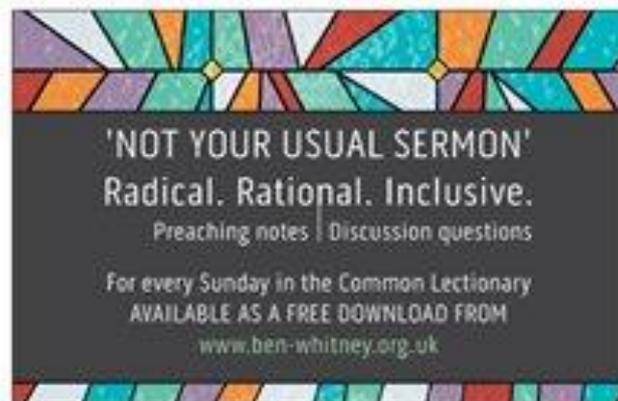


'NOT YOUR USUAL SERMON'

Radical. Rational. Inclusive.

Preaching notes and discussion questions for the Christian Year



OCTOBER 2019

BEN WHITNEY

www.ben-whitney.org.uk

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Each week contains my own 3 key themes, a 1300 word reflection on the passages from the Common Lectionary, a key quote and 3 questions for discussion.

READ THIS FIRST IF YOU'RE NEW. WELCOME!

Let's be clear from the start – I don't believe in a God as usually understood. The Universe just is. It all began about 14 billion years ago just because it did. There was no pre-existing Being who made it all happen. The earth is not the centre of everything; just a tiny insignificant planet in a vastness far too great for me to contemplate. In the past, including when the Bible was written, they thought it was all about us, with a God 'up' there. They were wrong. We are just a part of the heavens. A personal Deity who knows all about me is inconceivable. Things that were previously attributed to a God – weather, illness, death, what happens – just happen. Science tells us 'how'.

The usual response to this is that science doesn't tell us 'why'. But there is no why. No deeper purpose to our existence. No pre-determined meaning. We are indeed just grains of sand or specks of dust. Here today, gone tomorrow. Maybe our planet will be the same eventually. I understand that many people will find such an idea uncomfortable. We'd like there to be a meaning to it all. That's why people have always created religions, to provide a framework within which to understand themselves. Religions have a use as human constructs – but their insights are not a 'revelation' or a 'given' from elsewhere. They're just our ideas and so we have to change them in the light of greater knowledge. Religions have to evolve like everything else – or they die.

I will use the word 'God' in these Notes when I'm quoting other people's ideas. I may even occasionally use it myself as a metaphor or picture. But I never mean a 'Being' who knows us or who wants to 'save' us for Himself. 'Father' (not a biological description) worked for centuries. It doesn't work so well now. All statements about a God are human inventions and mostly I don't think we need them anymore.

What we do still need is to decide how to live. 'Faith' is not about an assent to a list of statements just because they're in the Bible or the Creeds. It's about how we choose to live – our values, our own defined purposes, what is best for us. Of course many of the old understandings still work without a God – because they were human insights in the first place! That's the point. We have always created our own values and have to go on doing so. But what was thought to be true 2000 years ago might not be right now. Or we might not have always lived up to our values and we need to be constantly revisiting them.

So what of Jesus? Not God. A 'Son of God' in a metaphorical sense. A human person who stands in a long line of those who have suffered for what they believed. Whose life and teachings (if only available to us at second or third hand) seem to offer a picture of 'God' that is quite different from the one usually on offer. One who works by stealth. Whose ways are hidden and found mostly when we care for one another, especially the outsiders and the stranger. Love itself made manifest. An example of how to live without thought of self. Someone still worth trying to know but not because of some impossibly miraculous happy ending. Who 'lives' only if we keep his vision alive. Not in heaven. In us. That's as 'Christian' as I'll ever get.

