



St Marylebone
Parish Church

5th Sunday after Trinity 2021, 8.30am BCP Holy Communion

St Peter, ever practical - he was a fisherman after all. In today's Gospel he pushes back at Jesus - 'we know these waters, we have fished them every day of our lives' but 'Lord, we'll do as you say' and a miraculous catch follows. St Peter - always straightforward - falls to his knees: 'I do not deserve you, Jesus'. Jesus, always forgiving, looks beyond His flaws and calls Peter to life in Him - to be 'fishers of men'.

It is the same straightforward, blunt, both-feet-in Peter who writes to the Early Church decades later in today's Epistle. And he is just the same! He is blunt and full-hearted when he says how we, the Church, should be: of 'one mind' 'having compassion one of another' full of pity and courtesy. Repaying evil not with evil, but with a blessing, in order to transform the situation. No excuses. Thank goodness, because we know that this core message of the Faith inspired Ghandi and MLK and Desmond Tutu.

Blunt. Straightforward. Life-changing.

That's hard enough. But there's one more little puzzle I want to explore together this morning. That is the way St Peter talks about prayer.

He says 'For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.' God hears the good, but shuts His ears to bad folk.

Really?

Let's look a little closer.

These New Testament documents are the crucible of theology – grappling with who God has shown Himself to be, how we fit in, how we are to live. This is the messy cutting edge, with ideas fizzing back and forth, all the time being enfolded and refined. This, like everything else in our faith, is the outworking of a relationship. So, the theology found here is not the tidy theology of a Cambridge University Press textbook – this is raw and pastoral ground-level theology.

The Early Church was grappling with what life is in the light of what Jesus had done. They would continue to grapple and argue and work out for centuries; indeed, we still are.

All that is a very long way of saying, Peter’s words here speak of the quality of our relating to God. The quality of our relationship to God does *matter*. It matters, perhaps, more than anything else in the world. But, we must not misunderstand this letter and think that God is the classroom teacher in the sky observing behaviour and dishing out rewards or punishments, or a small-minded magistrate scrutinizing in order to scold. The quality of our relationship with our heavenly Father is desperately important, but it cannot alter His love for us, or the reality of Christ’s resurrection. It cannot alter that our prayer is heard. So, finally, I want to consider briefly the mystery of prayer.

Too many people think too mechanically about prayer. Indeed, read wrong (as we’ve said) you could be led astray by what St Peter says. God does not sit up in a celestial office getting our prayers by fax, deciding which to answer and which to bin. God does not hear our prayer based on how good we’ve been, or whether we’re wearing our lucky underwear. God does not pull puppet strings in heaven, and we’re here trying to persuade Him to pull them in our favour.

Prayer is a mystery. Prayer is powerful. Prayer is part of being human. It is essential to a whole human life.

One of the reasons prayer is so essential is because prayer is simply us doing relationship with God. Prayer is the substance of our relating to God.

The Eucharist is prayer, reading the Scriptures is prayer, chatting to God on the bus about your day is prayer, asking God something on behalf of another is prayer, being in silent meditation is prayer. The tree in our churchyard was made to be a tree – it praises God by being as tree-ey as it possibly can. That is its prayer, of you like. We were made for union with God forever – anything that fosters that union is our prayer and our excellence, the peak of our humanity.

A great monk of the last century spoke of prayer like a radio – a proper one with big old dials, none of your DAB! The Holy Spirit – who is within every fibre of our being, by dint of our creation and baptism – is in perfect loving union with God our Father all the time. All we have to do is loose ourselves from the shackles of ego and distraction and the rest, and simply *tune in* to that perfect union already there.

Does prayer change God or God's mind? No.

Does prayer change us? Yes.

Does prayer change the nature of the universe as we are changed and change the world around us? Yes.

Does our union with God give birth to more love in the world and thereby change the very nature of things – love being (as Dr Martin Luther King said) 'the only real transformative power in the universe'.

Yes.

In prayer we are becoming our real selves, and we are participating in the Divine life more fully now, even on this side of heaven. In prayer we are becoming co-creators with God, joining in His loving of the universe, joining in His redeeming work as He loves the world into being, towards the Kingdom of Heaven.

Prayer is not the *transaction* that so many people think it is. Prayer is powerful love, deep mystery and the reality of who we are as created beings. If only we would escape our small mindedness and – in the words of today's Gospel – 'launch out into the deep and let down [our] nets'.