



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Lent 2 2021

On the Sunday before Lent, inspired by the Transfiguration Gospel, I suggested we focus on *glory*, not *deprivation* this Lent. But I didn't answer the obvious question – 'How?'

Last Sunday at 8.30 Fr Stephen gave the answer: prayer. *Prayer* is how we step into glory this Lenten Springtime for the Soul.

The Holy Spirit must have been about, because at 11am Mother Katy also spoke about prayer. She bid us arm ourselves with 'arrow prayers'.

So, prayer it *is* this Lent. And I must say I'm very excited. Let me tell you why.

As a child, prayer was first introduced to me as listing dead relatives in my head (and vaguely asking God to look after them) in the quiet pews before Midnight Mass – the only time my family went to church.

A little later it was asking God (a God I thought nonsense) for desperate help when I'd broken some precious ornament or lost my house keys. The deal was, of course, that I *would* believe if things turned ok. A deal I quickly forgot.

Leap forward to university. Studying history and philosophy had exploded my narrow understanding of what *was* and *wasn't* to be taken seriously. And God was suddenly more real than I could account for. What's more, the evidence for Jesus in the New Testament documents had become credible and compelling.

In amongst this heady time I remember kneeling down next to my bed, hands together (I'd seen it in a film, it's what you do), and there began an adventure that has defined my life ever since.

Those weren't even the foothills of prayer, of course.

It wasn't until I went to the College of the Resurrection at Mirfield (to be formed for the Priesthood alongside the monks of the C of E monastic community there) that I discovered extended periods of silent prayer. It is *this* continued experience of prayer that makes me *excited* to speak about it this morning.

Forgive me going on so long about myself, but I hope it helps.

What I really want to say is that prayer is 1) both very simple and very hard, 2) that it is essential to living a real life, and 3) to beg you to do it.

And I don't just mean intercessory prayer – asking for things. That really is the little sister of prayer.

There's 'arrow prayers' in amongst the hurly-burly of life, as Mthr Katy said. She *also* mentioned the Jesus Prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner'.
[breath in and out and repeat]

These are the words *I* say, slowly, rhythmically, breathing in and out, for the whole of my own silent prayer time each day. The Jesus Prayer is good for walking, buses and washing up too.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. I think at *first* I thought it morbid: ‘mercy, mercy, sin, sin’; and selfish – ‘on *me*, a sinner’. I have come to realise that this is not the case.

Mercy. Misericordia – cor – from the heart. We are asking God to hide us in His heart. To join our heart with His as we pray.

And whenever we pray ‘on me, a sinner’, we do so as part of the Body of Christ. We pray as a part of creation, for the good of all creation. Prayer (if it is real) *cannot* be selfish. By getting closer to God, we carry the world with us, deeper into His love.

The reason I say the Jesus Prayer gently for pretty much the whole hour I try to offer in silent prayer daily is that I have (after years of trying) barely made the foothills of prayer. One day, I may be granted the wholeness of real silence. But so far, when I close my eyes and simply try to be with God (a creature with my creator - the most natural thing in the world!) my to-do list, lunchtime sandwiches, all my pettiness and seediness and bilge, crowds in.

When this happens, I simply return: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Most of my hour is spent being distracted and simply returning to the Jesus Prayer.

Archbishop Michael Ramsey was once asked how long he prayed for each day. He shocked the interviewer by saying, ‘oh, one or two minutes’. ‘What!?! As little as that?’, ‘But it takes me an hour to get there’.

Don’t start with an hour. Start with five minutes, then maybe eight after a few weeks. And two or three times a week to begin with. Set an iPhone timer so you’re not clockwatching. An icon, holy picture, a candle. Carve out a quiet space if you can at home or come here. If you want help or accompanying, speak to one of us clergy.

Prayer is simply us being with God. It is the most natural thing in the world. And yet, it *is* hard. But beginning to pray has been the greatest adventure of my life. Whatever exciting things I may do, I never doubt that my time spent in silence, trying to be simply *me with God*, is the most real and important thing I ever do.

It is, like all love, like all that truly matters, a deep mystery.

But (and I say this with complete confidence) as well as attending to our financial and social wellbeing and health and passions and everything else we so sensibly do; if we do not attend to our prayer lives, we will only ever be less than fully ourselves, and less than fully alive.

This Lent, please do make it a Springtime for your soul.