I hope these Notes encourage you, if you are thinking much the same. If not, I hope I at least will make you think. Friendly feedback is always welcome via my website.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

October 6th 2019

Lamentations 1: 1-6 2 Timothy 1: 1-14 Luke 17: 5-10

Psalm 137

MY KEY THEMES

- Exile and a sense of abandonment have been a common human experience. It still is for many today.
- Religious teaching has tended to stress our alienation from God. Perhaps we need to think about ourselves more positively.
- The Church clearly has a mission to care for those away from their homeland and their loved ones

I'm taking a break from Luke for a week or two, to focus on a theme raised especially by the Old Testament lessons and the Psalms: alienation and exile. But before we get to that, it is generally assumed that 2 Timothy was written by Paul while in prison in Rome, probably shortly before his death. The NT record is unhelpful as Acts finishes with him living in relative freedom under a rather liberal kind of house arrest. 'Evidence' for his execution comes from elsewhere. But Paul was away from those he cared for and wants his protégé to be sure of his continued support even though he cannot be with him. Perhaps after my thoughts last week that death is inevitably a final separation, it's a helpful reminder to also remember those who may still be close to us emotionally or spiritually, if not necessarily physically. The 'body' is not constrained by distance, perhaps not even by the distance of death. Way back on Easter Day I wrote that my father lives on in my own life over 40 years later. Perhaps that can help to fill the void for those who are not convinced of the usual understanding of life after death? Loss is an inescapable part of life but we can still feel in community with those we have loved and cared for.

The exile is one of the pivots of the Old Testament. In the 6th BCE the leaders of Judah/Judea were deported to Babylon, probably for several generations. Not everyone was forced to go but the religious and intellectual heart was ripped out of the community, and in particular this meant them being away from their precious Temple in Jerusalem.

This wasn't just a physical separation. It felt like actually leaving their God behind – or their God abandoning them – because the 'spiritual' was at that time so closely associated with particular places. The Temple was where God was. In the end it all actually worked out quite well as, when they returned, there was a significant revival of the Jewish scriptures and a broadening of the old traditions. They brought back with them the much more wholesome idea that 'God' is not a tribal totem, or concerned only with them, as they had previously thought. As the Psalm and the Lamentations (of Jeremiah) so movingly express, it was very painful at the time, and it seemed impossible to sing the Lord's song in such an alien context. But it had some real benefits in the long run. Maybe it does us no harm to be forced out of our comfort zones and made to find new truths and new understandings that work in a different way.

This sense of loss is echoed at other points in the Judao/Christian story. I usually attend my local Cathedral on Good Friday when these verses from Lamentations form part of the passion liturgy, in a magnificent setting by Thomas Tallis. Jesus is identified with his whole nation's previous experience of being away from God. It's one of the points in which I find the recollection of his crucifixion most moving. I cannot see it as a pre-arranged plan with a happy ending guaranteed. The cross is a symbol of separation and complete loss of hope, felt, I believe, as strongly by Jesus as by his ancient forebears. Whatever may have come next, he didn't know it at the time and that human existential crisis still speaks to me. And it has national, international, even global implications. It's not just a private 'religious' event but Jesus experiences it on behalf of, and in solidarity with, a broken and alienated world.

Some would say that all this goes back to Adam and Eve again. It's all our own fault! That was *the* separation that defined everything that came later. Of course that story isn't 'literally' true. It's a profound myth about what it means to be human, not a lesson in anthropology. But it is a reminder that being 'exiled from the Garden' means that it is an inevitable part of life for us to experience rejection, abandonment and a sense that we are not always where we want to be. You can be lonely in a crowd. You can lose touch with the people closest to you. How many people fail to find their full humanity because they are lost souls with no-one to affirm them? They are like a widow with no friends or lovers left. The Psalmist can do no more than look back nostalgically to being in Jerusalem. Their only hope is to keep the memory of better times alive. I understand that.

But there is something about living life to the full which requires us to take on these sad feelings and transform them into opportunities, just as the ancient people of Judah did in the end, (see next week). It's the only way I can respond positively to the killing of Jesus; not because it was some unique arena in which the normal rules of human experience did not apply, but because it was just the same. If not, he hasn't really been there and the hope that is found within it cannot possibly be true for me. When Jesus said 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me' he really meant it, just as the Psalmist did. Wishing the past was still here is not the way forward. Embracing the pain is the only way to move on from lonely exile to a new home, even if it is somewhere that is very different to where we have been before.

For many people in our world, and in our nation, that is an actual reality that they have had to face. Asylum-seekers and refugees have left their homes in droves, not because they wanted to, but because they have been driven out by economic necessity, war or persecution. Many have found a home here in the past. Maybe the Babylonians resented the arrival of these 'migrants' from Judah, just as the Egyptians had come to resent the Israelites generations before, even though they had made good use of them while they were there. 'Welcoming the alien' is surely one of the hallmarks, not only of those who follow Jesus but of any civilised society?

