

All this is from God....

We have just heard sung the Litany of Reconciliation. It's also on a card in your bags - you might want to take a quick look.

The litany of reconciliation is a great leveller, bringing us back to what is important. It's becoming an important part of life in the Chaplaincy at the University of Warwick. We pray it most Sundays in our community and it has become a very popular take away in our chapel. At times of tragedy; of crisis in our nation and around the world, I have shared the litany on social media and email and it has been one of my most shared posts amongst the University community.

There's something about the litany that can really reach into our hearts and our communal experience as Christians. I think it's something about the corporate nature of the text. That we stand together. That we return. That this too, this work, this prayer, is from God and it's as much about our own interior workings as it is about the call to go out in the name of Jesus. I love the ending. Whenever being a follower of Christ feels too tricky and complicated, I love being told to 'be kind to one another, tender hearted' because that feels transformative without any tricks or difficult mind games. Something I might actually manage, if I stop being so hard on myself and those around me...

Because all this is from God.

Our churches as places of refuge

I have a question for us to ponder this afternoon....If we are able to say the litany, embrace the litany, perhaps you love it as much as I do - if we understand, therefore, that we stand together in our brokenness and in our mess - that no one wins the prize for most together, we all, each of us struggle. And that this work we have is not just my responsibility but our, collective, responsibility and that God invites us together to acknowledge this and corporately seek forgiveness and a renewed vision. If we know deep down that we are all in this together.....why is it that our churches on Sunday mornings can be the last places people want to go when life has been turned upside down by crisis or tragedy?

Perhaps you don't agree with me on first hearing that question, but the conversations I have with staff and students and I wonder if you've had similar go something like,

'I'm sorry I've not been around much recently, I've been going through a really hard time.'

Or

'I'm not in the right place to come together on a Sunday at the moment. I'm in pieces.'

Or

'I'll be back next week, when I feel up to it'

Or

'I need to withdraw from doing anything on Sundays because I'm not in a place where I can minister to others.'

Or even more tragically,

'I loved church and then my life fell apart and I realised there was nothing on a Sunday that spoke to where I was.'

How can we read the litany together, noticing its life changing, community transforming, stereotype busting manifesto and then turn up to churches where we feel we have to shine - as leaders, but also as congregation members? That it's somehow all up to me and I mustn't let people down? Remember the beatitudes? 'Blessed are the meek, the merciful, those who mourn, those who are persecuted' - Blessed! - so why aren't these blessed filling up our pews or comfortable chairs on a Sunday morning. When did we sanitise and polish our churches so much that people have to feel OK to stop by?

Let's turn now to prayer. The life sustain work of the spirit of Christ in us.

So far I've spoken about church Sunday morning worship. Because that's what we see and hear most frequently when we look at our faith lives together. But what if the problem goes deeper - what if people not

only leave our corporate worship when they can't reach what they perceive as their Sunday best, but avoid the 'Sunday best God' that we've built as well, their prayer lives reducing to a sporadic and desperate, 'help' or as Homer Simpson so eloquently put it 'If you're up there, superman, please me'. Have we made God, and the way we relate to God - through prayer - Sunday best and shiny too?

If I said to you, 'how is your prayer life' what feelings do you notice inside yourself? I wonder if feel yourself clench up a bit; does the shame come upon you; do you think, 'actually, pretty good thanks' and then shrink inside as you remember the Pharisee at the temple who was all 'Oh, look at me I'm so great in comparison to that awful woman there'. No one wants to be him. I'm not him, right?

Prayer. We know we should; sometimes do; often don't do as much as we would like or feel we should; or we don't feel we do it *right* - something about our Sunday best God requiring a Sunday best approach to prayer. Prayer can end up feeling like an indulgence, a precious extra that we don't have the space for; can't get our heads around, don't feel good enough for....

And yet, if all this is from God, how can our understanding of that and this calling to be with God in God's reconciling work and to work for God in that ministry, ever be made real and grounded if we never look up? How are we all not just going to burn out with the demands from Yet Another Vision being placed upon us?

It seems to me, that we have got ourselves into a series of double binds when it comes to prayer. They must be:

- Undistracted, yet filled with the world's concerns
- passionate, yet measured in what we're seeking, with a sound theology;
- honest yet not scandalous
- Emotional but not dark.

All this is a perfect recipe for inaction; shame and, 'I'm sorry I just can't do it this week, I'm not in the right place'....

All this [] though is from God - from our glorious, creative, generous God - who gives us *good* things. Who would give their child a snake when they ask for food? Who?! And I'm going to suggest we know all this and we can even believe it - for everyone else "but for myself". Because the God I believe in sometimes, the God I pray to - the one for me - I have a sneaking suspicion that God has a snake up his sleeves - because I don't deserve to be fed. You do. Eat your hearts out. But I can't accept that truth for myself sometimes. Is it just me who feels like that? Or are many of us here in this room in the business of believing in a Christ who calls everyone else out there 'beloved', but mostly just looks at us with his arms folded and a 'is that it' on his lips?

All this is though really is from our loving, reconciling, God. There are no snakes up sleeves. We have to learn to step out and step up....and that can only come from getting to know this heavenly food giving, generous, beloved God who when we do finally turn up doesn't say 'where have you been' but rather 'I am so glad to see you. Welcome. Sit. Eat. Stay a while.' And this is where prayer fits in.....

So what is prayer?

