

Serving God with a quiet mind

A sermon preached by Revd Joanna Coney on Sunday 12th October 2008 at St Peter's Wolvercote.

The Epistle

My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4.1-9)

The Gospel

Once more Jesus spoke to the chief priests and Pharisees in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.' (Matthew 22.1-14)

We live in worrying times. Our economy is in free fall. We live in fear of terrorist attacks, tsunamis, hurricanes. Our world is still populated with far too many voiceless people living in poverty, danger, sickness. In our so-called civilized society our children are often without purpose and dependent on drink and drugs. Our prisons are overflowing. We worry about our families when they are sick or anxious. The list is endless. And you only have to walk through the city centre and look at people and you'll see that virtually every person has a worried expression on their face.

So this morning's Collect really is a cry from the heart.

Grant, we beseech you, merciful Lord, to your faithful people pardon and peace, that they may be cleansed from all their sins and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

We pray for pardon and peace, that we may be cleansed from our sins and serve God with 'a quiet mind'. A quiet mind. We pray for grace to let go of our anxieties, to clear our minds, not primarily for our own well being, but so that we can concentrate wholly on serving God, on loving him with our whole being; and on loving our neighbour as ourselves. We pray for the grace to be liberated from all that binds us, so that we can work tirelessly to bring peace and justice to others – those close to us and those throughout the world.

We are not called to ignore the troubles of this world – far from it. But we are called firstly to love God and accept the love with which he surround us, and then to live by the conviction that , by virtue of the incarnation, God is indeed right in all the troubles of this world.

So we pray that beneath all the world's troubles we may have that quiet mind, that we may discover within ourselves that still centre, that place deep down at the rock bottom of our being where, whatever is happening around us, our faith and security within God's love is real, undisturbed, strong and unchanging.

If we look at people like Desmond Tutu, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Rowan William perhaps, then we see people who are habitually living in this still centre. And yet these are the very people who are constantly and totally immersed in working tirelessly to make this world a better place. It seems that the more rooted we are in this still centre, the more we are enabled and energized to serve others.

So how might we, in our small way, cultivate this 'quiet mind' within ourselves? Firstly of course by constant, honest and deep prayer - being always knowingly in Gods presence. And secondly, following from this life of prayer, in the way we live, and throgh our whole outlook on life.

Paul paints a picture of how we might begin in our Epistle this morning. He begins by greeting his brothers and sisters whom he loves with joy. So might we begin - in seeing all whom we meet and know as being loved by Christ, as being inherently good and lovable.

Then Paul goes on to urge two of them to overcome their conflict and be reconciled –to embrace reconciliation and living in harmony, forgiving one another and becoming people who live in peace with all around them. He says them to them: rejoice always in the Lord; be gentle; do not worry, but take everything to God in prayer; be always thankful. He exhorts them to think positively, to concentrate on whatever is good and holy and pure, never dwelling on the negative or destructive.

And it is then, as we begin to learn to live like this, that we shall experience ‘the peace of God which passes all understanding that will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus’. We shall indeed receive the grace of a ‘quiet mind’. Rowan Williams has been quoted as saying that ‘where there is joy, there is the place where God might be found’. People of quiet minds – who hear and live by Christ’s words ‘fear not’, who are not weighed down with anxiety about the things of this world, who are people of joy - these are the ones who are likely to be the places where others can catch a glimpse of and learn of God’s love for us all.

We all have our troubles and anxieties. We all know of our great need for pardon. But if we can accept forgiveness, and find and hold on to our still centre, uncluttered by worry, we shall not only *not* be overcome by the evils of this world, but our hearts and minds will be set free to give even more energy into loving God and living and working for peace and justice throughout the world.

A helpful picture might be of the sea. The waves on the top, over which we must travel, may be choppy and storm-tossed. But deep down, way beneath the waves, all is quiet, tranquil and serene. And God is always holding out to us this gift, this invitation into this peace which passes all understanding, and longing for us to embrace and receive it.

Our Gospel parable spells this out for us. The King sends out an initial invitation to his chosen guests to say that he will soon be giving a wedding banquet. But seemingly no one really takes much notice of it. Later, he sends out again saying ‘all is ready now – come and rejoice with me’. But by that time they had all made other arrangements, which they regarded as more important. So they refused.

So he sends out again, onto the streets this time, to gather into his banquet both good and bad - people unlikely to be socially acceptable at that time, and certainly not good and upright Jews. This offers a very clear picture of how God invites us to his banquet, and how we all too often, like the wedding guests, take little notice. But he keeps on inviting us; he never gives up on us. Yet we make excuses; other things seem more immediate and more important; so we put off accepting. But God’s persistent invitation shows us just how much he longs for us to come to him, however unworthy we may feel, however good or bad we are.

And what is he inviting us to? He is calling us into the fold of his love. He is calling us to his banquet. He is calling us to live in that still centre – to live with a quiet mind. He is calling us to partake of him in this and every Eucharist.

The psalm which is set for this morning (that we haven’t actually used but which you might like to read again during the week) is psalm 23:

*The Lord is my shepherd. He leads me by still waters. He revives my soul.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.*

God is in charge. God holds us in being. So how can we be anything but joyful, thankful peaceful people, longing above all else to worship him and to serve him and to care for all those he has given us to love throughout the world? To love him and to work for the coming of his kingdom. In a favourite quote of mine, Bernard of Clairveaux expresses this beautifully. He says:

“If then you are wise, you will show yourself rather as a reservoir than a canal. A canal spreads abroad water as it receives it, and a reservoir waits in stillness until it is filled before overflowing, and thus, without loss to itself, communicates its superabundant water. In the church at the present day we have many canals, but few reservoirs.”

All we can do – turning to words from Rowan Williams again – is *“To become people of intense prayer and holy lives so that we can open up the world a bit more to God’s purposes – to open the door a little more so that his love can come through.”*

And so again, we pray in the words of our Collect: *we beseech you merciful Lord to grant to your faithful people pardon and peace that we may be cleansed from all our sins and serve you with a quiet mind. Amen.*