



LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

A Pastoral Letter to the Teulu Asaph from the Bishop

17th February 2022

Bring a Christian involves a life of discipleship, following Jesus. I remember a preacher putting it very starkly in a sermon many years ago which had a great impact on me. “We are called”, he said, “to put Jesus first in our lives, but what does this mean?” “We should give him”, he continued, “the first day of the week in worship, the first part of every day in prayer, the first say in any decision, and the first part of our resources, talents and money.”

What a template for commitment! I know that I struggle to do this in my own Christian discipleship and ministry, and it does sound like a counsel of perfection, although that doesn’t mean that it isn’t a very good set of recommendations. I wonder how we’d mark ourselves out of ten.

At least two of these resolutions relate to the life of prayer, and yet I suppose that most of us would say that we find prayer difficult – difficult to find the time, difficult to know what to say, unsure of its effectiveness, and doubtful about its impact. Even the disciples came to Jesus begging “Lord, teach us to pray.” (Luke 11.1) After all, if God knows what we need before we ask him (Matthew 6.8), and is a God who seeks for the best in our lives (Luke 12.32), why bother in the first place? Well, I believe we should pray because Jesus tells us to pray (Luke 18.1), and in God’s plan, as a Father he delights to draw close to us in relationship. How strange a world it would be if we never spoke to each other in our homes, and passed like strangers through kitchen and living room, and yet, God, whom we believe to be in every place and every time, we sometimes forget and ignore.

So I believe we should as disciples regularly catch ourselves, and give God a moment to catch us, a moment when we stop and invite him to speak to us. We may have a regular slot, we may fit it in with the day’s schedule, but the important thing is not to let a day pass without making some time which is for him. A regular slot is better, of course, because we are creatures of habit, and the more habitual that we can make our prayer, the more naturally it will come to us. Some people tell me that they prefer to chat to God through the day, sending up short prayers like arrows before they start a new activity, or when they find themselves in need, and that is lovely – but I don’t think it can replace a sitting down, and giving God some intentional attention. It’s not for nothing that Rowan Williams once compared prayer with spiritual sunbathing.

So let our prayer begin with a putting down of our busyness, a stopping of other activities, and a quiet spot. Let it commence with a listening for God, in the beauty of our situation, or with a picture, sacred or special, or a piece of music that calms and puts a threshold between the world and our time with God. Perhaps the best thing to do is to read a brief passage of scripture – great chunks are not needed, a verse or two, perhaps from a study guide or a reading programme. Then, let us look for the movement of God in our lives, what blessings have come our way, what challenges may have distracted us. At the time of my confirmation, I was taught that prayer can be described as ACTS, a moment of Adoration, seeing what is beautiful in God; Confession, acknowledging where we’ve missed God; Thanksgiving, thanking God for where we’ve spotted him, and only then, Supplication, offering him our requests.

Only remember this, God delights in you, and when we put ourselves in his way, even if it is just breathing out a sigh, and letting our heart respond to his presence, it is a good starter for ten. Too often, I suspect, it is easy to let prayer be extra-curricular, something to be done when there’s a gap or an opportunity, rather like a school activity not part of the core curriculum, but for discipleship, prayer is and should be part of the core curriculum, something to invest in ahead of the rest of life, which helps to get all other things in proportion. Lord, teach us and help us to pray!