The inclusive inner-city church that I sometimes go to has a growing community of Iranian and Kurdish Christians, many of whom are separated from their families. We're not the worst country when it comes to supporting those who have been forced to flee – though our response to unaccompanied children is poor – but much of the help they need comes not from Government agencies, or from our taxes, but is provided by volunteers and charities. Many are forced into extremely poor housing; they are not allowed to work to support themselves financially and they can be subject to what look like very arbitrary and ill-considered decisions about their future status. People often have to move on just when we've got to know them but we try to give them opportunities to sing their Lord's song, even if they are in a strange land. Services can take a long time when everything has to be translated into Farsi but we all benefit in the end. It broadens our understanding of the world to encounter such realities first hand. The 'home' community's faith has been deepened, the worship has been refreshed and the church has grown through acts of kindness and generosity. Without our new friends it would probably have closed.

Ironically, it seems to be those who never actually meet someone in this position who can seem most hostile towards them. Maybe that's another kind of exile and alienation, experienced this time by the hosts not by the guests. Cut off from our deepest selves, from what we have traditionally called 'God', *and* from our sisters and brothers by barriers of suspicion that mean that we are actually more lost and alone than those about whom we may feel so uncomfortable. The Church can be different; it must be different. We are enriched by those whom the world sees as poor. They are a blessing to us. I think someone may have said that before! To be continued....

KEY QUOTE

When Jesus said 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me' he really meant it, just as the Psalmist did. But wishing the past was still here is not the way forward. Embracing the pain is the only way to move on from lonely exile to a new home, even if it is somewhere that is very different to where we have been before.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- What kinds of things may make us feel 'in exile', from others or from ourselves? Is this why people sometimes seek solace in sex, drugs, alcohol etc.?
- Christians have traditionally talked of people being 'cut off from God by our sin'. How could you have this same conversation with someone who does not believe in the conventional idea of a God?
- Does your Church have the opportunity to support asylum-seekers and refugees where you are? Find out about local charities like 'City of Sanctuary'? Can you help more, even if from a distance?

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

October 13th 2019

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7 2 Timothy 2: 8-15 Luke 17: 11-19

Psalm 66: 1-11

MY KEY THEMES

- My chosen theme doesn't have to be your theme! How do you decide where to focus?
- The people of God must have a special concern for the welfare of the 'city', not just leave it to others.
- 'It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness'

I could have chosen a number of themes this week from the Bible selection. We haven't yet considered Jesus the healer; a topic I certainly need to come back to. Given my rational approach to the Jesus story, what's to be made of the apparently 'miraculous' things he was remembered as doing? I don't see him as some kind of magician. Liberal Christians have usually interpreted the healings as largely psychological transformations; physical illnesses often have deeper emotional roots which Jesus was able to address. Or they were remembered, far from uniquely, as 'miraculous', based on the knowledge available at the time, when there was actually an entirely understandable reason for the change. More radical approaches to the text suggest that the examples are meant to represent something else; not just healings but 'signs'. They may not be descriptions of real events at all but should be seen symbolically. I need to do a bit more thinking about this before I venture my own ideas. But note that the star of the story is yet another Samaritan – never a coincidence in Luke's retelling and another reminder to his church about welcoming 'outsiders', reflecting the Gentile mission that was his primary context. Another 'good' Samaritan who has something to teach the so-called 'religious'.

Or I am very tempted by the writer of 2 Timothy's advice in v.14:

'Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening'.

If only the later Church had listened to this advice! Some churches still insist on certain words being included if someone's faith is to be considered 'sound'. But the words we use are nothing like as important as the use we put them to. Or what about the endless wrangling over particular Greek words that so preoccupied the C4thCE Councils on which the Creeds are built? Debates which are now entirely obsolete but which have been hugely influential in what we normally assume is central to 'Christianity'? Creeds are just words, aren't they? Just remember, it's all about Jesus, says the writer here. I'd like to think so.

But I'm picking up this week where we left off last week. The exiles have arrived in Babylon. Last week I was thinking about what it feels like to be away from home and how strangers should be welcomed. But we are the exiles this week. I'm moving on to thinking about how we should react to an uncomfortable modern setting, even if it is somewhere we never chose to be. The exiles are being encouraged to move from nostalgia to engagement. The instruction from Jeremiah, in the name of his God, is to make the most of the exile experience. Get over it! Settle down. Have children. Build houses. Plant crops. Make it your home. This was a revolutionary idea, given that they must have hoped it would all be temporary so they could get back to their God as quickly as possible. But God is not to be tied down; nor is it a good idea to constantly hark back to a supposedly better past. Move on. Create something new.