Rowan Williams, in a sermon back in 2005 once compared prayer to sunbathing - you just have to turn up and let the light get at you.

It's a great quote and I love it. Until I have to tackle the idea that Rowan Williams might know anything at all about sunbathing. I wonder if you can hold it in your head for a moment the image of Rowan Williams on a beach....it is a very peculiar thought indeed. I can just about picture it if I put a handkerchief with knotted corners on his head....

You may be able to tell from the bluish tints in my skin tone, that I am not a natural sunbather. Not only does my lack of melanin conspire against me, I hate the fact that it's so hard to read a book when lying on a beach towel - you have to decide which bit of your body you're going to get a crick in - and, depending on where you are, it's so HOT. In fact, because my family love beach holidays so much, I have developed a system to

cope - I now have a special beach chair and a large umbrella and wind break that I'll trek down to the sands, with a cool box, family size factor 50 lotion and a giant hat and, importantly, a bag of books - we'll carry it all together over long distances if necessary - we are *that* family... I make life very difficult for myself because I refuse to give up on my own personal ideal of what sitting still looks like. In many ways, with the paraphernalia I take with me, and insist my husband and daughter help me carry down, I have turned sunbathing into yet another Sunday best activity. It requires great effort and planning and coordination and determination. And if I'm not feeling up to all that effort, it is the last thing in the whole world that I want to do.

And that, of course, is the secret to the quote about prayer being like sunbathing. Sunbathing at its simplest and best. When did we make prayer so complicated? Quiet times and prayer journals and bible notes and 'would my church leader approve of this person's thoughts'; 'am I doing it right'; complex liturgies and reading notes and then, when you're in a praying in a small group, all the unspoken unwritten rules of how to do that - how long prayers are; is this a place where passion in the voice is OK, did I say that like I believed it; the daily bulletin prayer of updating each other on the events of the week via addressing a newsletter to the almighty; the end of prayer shuffle that says 'I'm done now, so if you're done too then you can look up'. An 'actually I was trying to remember if I'd left my straightening irons on when you said that' moment, what did I just say amen to?! It's all very complex.

Receiving from God

Prayer is not about saying the right words in the right order to push the right button for God. Prayer is an invitation into the heavenlies. Because all this is from God and to work with God and for God, we've got to get the hang of that - through prayer we connect into this truth and if we find a way that works for our personalities and our contexts, sometimes if the wind is blowing in the right direction we might just get a glimpse of what Jesus really thinks of us and those around us. And those glimpses will shape us forever. There is no need for a Sunday best prayer life or a Sunday best church when we get that the only thing our God ever asks of us is us. Just as we are. 'For Christmas Lord I got you.....myself' and our God says 'fantastic. you are just what I've always wanted'.

We just have to turn up. You can't make the sun shine any brighter or cause long term skin damage, any more quickly. Much as my parents tried in the 1980's with their tropical sun oils. We've just got to show up. And let the light reach us.

In the book of Exodus, we can read the story of Moses who hears from God through a burning bush. And he takes his shoes off and covers his face because he's in the presence of God. Lucky old Moses - it's alright for him - he knew that these things come from God because it was blooming obvious. Bushes catching fire and speaking to him; seas parting; the word of God being inscribed onto tablets of stone. *Easy*.

But.....what if this wasn't a one off of God speaking....what if there are burning bushes all around us, shouting out God's glory and love and power and acceptance and purpose and if only we'd put down our cool boxes and umbrellas and giant bags of books....we might notice them.

When I was 17, one school term, I found myself studying the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins in my A'Level English Literature class and I came across a line that has shaped and continues to shape how I approach prayer.

'The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil....'

Burning bushes. All around us. The world charged with energy, with compassion, with love.

And then God made it even simpler to know him. He sent Jesus to us in human form. Through Jesus Christ, we can *know* God - the burning bushes have shape and call. And we know that Jesus doesn't care about our Sunday best. Don't we?

Prayer is not something to make us feel even worse about. It is present in our lives and in our rhythms already. If we're surrounded by burning bushes, our job isn't to set them on fire again. It's just to notice them.

Where in your life do you feel connected to yourself and to God?

Beyond our Sunday best, where is our everyday God, who journeys with us on the bus; who sits next to us when we have our head in our hands, no clue how we're going to cope with another day; when we give a tissue to a stranger who has a sniffle; when we smile at the tired parents with the crying baby and tell them they're doing a good job; whether our work is gratifying and stimulating or a daily hard slog, our everyday God goes with us.

We need to dare to look inside ourselves, away from the doing and the strategies for a while, and allow ourselves to look around, so that we can notice our God of love burning brightly around us and at work in those around us.

Where are the times and spaces when the burdens of the world loosen a little on us; where are the moments that we forget to notice the weight of the shame that we force onto our backs each day; what are we doing when we notice a rhythm, a deep joy within us? Find it, hunt for it, it is treasure worth seeking. Then give that time to God and let the light touch you.

To notice, to engage, to receive from our God, who loves each of us, not just me - is the path to noticing that all things come from God and to equip us for the work of reconciliation to which we are all called. And this work of reconciliation will transform our lives; our churches; our communities and ultimately our entire world. But this must spring first out of the depths of our hearts and our relationship with God, who loves the world so much and holds a dream for it so dearly that God was prepared to die for it.

Be kind to one another, tender hearted. Because this too is from God.

Kate Pearson
November 2018