**13th January 2012**

**Luke 11.5-13**

Last week I shared how I had been reading a great book on prayer called Epiphanies of the Ordinary, by Charlie Cleverly.

I said over this moth I'm going to be using some of his thoughts, looking at how we pray. Prayer is not primarily about presenting a shopping list to God. *‘Please bless Aunty Mary with a good night’s sleep and heal uncle john from his haemorrhoids’*. Petitions and requests are not un –important. They are just not the most important part of prayer. The request ‘give us this day our daily bread’ comes half way in to the template for prayer ‘The Lord’s prayer ‘and only after Jesus focuses at the start on a vision of God – our Father who art in heaven hallowed be your name....

Key to faith is seeing God, having an encounter with god, having a vision that will inspire and change your life.

Cheverly’s book starts with a quote from the Presbyterian pastor john Ortborg:

*It all begins with a vision. A Francis of Assisi or a John Wesley is gripped by a vision that will not let them go. But it is not a vision of what they’re going to do. It is not a vision of a preferred future. It is not a vision of human activity. It is a vision of God, and how good he is, and how wonderful it is to be alive and a friend of such a Being. Out of such a vision flows a desire to do good things for such a God. Then other people may gather, and people begin to pay more attention to what they are doing than the reality of God . . . At this point, the mission replaces the vision in people’s consciousness. Once this happens, descent is inevitable*.

(John Ortberg, Leadership Journal)

I suggested that there is a salient warning there for us – before we dash off into a year of frenzied activity, even good activity such as helping others – there is a danger we can end up paying more attention to what we are doing than to the reality of God, the vision that inspired us in the first place and gives us the energy, the inspiration, the conviction, the fuel, to move forward.

So these sermons are all about how to pray - how to keep the vision before us – about having your eyes opened in such a way that everything changes, forever, into a life of love. It is about epiphany moments that last a lifetime.

I suggested last week that the prayer of contemplation would be important in this and I want to elaborate a little more on what I mean by contemplation this week.

One of the great spiritual writers of recent times was Henri Nouwen. He taught for twenty years pastoral psychology and theology at Harvard University, one of the top universities in the United States. Then he had what he called a deep inner threat’ as he found that growing older did not necessarily bring him closer to Jesus. Instead he felt close to burnout, which he called ‘a convenient term for spiritual death’. He concluded that the question is not: how many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show me some results? But are you in love with Jesus? Perhaps another way of putting it is: Do you know the incarnate God?

Nouwen pleads for contemplation, which he calls moving away from ‘the temptation to be relevant’ and towards a conscious irrelevance which breaks with the worldly addictions to success and driveness. Nouwen lived this out as he moved from among the best and the brightest at Harvard to live in a community of people with disabilities in a forgotten corner of northern France. At the same time as hearing a call to love Christ, he also heard his call to feed his lambs, i.e. to love people.

He continues: ‘In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart for God, a heart that forgives, cares and reaches out and wants to heal... in that heart there is no suspicion, no vindictiveness, no resentment. These twin calls were put together by Christ in the great commandment to love God and neighbour, and often come together: a vision of the love of God leading to a life of laid down love for people. We might say that what God has joined together let not man divide. Yet ‘to see God’ may be difficult in our age of bustle and rush and important subjects. What is needed is a slowing down and waking up to mystery.

**What is contemplation?**

1. It is about finding space by slowing down.
2. It is about waking up and discovering God’s space within you
3. God’s space is known and owned by interior silence and prayer
4. This is called contemplation
5. It is the attention of the soul to God
6. It arises from and derives its life from the reality of God’s indwelling of the soul and the indwelling of the soul in God
7. It is praying from the heart and not from the mind
8. It is praying without words and thoughts
9. It is being still before God in silence

**Christian Mystics and contemplation**

Dame Julian of Norwich 14th century:

*“Greatly ought we to rejoice that God dwells in our soul, and more greatly ought we to rejoice that our soul dwells in God. Our soul is created to be God’s dwelling place, and the dwelling of our soul is God, who is uncreated.”*

Teresa of Avila, 17th century

*Likens the human person to a beautiful crystal castle in the centre of which God dwells.*

Meister Eckhart

*thought we are like a mirror that reflects the sun so brightly that it actually is the sun.*

St John of the Cross

*used the image of a log in a fire that was so hot that it was both a log and a fire together.*

These quotations all suggest something of the non cerebral aspects of knowing God – more of a soul thing – from the heart – when our spirits are awakened.

Cleverly in his book tells how George Whitefield, forerunner of the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century, whose preaching founded Dursley tabernacle, testifies that: ‘If the trees of a certain wood near stonehouse could speak they would tell what wonderful communion... I enjoyed with our blessed God there. Sometimes as I was walking my soul would make such leaps that it would almost go out of the body... at other times I would be overpowered by a sense of God’s infinite majesty.

Epiphanies – visions of God – encounters with god – not through thought but through the heart – deep in the soul – touching spirit to spirit.

How do they happen?

Biblical meditation is one important discipline of intimacy. Reading the scriptures not so much with the head – thinking deep thoughts, as reading with the heart – allowing ourselves to be moved by the story, reading the reads as if addressed to us, reading the gospel stories as if we were there, in our imagination, hearing, seeing smelling touching, encountering the living word. Christina meditation differs radically with Eastern meditation which has to do with emptying oneself and the use of repeated mantras. Instead we are concerned to fill our mind with biblical truth and to heighten our relationships with the heavenly |Father through Jesus the Son. We seek a vision of what is ultimately real and beautiful – god, not a vision of emptiness or our own imagination.