And, crucially to my mind, the reason for doing all this was not to benefit themselves alone. It was to promote the welfare of the city. They were to be a blessing to their former enemies who were now their new neighbours. It may be tempting to watch what we see as an alien world tear itself apart while we pull up the drawbridge, but is that right? This is another reflection of the hope that Israel would be a 'light to the nations', a destiny that was somewhat forgotten by the time of Jesus. In Biblical terms, true religion is not meant to benefit only those who sign up to it. It is meant to be a means by which goodness is shared with others. This has often been interpreted as a call only for evangelical zeal. At the time of the exile it seems that the call was to integrate, not to criticise; to contribute to the well-being of the whole community, not to set yourselves up as a nation apart. The end result of exile was a broadening of Jewish theology but also a rediscovery of their essential and different identity from before. That did rather become a focus only on themselves but that doesn't seem to have been Jeremiah's original vision.

Over 30 years ago I was involved in helping one diocese to implement the 'Faith in the City' report. This had drawn attention to many of the social inequalities in our society and recognised that local churches were ideally placed to address them. It was, of course, rubbished by some leading politicians, including some Christians, as 'communist propaganda', (a bit like Jesus' sermon at the start of his public ministry in Luke 4:18ff). Actually most parishes embraced the idea relatively happily because, once they started to look, they could see the need on their doorsteps. They may have sometimes lacked confidence in responding, and some could only really recognise the challenges in other less fortunate parishes, but some twinning arrangements and partnerships were built which I know continue to this day. Some rural parishes 'discovered' poverty or issues of transport and loneliness that they hadn't been as aware of before. Many carried out parish audits, or created parish maps, some in tapestry or as 3D models, to chart their greater awareness of their local context.

I'm not sure how many extra worshippers it all led to but that wasn't the point. It did seem to bring people together in new ways and enable more people to use their gifts, especially in practical ways. But it was the wider welfare of the city, or of the town or village, that we were seeking and I remember using this passage, as I think the report did, to underscore the theological point. Whether things have got any better a generation later is a good question. Jeremiah talked of planting crops and building houses. I don't remember helping any church to set up a food bank but there are hundreds of them now. Only a few parishes saw homelessness as an issue back then, and that was largely about the lack of affordable housing, not people literally sleeping on the streets.

Some people of faith feel very out of step with the wider community, like exiles in a strange secular land. The word 'God' and the language of faith mean nothing to most people now. I know good Christian people who just do not seem able to come to terms with the fact that some people are gay or have different opinions from theirs. The Church can still look very out of touch with a society where far fewer people are choosing to marry or baptise their children. Moral standards are not necessarily all the same any more, or they are not those the Church has traditionally advanced. Our communities are changing; more multi-cultural, more religiously diverse, more open to being honest rather than hiding differences away and pretending they're not there. How should Christians react? It seems to me that, like the exiles of old, the Church in our culture and context has a choice.

It can call people back to the old ways when God was assumed to be at the heart of things, when the Bible was seen as authoritative and moral standards were more cut and dried. It can hope to be an enclave of God's so-called 'truth' in a dark 'secular' and disbelieving world. Or it can embrace our modern culture with its questions, new scientific and psychological understandings and seek new ways to keep the story of Jesus alive within it. Maybe that's actually where our God is, not in here. That may mean having to redefine the gift we have received from the past, not merely preserve it. That won't be easy. But lighting a candle is surely always better than just cursing the darkness?

KEY QUOTE

It seems to me that, like the exiles of old, the Church in our culture and context has a choice..... It can hope to be an enclave of God's 'truth' in a disbelieving world. Or it can embrace our modern secular culture with its questions, scientific and psychological understandings and diverse values, and seek new ways to keep the story of Jesus alive within it.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- Would you rather discuss Jesus' healing ministry or whether we worry too much about the meaning of words in defining faith? If so, that's fine; talk about that!
- How much does your Church know about its local context and community? Would a parish review/audit be useful in identifying some new opportunities?
- Do you feel like an exile in a strange land? What are some of the points of tension between Christians and the wider society? How do you think we should we respond?

