

Contemplation

'On earth as it is in Heaven...'

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Psalm 27:1-8

As most of you will be aware, we're following Pete Greig's prayer course, working our way through the Lord's Prayer. Those of you who are familiar with the course, or who use the Lectio365 app will know that it uses the word PRAY as an acronym for how to pray: Pause, Rejoice, Ask and Yield. Having spent a few weeks looking at the first 3, we now turn our attention to what it means to yield to God in prayer. Specifically, we're going to be thinking today about contemplation, in light of the line from the Lord's prayer which says 'on earth as it is in heaven'. This is all about surrender – about placing ourselves before God with open hearts and minds. We're going to start by looking at what contemplation is, before thinking about why we should engage with it.

We had some lovely warm weather over Easter, and for a few days Dan and I were able to spend a couple of hours sunbathing in the garden. Rowan Williams suggests that there is something about sunbathing which tells us more about this kind of prayer than we could otherwise explain. He says this:

When you're lying in the sun, something is happening, something that has nothing to do with how you feel or how hard you're trying. You're not going to get a better tan by screwing up your eyes and concentrating. You give the time, and that's it. All you have to do is turn up. And then things change, at their own pace. You simply have to be there where the light can get at you.

One of the Bible's favourite ways of describing this kind of prayer is 'resting in the Lord' and there's something about this image of sunbathing that captures that really well.

At times it can feel like our prayer is as good as we make it – that it's all about our effort – our preparation, our words, our motives, and so as with everything else in life, if we just try harder, we will do better. But at the heart of contemplation is simply this: "Be still and know that I am God." Unlike other forms of prayer, contemplation involves very few words. It often starts with meditation on a short phrase from the Bible, but gradually the words themselves fade out. Mainly this is a silent meditation in which we enjoy the presence of God without doing or saying anything in particular.

There's a danger in making this sound too easy, because the truth is that for lots of reasons, it can feel like an incredibly hard thing to do. I wonder if part of the struggle lies in that word 'yield', or surrender, because when we really think about what that word is asking of us, we realise that it's much easier said than done. To surrender, we have to let go of all the things we do and say which we mistakenly think earn us something with God. We have to let go of all the subtle ways that we try to control things. After the feeding of the five thousand, the crowds were amazed and we read in John 6:15 that they intended to make Jesus king by force. And I think there can be something of that in the way that we approach prayer. It looks a lot like submission, but in fact it's more of an attempt to assert control. Yielding to God means re-claiming our 'unadorned self', as Henri Nouwen puts it, the self which is empty handed, completely vulnerable and totally dependent on God's love and grace. "Be still and know that I am God."

So this is about surrendering to God, but it's also about being attentive to God – learning to sense his presence and to be present to him. It's interesting that in a lot of traditions that encourage meditation, Christian or not, there is an emphasis on breath – on breathing slowly and deeply. But unlike other religions and spiritualities, Christian meditation is not about emptying our minds, discovering an energy, or a hidden resource within ourselves - it is about welcoming the deeply personal presence of God.

A theologian called Luigi Gioia puts it like this:

Contemplative prayer...discerns the presence of a breath from somebody other than us, the breath of life God breathed a first time into our nostrils to make us living beings, and then a second time by the risen Lord who said: "Receive the Holy Spirit".

This is about becoming aware of the breath of God flowing through us by his Spirit.

In Romans 8, Paul says that:

Romans 8:26-27

²⁶ "...Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God."

And so there is a sense in which, when we pray, we're simply becoming attentive to, stepping into, something that is already and always happening. The Holy Spirit, present in our hearts and interceding on our behalf. If we think about it in terms of the sunbathing analogy, the sun doesn't start shining because we lie down on a sunbed – the sun is always shining and by lying on the sunbed we are simply putting ourselves in its path.

And as we become more attentive to the presence of God, our thoughts and our awareness are drawn away from ourselves and onto him. Pete Greig talks about the movement from meditation, to contemplation, to communion. We begin by meditating on a phrase from the Bible, and as we do, our attention, our centre of gravity gradually shifts towards God and away from ourselves. As this happens, our words fade out and our feelings come to the fore. Prayer becomes something I am *being* in the presence of God, rather than something I'm *doing*.

What should be clear by now is that this kind of prayer is experiential. We engage our feelings more than our intellect. That can understandably make us nervous, because we know that our feelings can be flitty and unreliable. But the kind of emotion we're talking about here is what Luigi Gioia calls 'intelligent emotion'. Picture a kite flying on a warm, breezy day – the sail flies around above you, carried with the wind. Now imagine that the sail is all of your emotions and feelings. It blows where the wind takes it, but it's also tethered with string – cut that string and the sail is lost to the wind. The string is what makes it possible for the sail to fly safely and securely. If the sail is what we feel in our hearts, then the string is what we know in our heads. Our feelings can lead us astray when they become untethered from the knowledge and truth that can only be found in the Bible.

But if that knowledge has no impact on our emotions, then we're missing something – a kite without the sail is just a piece of string. If we are to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds, then our feelings must be involved. John 15:11, 'I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.'; John 14:27, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.'

John 15:11

¹¹ "...I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

John 14:27

²⁷ "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

It would be strangely illogical for these gifts, given by Jesus to his disciples, to have no emotional impact. What is joy, what is peace, if not something that is *felt*. And so, when we read the Bible, we need to be engaging not only with our minds, but with our hearts – paying attention to the feelings that arise in us as we ponder God's word.

