

On Thursday our clergy chapter – that is those who are clergy in Brent went for a ‘Quiet Day’ at a retreat centre in Limehouse. The retreat centre is right under the fly over and why they advertise themselves as an oasis in the middle of the city, and it a very beautiful and calm spot – there is no escaping the fact that you are in the middle of the city. Sirens and traffic, rather than bird song are the background noise in their beautiful water feature garden. It is still a lovely place to go however.

The quiet day was supposed to create a space for us to prayer and reflect, however I am not sure that our facilitator for the day received that memo. There was quiet a lot of being prayed at, and talked at, and not a lot of sitting praying or reflecting in the grounds. This frustration was added to by the overwhelming heat!

When we did however have some space for prayer before and during the midday Eucharist we were told an amazing story which I found helpful. While I don’t remember the whole story to tell you, the heart of the story was that it is not in all our doing or providing to others we find Christ, but in our prayer and conversation. And if this is the case – what do we pray for.

I had already read the readings set for today before I went on Thursday, and so the nature and desire of prayer was at the heart of my thinking, and it became more so as the day progressed and we explored different themes around this idea of how the church is praying and whether it is what God desires.

Today again we meet Abraham in our journey through Genesis. Last week we considered how long we wait for a promise or a prayer to be answered – today we hear more bargaining! Now Abraham is in deep conversation or prayer with God. It is the most unusual prayer. God has said he will destroy the city (Sodom and Gomorah), but Abraham says surely if there is one good person – you will not destroy. Abraham goes to and fro with God about what number of good people needed that the city might be saved.

I wondered if we have ever done this. God if you just get me out of this situation, I promise I will change, or I will behave differently. Now God, you know last week I said I wouldn’t get myself in this situation again, but well here we are – do you think you could help me again, and I promise next week will be different?

While these kind of prayers and conversations may well be familiar they are also strange. The positive thing about such conversations is that they can only take place when a relationship exists. We cannot do this kind of bargaining if we do not know the other!

In Colossians the nature of the relationship we have with God in Christ is the central question to the text. Colossians is filled with metaphors about the characteristics of Christian practice. It would appear from what is expressed in the letter to the Colossians that there were members of the community who were mystical, and also had a euphoric approach to their praise and worship. It is hard to tell whether it is what we might call charismatic, or mystical contemplation – but judgement had arisen as to whether this was good practice and a sign of God spirit in the midst of the community. The writer of this letter, who most recent research believes was not Paul but a later teacher, was criticising those who believed themselves better in the

faith than others because of the spiritual experience that they were having. There is more than one way to encounter God, and to express our faith and praise.

Interestingly this challenge has re-emerged in the church in almost every generation – and some of you may have experienced this. I know I have been approached by people in the street at times, even when I am dressed as a cleric and asked if I want to really know Jesus, and when I wish them well and point out I have a faith – they have commented – yes but is it a real faith and do you know the holy spirit. Sometimes our zeal for our faith can stop us seeing God in others or in our midst – which is part of what this passage is addressing.

So we have one passage which challenges the kind of relationship we might have with God, one passage which is about expectations we might put in place about faith – and with these both in mind we turn to our Gospel reading which is at its heart a reading about our practice and perseverance in prayer. But this well-known passage is not as it might seem on face value. It is not a simple formula to address all the questions that are raised when we think about prayer.

How do we hear this invitation to pray and believe that God answers prayer when we look at the state of the world and the pain that is before us each day? I don't know about you, but some days I don't want to listen to the news – I don't want to hear the pain in the world has not ended and continues to get worst. Or to be told I am on the cusp of a golden age when the people around me are falling apart. I am sure there are days when we might all exclaim 'Why is God not answering our prayer?'

I remember once being told that "God always answers, but sometimes the answer is 'no.'" But that is not what Jesus is saying in this passage, and while I do believe that sometimes God says no, I don't think that is what is happening most of the time.

I do believe God is with us in the midst of all the struggling and pain, personal or global, and I believe that God suffers with us, as God also rejoices with us.

Prayer, as Jesus points out takes perseverance, but it is also active and passive.

Prayer isn't just sitting around waiting for the answers. Prayer is also listening with our hearts to the actions that we can take to bring about the change that is required. David Lose¹ calls this shameless prayer. This is based on the translation of a word in Luke 11 - *anaedeia* in the Greek, which most translations render as "persistence" (11:8). But a better translation might be "shameless." Our prayers to God ought to be bold, audacious, and unfailingly confident.

Lose suggests that instead of waiting for God to change the world we actually start living into the reality of what we've prayed for. So rather than pray for someone who is lonely, maybe I'd go visit. Rather than pray for an end to violence, maybe we ensure that we are not violent in our own relationships. As we prayer for safer streets maybe we visit a police station to tell officers that we grateful for their service and pray for their safety. This could be true of almost any community or public service too.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/07/pentecost-10-c-shameless-prayer/>

At times prayer is words we say alone in moments of thanksgiving or desperation. At times prayer is words we share with others, gathered in the sanctuary or around a hospital bed. And at other times prayer is action and work as we try to live into and even bring about those things we've prayed for. All of this can be praying shameless, praying, that is, confident that the God who came in Jesus understands our hurts and disappointments because that God took them on². There is so much which is unexpected and unknown, as well as surprising.

When Abraham looked down on the city and cried out to God he did not wait for someone else to convince the city to change their behaviour, he went and told them. He went to show God those good people.

When the writer to the Colossians reflected on our relationship with Christ, they sort to encourage to prayer as we can, with the gifts that God has given us, and to recognise that others will do this differently to us.

When Jesus spoke with the disciples he encouraged them to be ceaseless, shameless and persevering in their prayer and action.

Today we are reminded of that, and of the joy of persistence, perseverance and even promise. All these things reminded me of the words of Teresa of Avila who said

*Christ has no body now, but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks
With compassion on this world.*

*Let nothing disturb you.
Let nothing frighten you.
All things pass away:
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
Those who have God
Find they lack nothing;
God alone suffices.³*

At its heart maybe this is our call to prayer.

And the reality, that it is up to each of us to make space for this prayer. Amen

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/07/pentecost-10-c-shameless-prayer/>

³ <http://spckpublishing.co.uk/blog/spck-prayer/prayers-of-st-teresa-of-avila-1515-1582/>