

VISION 4 *LIFE* YEAR OF PRAYER

The 2nd in a series of Sermons by Rev. Peter Chave

From time to time my mother used to come out with a few lines of poetry she had been taught at school. These various nuggets were held in her memory, to be produced when needed. The one I remember is:

*Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever;
Do noble things, not dream them all day long.*

After which she would put away her cup of coffee and her 'Women's Weekly' and get on with whatever domestic task it was that she did not particularly feel like doing.

The Book of Proverbs works on the same principle – short, poetic, memorable thoughts that pop up when we need them:

*A soft answer turns away wrath;
But a harsh word stirs up anger (15:1).*

In our second sermon for this Year of Prayer, I want us to think about the importance of having something ready and available – preferably in our memory, but otherwise in some sort of notebook – for those times when we settle down to pray but 'don't know what to say'.

At my Primary school our teacher, Miss Pack, taught us her favourite prayer. It is by Sir Jacob Astley, a Cavalier commander in the English Civil War. How relevant it is to the sort of lives we lead now! He was going into battle – and we are only going into work, or at the worst, going into town. But his words still apply:

*O Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be this day;
If I forget thee, do not thou forget me.
Amen.*

In a similar spirit of providing us with prayer material the very Baptist headmaster of my secondary school made us learn the General Confession and the General Thanksgiving from the (Anglican) Book of Common Prayer:

*Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give
thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness
to us and to all men...*

And a bit further on:

*Give us that due sense of all thy mercies that our hearts may be
unfeignedly thankful, and that we show forth thy praise not only with our lips,
but in our lives...*

We could not have put it better ourselves! And that's the point. God wants us to speak to him 'unfeignedly' – naturally. If we are hesitant and tongue-tied, with lots of 'ums' and 'ahs', that doesn't matter. But there are occasions when we want to come before God in awe and wonder and using beautiful words...words we have come across and thought: 'That says what I want to say and says it better than I ever could myself'.

There is an obvious danger about 'set' prayers and liturgies: Matthew's Gospel has Jesus warn us: 'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words' (Mt. 6:7-8).

But the remedy is obvious too. Most Christian prayers, most liturgies, are actually quite lean - cut down to the essentials – and it is up to us to 'inhabit' them, to make them our own. We can recite the General Confession (or, come to that, the Lord's Prayer) lazily or absent-mindedly, leaving the author to do our work for us. This would be a case of 'empty phrases'. Or we can let those beautiful words speak deeply to us, and then send them on as our own deeply personal prayer to God.

A prayer like the General Thanksgiving is a storehouse of things to think about and absorb – as is the Lord's Prayer. We may not think deeply about each phrase every time we say it, but we need to revisit each petition often – so that when we recite it we do really mean what we say.

The Lord's Prayer is a stock item in our memories (but how many people learn it now?) and we may have picked up a few others on the way: the Prayer of St. Ignatius Loyola, perhaps – 'Teach us, Good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest, to give and not to count...etc.'

The prayer of St. Francis – 'Make me a channel of your peace' – is known to us through a hymn; and the Prayer of St. Richard of Chichester through the musical 'Godspell'.

The Russian poet Lermontov tells us how helpful such treasured prayers can be:

*When in a gloomy hour
My heart with grief was fraught,
A half-forgotten prayer
Some wondrous message brought.*

*A bliss beyond expression
Lies in those sacred words,
Mysterious life is flowing
To me from magic chords.*

*And from my soul the burden
Of anxious doubt doth flee –
A sigh sent up to Heaven
Sets all my being free.*

Lermontov would have been familiar with 'the Jesus Prayer' of the Orthodox Church. It is very short: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner'. This is often

repeated over and over – yet it is not ‘vain repetition’ but laying down a base, creating a background, as we spend quiet time with God.

I have been talking about gathering useful material for prayer. There is always something in Tidings: but perhaps we can make an effort for next month’s issue (and subsequent months) to pass to the Editor prayers that have helped us.

Most of the prayers I have mentioned happen to be hundreds of years old. Their beauty still helps us greatly but there can sometimes be some phrases (as in our hymns) where we think ‘I would not put it like that’. There are masters of prayer in our own age: think of Michel Quoist’s ‘Prayers of Life’ with such items as ‘Prayer before a £5 note’ (Actually, even that book is fifty years old now, and you wouldn’t get as much for £5 now as his meditation suggests).

There are many truly contemporary prayers. But we haven’t always sorted out which are the good ones. Share your prayers-of-today with the Tidings editor too.

And why not write some? Write God a letter –It will help clarify your thoughts if you take care to express it nicely. And you will be able to judge which sentiments ring true and which ones just clunk. The result will be a new prayer – which you could share with the rest of us. Sharing in Prayer, a Prayer as a gift to others - That is the final point I want to make. The sharing may not be intentional. When Augustine wrote his prayer ‘our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you’ he had only God in mind. But that prayer has turned out to be a gift which has enriched many over the centuries.

In the course I teach at Marjon, the topic of ‘Prayer’ came up. I produced some abstract account of how prayer might be supposed to work - and the students nodded politely. Then I produced a sheet with some specific prayers by real people on it. The class came alive with genuine interest.

We had Michelangelo, praying that the beauty of this world might not distract him from the even greater beauty of God. Then we had this from a composer tempted by others to strike false notes in his life:

*O God, God, look down upon thy unhappy Beethoven; ...O God, help!
Thou seest me forsaken by all mankind, for I will commit no unrighteous thing.*

Finally, to balance up the prayer of the Cavalier Jacob Astley, here is part of the deathbed prayer of Oliver Cromwell:

*Lord, though I am a miserable and wretched creature, I am in covenant
with thee through grace. Thou hast made me, though very unworthy,
an [...] instrument to do [the nation] some good and you some service...
Lord, however you dispose of me, continue and go on to do good for them.
Give them consistency of judgment, one heart and mutual love...*

We could certainly say ‘Amen’ to that. Cromwell concludes:

*And pardon the folly of this short prayer: Even for Jesus Christ's sake.
And give us a good night if it be thy pleasure. Amen.*

We must not give up speaking to God in our own words. But let us gratefully use, and learn from, the prayers of others - especially when they say what we want to say much better than we could ourselves.

AMEN.