But what about the times when we don't feel anything? At times we might feel a deep awareness of God's presence, but at other times we feel nothing. And when that happens, it can be really frustrating and disappointing, and we can end up filling the silence with words or giving up altogether. But feeling nothing isn't a sign that we're doing something wrong. As with all things that are new to us, it takes time to adjust, to perceive God's presence in a new way. When you step into bright sunlight, it can take time for your eyes to adjust. The more time we spend with God, the more we grow to love and trust him, the better able we are to perceive his presence. I think I also need to be reminded sometimes, that feeling something in my encounter with God through his word is always a gift of grace – it's not something I'm owed because I've given him a few minutes of my time. But I also sometimes need to be reminded that as frustrating as it can be when we feel nothing, God is *always* with us by his Spirit, whether we happen to feel strongly aware of that, or not. Remember that this is about intelligent emotion – and so even when our feelings do lie flat, we can rely on the many *reasons* we have to pray.

And that leads us from the *what*, to the *why*...we've thought about what contemplation is, what it involves, but why do it? What's the purpose of this kind of prayer?

Genesis 3 paints a picture of God strolling in the garden in the cool of the day. This is such a beautiful image – God doing what he loves best, strolling through the garden in the company of his children. But then one day, God goes for a walk through the garden, and Adam and Eve are nowhere to be found. “Where are you?”, God asks. How heart-breaking it must have been for God on that day when instead of coming to him and strolling with him through the garden, we hid from him. And the story of the Bible from that point on is one of God finding a way to mend that relationship so that he can dwell with his children once again.

There are lots of reasons why we might hide from God, or at least avoid him – guilt, shame, disappointment, frustration, anger. But God longs for us to bring all of those things to him, to work them out with us and to re-assure us of his love. He wants an honest and intimate relationship with us, not some version of ourselves that masks over the difficult stuff. A couple of years ago I went through a rough patch that left me feeling a bit numb, and unable to really express myself to God or anyone else. And that made it really hard to pray...my prayer life was so defined by my ability to come up with the right words, and I had nothing. What I would now want to say to myself then is that those feelings of sadness, confusion and despair can in themselves become prayer when we bring them to God. Romans 8 talks about the Spirit interceding on our behalf with groanings too deep for words. We don't need to have the right words to say and part of the beauty of contemplation is that it releases us from the burden of trying to.

Matthew 11:28

28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

God loves us deeply and he isn't naïve about our inability to love him back – but neither is he put off by it. No one can claim to perfectly love God – as with everything else, both the desire and the ability to love him back are gifts for which we are always reliant on God. But in his infinite grace, he does give us the desire and the ability to respond to him in love.

Psalm 27 gives us one of the most beautiful expressions of this:

Psalm 27:4

4 “One thing I ask of the Lord, this only do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. To gaze upon his beauty and to seek him in his temple.”

This isn't about being in a physical space, this is about wanting to forever remain in the presence of the Lord. We know that that prayer will be answered in full when Jesus comes again - Revelation 21 says

Revelation 21:1,3

“Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” ...³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’”

What a day that will be... That is the future we can look forward to, but because we have the Holy Spirit within us – the firstfruit of the new creation – we are gifted with the possibility of experiencing something of that future in the here and now – on earth as it is in heaven.

So this is about intimate friendship with God but it's also about transformation, because an encounter with God never leaves us unchanged. At the burning bush, Moses asks God “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh” And God says “I will be with you...”... “Who am I?”, asks Moses - “I will be with you”, replies God. In other words, God says, ‘I am who I am and you are who you will become thanks to our friendship’ [repeat]. Time spent with God changes us. Going back to our sunbathing analogy, it's not just that the sun makes us *feel* something – it actually *does* something to us, it gives us a dose of vitamin D, regulates our hormones, even changes the colour of our skin. Pete Greig suggests that if petition is prayer at its simplest, and intercession is prayer at its most powerful, contemplation is prayer at its most transformational.

We encounter Moses again at the Transfiguration in Matthew 17:

Matthew 17:2-3; 5-6

² “Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him...⁵ a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’ ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified.

There's a reason the disciples were terrified. If we skip back to Exodus for a moment, Moses says to God "Show me your glory", to which God replies "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence... But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." So you can see why the disciples were terrified. But then, in Matthew 17:7,

Matthew 17:7

7 "Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And they lifted up their eyes."

Jesus invited the disciples and he invites us to boldly look at him – to look into the light, and only by doing so – by contemplating his glory, by breathing God – do we become more like him.

2 Corinthians 3:18

18 "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

This is not a journey of self-discovery. This is about yielding to God who knows us better than we could ever know ourselves and trusting in his love – clay in the hands of the potter, creatures in the hands of our Creator, children in the arms of our Father. If we try to embark on a journey of self-discovery, then ultimately what we will discover is a messy knot of questions and contradictions and wishful thinking. It's not the trying to find ourselves that is the problem, just the belief that that's something we can do ourselves.

Psalm 139: 1,3,13

'You have searched me, Lord, and you know me...³ you are familiar with all my ways... ¹³ For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.'

This transformation of ourselves is also a transformation of our lives. Contemplation isn't simply about what we do behind closed doors at certain times of the day... As Brennan Manning puts it, it is about re-focussing, re-centring yourself on Jesus so that you can carry his presence with you into the other 23 hours of the day. Emma often closes services by saying 'walk in the light' and that is what contemplation, what time spent with God, enables us to do, by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit – to carry the presence of Jesus wherever we go and to walk in the light. "Remain in me", Jesus says, "as I also remain in you".

"On earth as it is in heaven" – these are not just words that we use in prayer. When we pray, we stand at the intersection between heaven and earth, as Tom Wright puts it. And in contemplation, we rest in that place, we yield ourselves to God, we spend time in his presence - children of our heavenly Father, dwelling in his house and gazing on his beauty. And as we do, we are gradually and gently transformed, becoming people who carry his presence and his light into the ordinary moments of our lives.

Amen



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