

Sunday 31st May 2020. Zoom Communion. Readings: Acts 2:1-21, John 20:19-23

Jesus “breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit”

Introduction –

How blessed we will be when we have Spirit-filled lives, with Spirit-filled people offering their gifts in service to our Spirit-filled Church

... The blessing begins with a commitment to growing your relationship with God, self-emptying, seeking God

Recap “Growing relationship with God (1)”

We celebrated last week that there are immense blessings of growing your relationship with God, enjoying being with God

- If you grow your relationship with God, you will see in time you are being blessed – blessed in outward circumstances, prayers answered,

... but much more, blessed within yourself, knowing God’s presence deep in your soul, leading you into all truth, changing you into the likeness of Christ

Slide

... We saw last week that to grow your relationship with God, you have to:

- 1) Make a set time each day
- 2) Settle yourself
- 3) Pray through the Lord’s Prayer/Prayer Book
- 4) Read the Bible

... All this is in a guide I am writing to growing your relationship with God which can be found on our web-site, and you can hear last week’s sermon, and all our sermons on the web-site.

We heard last week how members of our Church experience this growing relationship with God...

How is it going for you ? Have you made a set time each day ? Are you following the exercises of settling yourself, praying through set prayers, reading the Bible ?

...If you are doing all this, great... you are on the way.

If not, do not beat yourself up, it can take time to establish the rhythm.

...It’s a bit like physical exercise – quite hard to do every

day at first, but in time, you find it becomes integral to who you are, the day feeling incomplete without it.

So, I pray you are committing yourself to this time each day.. on your own with God... and a Bible.

Today, I want to explore more what is going on in this focussed time with God, and how the aim of your prayer is to be led into a point of stillness, adoration, of self-emptying

- If you do this you will be blessed, our Church will be blessed

... you will be changed and empowered, our Church will be changed and empowered

- Changed and empowered by the Holy Spirit..

Through the exercises, to self-emptying, receiving

The aim, then, through these exercises is to let go of self-absorption and allow the Holy Spirit to fill you..

Remember, settling yourself is a key part of the exercises of prayer

- Candles, a cross, writing thoughts and feelings down may help

But through the exercises, do not worry if the mental distractions, “monkey chatter” keep occurring

- Maybe write down what the distraction is, certainly turn it into prayer...

I just want to add, specially on this Pentecost Sunday, and to be honest about my own prayer life, that “speaking in tongues” is a key part of my settling before God

- St Paul writes beautifully in 1 Corinthians 14 about how in “praying in tongues” his spirit prays, and the mind is “switched off”.
... Paul says how he needs this form of prayer as well as “praying with my mind”

As Paul says, “I would like everyone of you to speak in tongues” (1 Cor 14:5)

- There is a great sense as you speak or sing in tongues, you have moved beyond yourself, letting go of your pre-occupations

... I pray you are open to this possibility of speaking in tongues – you can just ask God for the gift and speak in faith...

With or without speaking in tongues, I hope once you have been through the exercises described, you are truly, then, finding a sense of being settled

... I hope you will find that these exercises lead you into that place of stillness, quiet, the presence of the Holy Spirit, silence

- As I said last week, I want to suggest that this is the point you really start praying, communing with God
- This truly is the aim of giving your time in prayer...allowing God to love you, hold you, speak deep within your soul,

.. You are likely to find you are responding in adoration of God

Martin Laird, in his book, “The Practice of Contemplation” writes:

“Communion with God in the silence of the heart is a God-given capacity,

... like the rhododendron’s capacity to flower, the fledgling’s for flight,
... and the child’s for self-forgetful abandon and joy.” (pg 1)

- These are beautiful analogies aren’t they ?

... We are made to have communion with God,

...with the flowering of the self, learning to “fly”, discovering abandon and joy, playfulness in God

... There can be all this felt in the quietening of self before God

... But if we do not each day come back to this point of stillness, we may lose sight and sense of God

- We fill our lives with activity, with turning from one screen to another,
.. we seek experience, upon experience
and our minds are full of “monkey chatter” or as Martin Laird describes it

“the interior soap opera, the constant chatter of the cocktail party going on in our heads” (pg 15)

In church circles we often quote the famous words of St Augustine

“Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”

But we may often ignore the need to find daily “rest in thee”.

....In our churches we can be as guilty as the world in filling up our lives with a frenzy of activity

.... And maybe more so... thinking that we need to find the “great speaker” or the “great worship experience” to know God,

... when, actually, He is there with us all the time, just waiting for us to make space for Him

It is the rich time of stillness, silence, that brings God from “outside of you” to inside, deep within your soul

... So much of our Christian lives can be words about God rather than experience of Him unless we have this daily time of communion...

Truly we have to self-empty to be filled with the presence of God, to be filled with the Holy Spirit

... now, in this stillness, God can work on who you truly are

This can be painful as repressed memories or feelings, come into awareness, things about ourselves we would rather not face

➤ Thomas Keating referred to this as “the unloading of the unconscious”.