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

October 20th 2019

Genesis 32: 22-31

2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5

Luke 18: 1-8

Psalm 121

MY KEY THEMES

- 'Truths' must change and grow or they will die
- New ideas are risky and challenging but can be a renewal of faith if we are ready to embrace them
- Yesterday's 'heretic' may be tomorrow's prophet

It's not easy to spot what was in the minds of those who chose the passages this week, but it seems to be about truth and falsehood. I've written before about how Christians are often uncomfortable about embracing anything new, and both the writer of 2 Timothy and Luke seem to agree. Truths once given cannot be made untrue. So the Epistle urges the faithful to 'continue in what you have learned'. The verse about all 'scripture' being 'inspired by God' is usually quoted to bolster the Bible's permanent unchanging authority – though 'holy writings' is a better translation and of course it can only be referring to what we call the Old Testament as most of the New Testament hadn't been written yet! But here too, as elsewhere, there are warnings about 'false' prophets who will lead the faithful astray. Luke also seems concerned to stress the need for continued faithfulness; perhaps there were those in his church slipping back, so here's a reminder of the need to 'stick to what you've been told'. More his words than Jesus' in my opinion.

This approach is a major problem for me. And for the millions who have decided that Christian faith no longer offers anything that they can believe in. Surely this is a recipe for decay and eventual death? Anything that is living has to change and grow, not be pickled in aspic or frozen in time. I value the past, but it was present once. I do not see how we can expect the modern world simply to absorb 'truths' that take no account of all that we have discovered since. The sun does not go round the earth. No matter how firmly people believed it up to about 500 years ago, it is not and never has been true. Why should religious beliefs be any different?

I am far more attracted by the metaphor of Jacob wrestling with an unknown opponent. This is a strange and of course very ancient story. Like all OT legends it personifies the struggles of a nation rather than only of an individual. (As with Adam and Eve, ancient story-tellers often used the concept of a 'corporate personality' to make the tale more vivid; like the founding of Rome being described through a legend about two actual brothers). But as a result of his struggles, 'Jacob' is left physically wounded but spiritually renewed. He finds a new vision and purpose; he learns that 'God' cannot be known, only experienced as a mystery and that he has to make the place where he now is holy, not keep going back to what he had previously found reassuring. This encounter causes him some pain and makes him uncomfortable, but it is essential for growth.

So, hoping not to go off in too contrived a direction, I have recently been re-reading Bishop John Robinson's classic book, *'Honest to God'*, published in 1963, and the book about the subsequent debate, edited by David Edwards. Both are still readily available as paperbacks or on Kindle. If you have never read it I would recommend it, despite the somewhat archaic and sexist language. Every Christian is a 'man' and every clergyperson a 'he'! (In the Midlands area, I offer a Study Day for those who'd like a reflective guide to work through the book with you – more details on my website). It's well worth doing. 'God' should not be thought of as 'a' Being but as the 'Ground of our Being'. Jesus was 'the Man for Others', not some kind of half-man, half-God figure. The cross is about self-giving, not an atoning sacrifice. The Bible teaches through 'myth' not just through literal facts. Morality isn't set in stone but needs to be decided afresh according to the requirements of Love, not in compliance with some book of rules. The Church exists for the world, not for itself.

Did all this make him an atheist? Certainly not in his view, though it seemed to threaten many who said it did, and excite many others who thought that perhaps they weren't after all. Robinson was adamant that his role as a Bishop was to 'defend the faith; not to preserve it unchanged but to make it live for a new generation. Sadly any such hopes were relatively unfulfilled. A million copies were sold in no time at all. People actually read it on the Tube or on buses on the way home from work. But I suspect that many of the newly-stimulated turned up at their local church to find that nothing had changed and soon left again in disillusionment. Indeed Robinson himself went back to academic life not long afterwards, in some despair at the continued inability of most parishes, even in metropolitan London, to adapt to the changing world of the 1960s.

Perhaps he was naïve to expect anything else. Such insights are inevitably seen as controversial and may be thought to be upsetting to the faithful. Inevitably many Christian leaders denounced them, some of whom probably never actually read the book. The then Archbishop of Canterbury said it did ‘much damage’, though he later said he regretted saying it. In some ways for me, the book is not nearly radical enough!

