

I think it was a couple of weeks ago that Judith and I were talking about the service today, and about what I might say in the sermon slot, and I think she said something like, “Well, ordination, St Peter’s day and prayer – you ought to be able to get something out of those!”

And that sentence stuck in my mind, and forms the basis of what I am going to say. Ordination, Peter and Prayer.

This week as I have thought about Judith, away on retreat, I found myself thinking back to my own pre-ordination retreat, though to the one before my deaconing. I remember during the two days of silence becoming acutely aware of all my inadequacies, and all my failings, all my brokenness, all the reasons why I wasn’t fit to be deaconed, and in a state of some angst went to see the retreat leader poured out my heart and told him, “I’m just not holy enough to be a vicar!”

I remember him pulling out a glazed pottery cross, with a mix of colours beautifully blended through its breadth and length. He told me that he’d made it himself, guided by a professional potter. The main part was simply clay, but to make the colours he had had to smash different coloured glass bottles, green and brown and blue. And then he’d pushed the shards of glass into the clay. He told me that the broken glass had represented his own brokenness, which he had offered to God as he worked. When the cross was fired in the kiln, the glass melted into the clay, and what came out was utterly beautiful.

Then he said, “When you are on your knees in front of the bishop, just offer yourself to God in all your brokenness. He knows your heart, and all your failings. But he loves you, and delights in your offering of yourself to him. He will turn your brokenness into something beautiful.”

Peter, quite early on in his journey with Jesus, had been fishing in the Sea of Galilee, and had caught nothing. At Jesus command he somewhat reluctantly set sail again, cast his nets, and was overwhelmed by both the huge catch of fish that resulted and, moments later, by his own sin. In the presence of the Son of God he cried out, “Away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

Three years later, again on Galilee, another instruction, another miraculous catch of fish, and for a broken Peter who had three times denied he even knew who Jesus was, another moment of shame and brokenness as Jesus put his finger on the wound of those denials by asking Peter three times “Do you love me?”

“Lord, you know all things,” Peter replied – you know my sin, my shame, my failures and my utter brokenness. But you also know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.”

Jesus doesn't ask us to be perfect before he calls us to follow him.

He asks us to be honest, and to be ourselves, and to begin by simply being with him.

We are three weeks into our sermon series on discipleship, and today's topic is 'Living with God' and the place of prayer.

In our gospel reading Jesus urges his listeners, “Don't be like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and street corners, so that they may be seen by others. No, whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your heavenly Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

This is about honesty, intimacy, vulnerability. When you pray, don't wear a mask. Don't try to be someone you are not. Take yourself off to a quiet place, where no-one else will hear or disturb you, and just be you, in the presence of your heavenly Father, the one 'to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid'. The one who knows what you need before you ask him. The one who knows everything about you, and still loves you.

The one who longs, I think, for us to stop rushing around **doing** things so that we can spend some time just **being** with him. Being in his presence, receiving from him, basking in his love, and grace, and strength, so that we soak it in, and then have something to give to the world we live in.

But we're not good at just 'being', are we?

In his book, “Do nothing to change your life” Stephen Cottrell advocates spending time just resting in God's presence. He comments that most of us spend our lives rushing around, and our busyness disconnects us from God. If we could only learn to still ourselves and simply 'be' with Jesus, everything else would change. He writes:

“To be with Jesus is to be with one in whom you can be completely yourself. It is to be with someone who knows you better than you know yourself, someone who knows what it is like to be human. He sees you as you truly are

and he still loves you. He sees what you can be. He is on your side rooting for you.

“To be with God in this way is like being with a dear friend...someone with whom it is sheer delight to just rest in contented silence.....Somehow to be away from this person is to be away from ourselves. In the embrace of love we don't just find security and love, we find our true selves It is possible with God, to find security and acceptance, to be received in love.

This is what heaven is like; being with a person who not only makes you feel good about yourself, but who does this by acceptance love and forgiveness so you end up more yourself than you were before. This is what happens when God is at the centre of life.”

But is that it? Is prayer just ‘being’ with God?

The other readings we heard this morning encourage us to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances, and to offer our petitions to God. But our interceding will feel different if it flows from a place of intimacy with God, a place of being known and accepted by God.

Philip Yancey, in his book simply called ‘Prayer’, illustrates the difference like this:

“My home sits in a canyon in the shadow of a large mountain along a stream named Bear Creek. During the Spring snow-melt and after heavy rains the stream swells, tumbles frothily over rocks and acts more like a river than a creek. People have drowned in it. Once I traced the origin of Bear Creek to its very source, atop the mountain. I stood on a snowfield...Underneath I could hear the soft gurgling sound, and at the edge of the snow runnels of water leaked out. These collected into a pool, then a small alpine pond, then spilled over to begin the long journey down the mountain, joining other rivulets to take shape as the creek below my house.

It occurs to me, thinking about prayer, that most of the time I get the direction wrong. I start downstream with my own concerns and bring them to God. I inform God, as if God did not already know. I plead with God as if hoping to change God's mind, and overcome divine reluctance. Instead, I should start upstream where the flow begins

When I shift direction, I realise that God already cares about my concerns – my uncle's cancer, world peace, a broken family, a rebellious teenager- more than

I do. Grace, like water, descends to the lowest part. Streams of mercy flow. I begin with God, who bears primary responsibility for what happens on earth, and ask what part I can play in God's work on earth."

Jesus offers us an invitation not just to 'Come and see' but to 'Come and be' – to simply be ourselves, to spend time in his presence, and then to let our praying, our thinking and our doing flow from that place of intimacy with him.

Amen