am</i>	<i>Eucharist</i>
	<i>10:00am</i>	<i>Sung Eucharist</i>
<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>6:00pm</i>	<i>Evening worship</i>
	<i>12:00 noon</i>	<i>Eucharist</i>
<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>6.30pm (1st)</i>	<i>Eucharist & Curry</i>
	<i>7pm (2nd)</i>	<i>Eucharist</i>
<i>Tues-Fri:</i>	<i>9:30am</i>	<i>Morning Prayer</i>
	<i>5:00pm</i>	<i>Evening Prayer</i>