However, as the reviews and personal correspondence sent to the author showed, many people, including many churchgoers, found it helpful. They too had been thinking much the same about the need for change but had been afraid to admit it. If anyone ‘lost their faith’ as a result of reading the book, then their faith obviously wasn’t built on very firm foundations. One critic wrote that he could no more tell his church that God is not a Being who lives beyond/above the sky than he could tell a child that Father Christmas does not exist. I have news for him (spoiler alert); he doesn’t! It’s not true. Are those who currently believe really so fragile in their faith that it can only be sustained keeping new truths away from them? I would say exactly the same to those who want to ‘protect’ the faithful from such ‘heresies’ today. We have had very little open and adult debate about such key questions since, so most people still think that ‘Christianity’ is either irrelevant or simply unbelievable. How many churches ever encourage such genuine honesty rather than only keeping everyone ‘on message’? A friend of mine suggests we need an ‘Omega’ course to counter what can seem like a constant emphasis on repeating the basics, unchanged and unchallenged.

But Christian history is littered with people who weren’t afraid to challenge pre-existing ‘truths’, including, of course, Jesus himself. He cannot possibly be seen as anything other than a radical teacher who reinterpreted the ancient traditions. We think everything has stayed the same ever since the C1st when of course it hasn’t. But we are inconsistent. Happy to accept new insights when it comes to medicine or technology but wanting to keep God in a Trinitarian box which was actually not constructed until centuries after the New Testament was written. We embrace the reality of space travel or the existence of black holes, but we don’t see that much of our conventional language about where God is must change as a result. We still talk of God ‘coming down’ or Jesus ‘going up’ as if they were literal descriptions, rather than embracing more poetic or psychological concepts that might free God from ‘His’ traditional prison and open up the possibility of new encounters that actually make sense to modern minds.

Talking of prisons, one of John Robinson's inspirational sources was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He too was dismissed as a heretic by some of those who responded to the book. Few, I hope, would make such a statement today. In *'Letters and Papers from Prison'* written just prior to his execution by the Nazis, he wrote this: *'God allows himself to be edged out of the world and onto the cross...Matthew 8:17 makes it crystal clear that it is not by his omnipotence that Christ helps us, but by his weakness and suffering'*. Jesus reveals a God, the truth beyond all truth, as human self-giving Love. As it was for Jacob, it can be a painful struggle, but if that isn't a hope worth sharing, even if 'God' might now need to be understood in a different way, then I don't know what is. If that is heresy, count me in!

KEY QUOTE

Anything that is living has to change and grow, not be pickled in aspic or frozen in time. I value the past, but it was present once. I do not see how we can expect the modern world simply to absorb 'truths' that take no account of all that we have discovered since.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- How do you see the balance between keeping the old truths and embracing new ones? Are Christian beliefs a 'given' or can we change them?
- Do you have a book/writer that has influenced and helped you in your own journey as much as 'Honest to God' means to me?
- Talk to some people/family members who don't go to church/believe. What would encourage them to have another look?

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

October 27th 2019

Jeremiah 14: 7-10, 19-22 2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18 Luke 18: 9-14

Psalm 84: 1-6

MY KEY THEMES

- Prayer is not about getting God to 'do something'
- It's OK to be angry about the state of the world
- A life lived in the 'spirit of holiness' changes the person praying *and* offers hope to others

A whole chapter of 'Honest to God' is devoted to prayer and to both personal and corporate spirituality. It might be thought that all such talk is redundant once we abandon the idea of a personal God-Being who can actually hear us and who chooses whether or not to intervene in 'His' creation in response. I have written before that our sense of the mystery behind the Universe is not like an MP who has to be persuaded or shamed into answering our emails. As the Jeremiah passage seem to reveal, at least on first reading, of course ancient people assumed that the weather, wars, illness, when you died etc. was all under the control of a Superpower that had to be kept sweet if you were going to be protected. I'm not sure that is exactly what the prophet is saying, but such a superstition cannot be maintained in the light of modern knowledge about the way the Universe works. It also makes God very unfair and arbitrary; tailoring 'His' responses to whether or not we have asked nicely.

John Robinson draws on Bonhoeffer again in his chapter, 'Worldly Holiness'. 'What is the place of worship and prayer in an entire absence of religion'? Bonhoeffer had coined the term 'religionless Christianity', not to undermine the whole business of faith, but to stress that seeking the Way of Jesus is not some separate activity that is carried out only by 'religious' people doing 'religious' things, but an integral part of life. People sometimes ask me if I am religious and my answer is a resounding 'NO'. Religions are our own creation. They are made up of doctrines and creeds; structures and scriptures and, so often, rules and regulations about what believers can and cannot do, just like any other organisation.