Contemplation needs to be rooted in biblical truth but is about waiting in stillness, in the silence of our hearts for God to encounter us.

We are alert and awakened, as if on tiptoes in our spirit, to listen.

George Whitefield cried out after a long winter, ‘I thirst, and then it was that after a long night of desertation, the Star.. The Day star arose in my heart and ... the spirit of God did take possession of my soul and, as I humbly hope, seal me unto the day of redemption’.

Another spiritual writer Madame Guyon wrote that the ultimate stage of Christian experience is divine union. This cannot be brought about merely by your own experience. Meditation will not bring divine union; neither will love, nor worship, nor your devotion, nor your sacrifice... eventually it will take an act of god to make union a reality.’

Meditation and contemplation gets you in the zone though. They open you to the possibility of that encounter.

In the gospel passage Jesus encourages us to seek and be persistent and patient in seeking and to seek believing that God is good and wants to bless us with good things, good experiences, to encounter us in his love not his wrath, to shower on us his mercy and grace, not anger and fury.

**Modern reactions**

Mystical talk sounds threatening or specialized or escapist: detached from reality. It encourages an introspective selfishness.

Praying for “things” is useful: contemplation is a luxury! How is this relevant to those who are computer programmers, or machinists, or are at home looking after the kids with clothes to wash and floors to clean? Let’s be honest monks do not have to concern themselves with nappies or babysitters of Parent teacher meetings.

But let me insist that smack in the middle of everyday life is precisely the place where prayer and intimacy with god needs to be developed. True some may have a special calling to it and may be blessed with the right personal circumstances to develop that calling. But the vast majority of us build a history with god right in the midst of our families and our places of living and working. These places are our holy ground where we are to find God.

Genuine prayer should not be escapist but should send you back into the world with God’s concern and heart for the world.

The gospel story of Martha and Mary, Luke 10.38-42) is significantly immediately before our gospel reading today in Luke 11about prayer. Mary sits a Jesus feet and the Martha, distracted by preparations for the meal gets resentful that Mary isn’t bust like her. Yet Jesus says she chose the better option. Classically there is the contrast between The Martha’s and the Mary’s: “Being”and “Doing”

See Luke 10 vs. 38-42

1. *“Being”* *leads to “doing”*
2. *“Being” gives a sense of direction* *and rightness to our “doing”*
3. *without regular contact with our “being” we become superficial*

Experiment with varied venues for solitude. Take a pre dawn walk, listening to the awakening sounds of your world (whether in the town or the country). Limit speaking for one day and see what you learn about yourself and others. Sit in an airport, or train station or bus station and observe people carefully, reflecting on what you see. Take a one day retreat or three day or even seven day retreat. For one month turn off your car radio and make the morning commute a mini retreat. Light a candle in the dark when all are asleep (apart from yourself of course – safety warning – don’t leave an unattended lit candle!) May the candle flame act as a reminder of the presence of Christ, light of the world – who shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome.

I now it’s difficult to find this solitude if you have a house full of kids, especially if they are young ones. I have to admit when my kids were young I used to lock myself in the loo for a long time. It was a private space, in more ways than one. No one minded you being in there and no one asked what you were getting up to! I kept a bible there and notepad. It became a chapel of solitude. There are ways of finding some time to cut out the world.

Secondly set aside your normal bible reading and pray the scriptures. This prayerful reading is the turning our heart and mind and spirit ever so gently over to the divine Centre. All our external and internal senses swing like a needle to the polestar of the Spirit. Read slowly, quietly, and prayerfully, pausing at any word or phrase where we feel the Spirit’s drawing.

Perhaps we may come across Nehemiah’s wonderful statement: the joy of the Lord is our strength’ (neh 8.10). We stop and wait, yielded and still. The Spirit may plumb the depths of our weakness exposing the reasons for our lack of strength and giving us intense longings for a strength that is not our own and not dependent on the winds of circumstances. We begin praying the scripture ..’Lord help me to enter into your joy... forgive my hankering after the things that never fully satisfy... let me soak in your joy’. Instruction from the spirit may come. Or song or dance, or a spirit inspired tongue.

Thirdly is the perennial human itch to get ahead with intentional times of holy leisure – to be driven even for times of prayer. The antidote is to take a nap. Be lazy in the spirit. Did you see the news item about England’s oldest man, Revd Reg Dean, who died this week at the age of 110? He was a vegetarian for more than 30 years and was a minister with both the Church of England and later the United Reformed Church, only retiring when he was 80. Mr Dean once said the secret of his longevity was being lazy. Speaking at a party for his 109th birthday, he said: "I'm a member of the fellowship known as 'lazy bones'."

Spend an hour visiting a neighbour or friend about nothing important. Help each other watch the sun go down. Take a walk, not for exercise or to study plant life but for the sheer joy of it. Stop praying for a day and being religious. Listen to the birds not to get some message out of them but just to hear them. Sit in the silence, do nothing, have nothing, need nothing. Take a bath instead of a shower. Waste time for God. The ideas are endless.

In all that discover the divine rest that overcomes our alienation and gives us a loving attention towards God and puts us in a place to experience more deeply his love for us.

Next week I will talk about what happens to us in silence and some of the distractions we may have to deal with, especially our own inner noise – the things that trouble us – where we need to know the grace of God in our lives.