

Readings: Advent Sunday 28 November 2021

Jeremiah 33. 14 – 16

Psalm 25. 1 – 9

1 Thessalonians 3. 9 – 13

Luke 21. 25 - 36

I want to base our thinking this morning on some words that St Paul wrote:

Night and day we pray... 1 Thessalonians 3.10

In our readings from the Bible this morning we have heard four voices from the past: Jeremiah with a prophets voice, an anonymous poet with a feeling voice, St Paul with a teacher's voice, and St Luke with a story-tellers voice. All these people have one thing in common with us: they sought to maintain a relationship with God.

When Jeremiah was writing, Religious and Political leadership was exercised together as one, rather like our perception of leadership in Iran today. Political issues and religious issues were merged, and any political failure as with subjection to successive Empires was seen as failure to exercise sufficient faith in God.

People who saw themselves as part of the religious and political entity that was “Israel” were a group dedicated to God, and defeat to Empire was seen as their collective sin. They took it that there was no hope because defeat to Empire showed that God had abandoned them.

Jeremiah preached and wrote into that situation. His vision of God included the hope that for these people God would fulfil the potential for their relationship to continue and to develop. He says: “The time is surely coming...” and, “in those days...” to come, God will make new connections with people; people will be saved from group think and from their disappointments, and be saved to renew their vision of God. Jeremiah’s prayer, and hope, and vision provided the foundation for the eventual re-establishment of the Jewish nation within the Persian Empire.

The writer of Psalm 25, made his poetic voice felt within the context of that reformed group of people returning from Babylon. He draws on the rich history of their founding King, David. He calls on God to be mindful of his mercy and love for the group. He praises God

for the pathways created for the group to share in God's love. He is able to verbalise the hope that the voice of God instills; he is saying: I hear that voice each day when I am downcast. I hear it when I've almost lost hope, when I am entangled by my past, and when I am trapped by necessity. But, God alters my perspective, in his love all my ills diminish to their true size. I find my peace in all he wills for the group, and the relationship with God builds on this hope.

Both Jeremiah and the Psalmist are providing people with hope for their continuing relationship with God against a background of ongoing difficulty.

The reading from St Luke quotes Jesus warnings that difficulty in life is not about to go away any time soon. A relationship with God needs to be developed and renewed against a challenging background. Jesus points his listeners to the signs of the times. Their relationship with God is still based on traditional group think; but, all the signs are that this needs to change. The language is different: the appeal is to the individual. When

you see bad things happening, raise *your* head. When *you* see the signs: trees budding, other people drowning their sorrows, people weighed down with work, or struggling with broken relationships, or making themselves ill with the stress of it all, *you*, raise *your* head, be alert to God's presence, the kingdom of God is nearer than *you* think.

This new approach from a Christian perspective focusses on maintaining a relationship with God. Each of us is to work at our own salvation in these difficult times. Yes, we come together as a group to worship, and yes, we meet together in cell groups during the week. These are important structures as we support each other in the faith. But, Covid has served to disrupt our group activities. As individuals we often find ourselves alone, isolating, fearful, hopeless.

This is where we are forced to face the obvious. A relationship with God begins from how *I* understand my relationship with God and how I understand my relationship with the people around who are equally isolated, fearful, and often without hope.

In any situation of life the relationship with God is maintained and developed in conversation; we call it prayer.

St Paul writes to people at the Church in Thessalonica, “Night and day we pray...”. Prayer is the essential activity if we are to enjoy the rich potential of sharing our life with God.

But what are we doing when we pray?

Every so often there will be a scientist who will come up with a study of human behaviour. The last one I read about had measured the brain waves inside the heads of a few volunteers. From this research it was concluded that there was a definite pattern of waves in the brain when the person is engaged in prayer.

To me, this was hardly a surprise!

Being engaged in prayer myself, from time to time, I am quite aware that brain activity is needed in order to engage in prayer.

Hopefully, each of *us* engages in prayer from time to time. Perhaps you set aside a time each day. Perhaps you have some books of prayers you find helpful and which provide some words to use. Perhaps you keep a prayer list, so that you can add body, shape, and variety to your daily prayer. Perhaps you have downloaded the Anglican Daily Prayer AP to your phone. Perhaps you sit in silence, focussing on the view from your window. All these are examples of the activity of prayer

But, Night & Day!!! How does that work?

Our prayer life emerges from our commitment to sharing in the love that God has for all people, and from listening to what God is telling us through our life experience.

Commitment to God; listening to God: these are the two elements of prayer that lead us to talk with God – saying our prayers.

The commitment to God stems from our hearing of the Gospel – and practising living in

the new life promised by God by the death and resurrection of Christ.

Whatever level of faith we are at, we enjoy an understanding of God that works to change our attitude towards life and towards the people with whom we share life. Life takes on a different quality through faith, and this is enough to drive our conversation with God – saying our prayers.

In any conversation there are two aspects – listening and talking. Someone once said that we have one mouth and two ears – so, we should listen for twice as long as we speak. Well, there's a challenge! Especially to a preacher!

But, listening to God! How does that work?

First, we need the faith to hear God as he speaks. We have to get inside God's skin and try to look at life as God sees it. It is his world, so everything in the world contributes to the building of his kingdom.

As we listen out for God in his world,

as we look around us at God's world,
we should allow the whole of our life to
become a prayer.

Prayer is not limited to a crisis call to God from
time to time, when life has become tricky;
prayer is an unlimited, on-going, continuous
conversation with God, alternately listening
and responding.

In faith, as we observe world events, our
response becomes a prayer.

In faith, as we share in the life events of the
people around us, our response becomes a
prayer.

In faith, as we experience life for ourselves, our
response to what is happening in our own life
becomes a prayer.

In faith, both night and day, we can live our life
in an unlimited, on-going, continuous
conversation with God.

The whole of life is a prayer.

So, said Jesus, look at the trees: today, the leaves are falling; from this we work out that winter is near.

The parallel thought is that when all in the world looks hopeless –

Politicians are arguing over forming a government,

Covid continues to blight lives and livelihoods,

There is a terrorist bomb in a taxi,

We have a friend diagnosed with a terminal illness –

when all the world looks hopeless, we can stand up and hold our heads high, because in faith we know that we share in an approach to life that brings hope of new life in every situation.

The events of life give us impetus to respond to God in prayer, whenever they occur, as they occur, as we share in the horror of it all.

But it is not only in crisis that we share in prayer; our prayer conversation with God, encompasses the whole of life; so that we also share our good times, we share our feelings, we share the highs and the lows and the ordinary things of life.

Prayer is a conversation with a lifetime friend.

The message on Advent Sunday is that the Gospel of Good News gives us the hope of a new approach to life. Therefore we must be on our guard that we do not become weighed down and overwhelmed with the negatives. We must be alert at all times to share the events of life in that unlimited, on-going, continuous conversation with God; in prayer, night and day.

For us the time has come, we know the ways of the Lord, we can see the signs of our times, we can raise our heads because our redemption has been achieved in the death and resurrection of our saviour Jesus Christ, so...

Let us pray, *Night and Day*, and share in the closeness of the kingdom of God.