But, be comforted... in this place of stillness, with God, you are with Him who is the ground of all life, the essence of your being, who loves you through and through

➤ Receive His balm , His healing

This self-emptying, receiving from God is, I am sure the reason, as we saw last week, Jesus says “When you pray, go into your room, close the door” (Matt 6:6)

- Of course, Jesus prayed in other places – public places and mountain tops, but the core, daily foundation of prayer is in a room on your own with God

Because here there are limited distractions ... it is just you and God

... Of course, this deeper settling may not come easily... you may be bored

... And that is exactly the time you must continue

- Being bored is very understandable
... our lives are so full of activities and stimulus

But remember in this time of prayer, at this point of stillness, you are in the presence of your Creator and Sustainer, He who is Glorious, Mighty and Majestic, Gentle and Kind

... When we are bored, we are still in our self pre-occupation... we have not let go into the presence of God

Again, there are exercises that can help us to focus on God, letting go of self, keeping the stillness

- In particular, be aware of your breathing and use “prayer words”

In the Gospel reading, Jesus breathes on the disciples, saying “Receive the Holy Spirit”

... be aware as you breathe in, you are breathing in the presence of God, the Holy Spirit..

Then, you can repeat “prayer words” – a verse from the Bible which helps you to focus on God – maybe a verse from the Bible reading you have just done...

Working through any sense of boredom, in these ways, will draw you back to God

Own Example of Prayer

It may be helpful if I just go through how my prayer time went on the morning I am writing this.... I do not share this as an “expert”..

... I am just someone who has had to try to learn to pray otherwise I couldn't do my job, and along the way God has been very gracious

It's Wednesday morning .. I struggled yesterday, on Tuesday, in being focussed on work as I have struggled with energy levels and focus, as this time of Corona goes on...

I am sure this is true for many of you in work, especially if you are self-employed..

.... Work at the moment can feel like me, God and four walls

As a vicar, you have no boss to talk to or report to .. you have to be entirely self-motivated

... Thankfully, I do have Jenny, soul mate, to be able to share with, but, of course, it's me that has to get on with trying to work out what Church, being a vicar means in this time

So, it's Wednesday morning after an unsatisfactory day before.

As ever I start the day with prayer ..I set a timer

... you can probably use your fancy smart phones,

... I don't know if my Nokia has an alarm function, I don't know much about my Nokia,

so I use a good old kitchen timer

I have just 35 minutes today, I light candles, write in my prayer journal, pray through some of our Church members list – you all get prayed for over a couple of weeks

I also pray for Christians in Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt – the focus this week of the Barnabas Prayer Guide

I read through lists of family, friends, particular people in need, Church and general situations

... To be honest, I don't spend long on any particular person or issue

... I remember Jesus' teaching: "Do not keep on babbling" .. you do not need many words – "your Father knows what you need before you ask Him"

God knows better than I do, all the people and situations I pray for

I then read through the service from the Church of England "Common Worship Prayer Book" for this week .. it is full of glorious scriptural acclamations and prayers about the Ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit

I read the set Bible readings – Psalm 29, the wonderful teaching & miracle of Jesus recorded in Luke Chapter 8, and the strange goings on of Balak and Balaam in Numbers

Again, I do not spend long on each passage – I just read

I come towards the end of the service, praying through the Lord's Prayer

Along the way, I have done the "settling" activities, trying to deal with the "monkey chatter"

by writing down things to be done and praying in tongues

... I look at my timer and see there are still 10 minutes left

.. a glorious 10 minutes still to come

I try to settle just being still, silent, stilling the body, being aware of breathing

But I am distracted – not least because one of the candles has burnt down, and threatens to burn the wooden candle stick it is in .. I have to deal with it

I try to settle again, but realise, I am feeling a bit bored

.. I want to get on with the day

I feel prompted to go back to Psalm 29, and verse 11 stands out “The Lord gives strength to his people, the Lord blesses his people with peace”

I write this down on a card, and pray it as a mantra

... Now I feel I am there, God is speaking into my frustrations and weariness, my sins and failings, hurts and wounds, and affirming my strengths and purpose..

..God brings His balm and grace, He brings the Holy Spirit

... The blessing of the moment is broken, as the alarm on my timer goes off.. I wished I could stay and adore .. I do not want to leave

But, the day calls and I know I have been strengthened

- Strengthened by word as I carry that verse from Psalm 29 with me through the day: “The Lord gives strength to his people, the Lord blesses his people with peace”

Strengthened by Spirit, the Holy Spirit – I have experienced something of Paul’s prayer in Ephesians:

“ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” (3:16-17)

Conclusion

What blessing there is, will be when we truly seek to build our relationship with God, when we focus on daily communion with Him...

... We will receive the Holy Spirit

... like those first disciples who we are told, after the Ascension of Jesus, “joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14)

... They together were utterly focussed on self-emptying, and seeking God. And the Holy Spirit was poured out on them

- They knew joy and strength – transformed to tell others about the good news of Jesus Christ

They were anointed with gifts, people, to be an effective church

... And as they continued to focus on self-emptying, seeking God, they would know all the fruits of the Holy Spirit growing in them

- Love, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control (Galatians Ch 5)

This is the blessing we all need

- A Spirit-filled Church with people offering their God-given gifts in service
- Spirit-filled people who truly are growing in the grace of God

Such blessing begins with you and me giving that set each day to pray, to grow our relationship with God. I pray that you will be blessed this coming week..

Pg 52 Prayer word helps to bring “every thought into captivity and obedience to Christ” - 2 Cor 10:5

Pg 28 “We go off in search of what has from all eternity sought and found us.”

Pg 29 “You were within me and I was outside myself” – Augustine - like deep-sea fisherman fishing for minnows while standing on a whale.

Do not worry about “feelings”, thinking you should be sensing the presence of God – you may or may not. And anyway, how do you know what the presence of God feels like