When we are seeking to be a transforming influence on the world, or sharing in the hurts and sadnesses of other people, or reflecting on the meaning of our life and its failures and triumphs, even when we are sharing in bread and wine together; we are not being 'religious', we are being fully human. That is how Jesus lived. That's the Way. The secular is sacred – or rather, there is no distinction. We don't go to church or say our prayers in order to 'find God'. We need to *open* our eyes and look around us. Prayer is in the seeking *and* in the finding, as long as it makes a difference to us as a result. Life is prayer.

I have no desire to make our nation more 'religious'; I do want to see it more honest, just, caring, inclusive and welcoming, whether or not that brings any more people into the churches. On one measure we were supposedly far more 'Christian' in the past, but of course we never were. Several of the prophets talk of the annoyance of God with all this constant babbling on at Him: Amos 5: 23 and 24: *Take away the noise of your singing; I will not listen to the sound of your harps, (organs, guitars, keyboards, drums etc!) But let justice roll down like a river and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream.* It's all about outcomes again.

Jeremiah clearly had anger issues and expressed that frustration to his sense of the eternal. He was angry, in part with God for apparently ignoring His people, but also with the people themselves. There was much that was wrong as there still is; probably this was a time of drought and famine, but also a failure to live responsibly and well. The people deserved their fate and yet he also recognises that their God is 'in the midst of them'. It's the people's failure to follow Him, not God's failure to act that's the problem. Other nations, he says, call on their idols and expect them to 'do' something. Pointless. God is not a stranger who is just passing through and might spare us a minute if he's not too busy. Peace and healing will come only when the people change, not when God does. The truth beyond all truth is always there even when we can't see it.

It's our failure to find a new language about God that makes prayer seem ridiculous to many. The problem with a 'God of the gaps' who steps in and does things that don't seem to get done otherwise, is that there are far fewer gaps to fill than there used to be. Don't just pray for the future of the planet - plant more trees! Don't just pray for your sick and lonely friend – go and visit them. Maybe in a time of crisis we'll still try anything, but experience eventually tells us that there is no supernatural WonderGod waiting to ride to our rescue. Bad things still happen to good people.

People know that prayer cannot be about some kind of especially-targeted magic just for the lucky few. If that's what they think Jesus can do they will either be disappointed when it turns out not to 'work' or they will come to see the whole business of faith as irrelevant and unbelievable. Of course it's only human to wish for a sick person to be healed. When suicide bombers attacked Christians in Sri Lanka on Easter Day of course I shared their pain and lit a candle to show my compassion. But these actions are essentially about changing ourselves, not about changing what will happen.

Not that prayer should be selfish. The Pharisee's prayer was all about himself and how pious he was. That was what was so wrong. The tax-collector, (yet another of Luke's outsiders), knew that he came empty-handed, but went away satisfied. That image of self-emptying crops up again and again in Bonhoeffer and, of course, not only in his writings, but in his own death. And it's what Jesus did on the cross. It's in giving life away that we find it. Constantly asking God for reassurance and expecting things to be put right as a result is the very opposite of faith. That sounds like putting God to the test; assuming our own act of devotion is key when in fact we might be better spending our time out in the world getting our hands dirty.

I've only recently started attending any church at all after more than 15 years away. Why do I go when I don't believe there is a personal God who notices? I don't go to be noticed. Perhaps some people still do but that must be far less common now than it used to be. I don't go just to indulge in what an old friend of mine used to call 'spiritual entertainment'. Of course church can be inspiring and emotional – though it can be quite the opposite and I wonder why anyone goes at all! I don't go to experience a 'high' or to forget my life outside, though at its best there is an aesthetic element that I can't deny. Sometimes the sublime music or the compassion of the preacher lifts my spirits and enables me to sense a depth to life that otherwise eludes me. Sometimes I join in with the prayers; sometimes I don't. I recognise the need to acknowledge that my life is not as filled with 'the spirit of holiness' as it could be. I want to remember the needs of others. And I now choose to receive communion again, as an act of solidarity with my fellow-pilgrims and to remember Jesus. So what difference does it make? Sometimes not much because I'm not in the right mood or I am distracted by some dreadful hymn poorly sung or a sermon I don't agree with. Or there's far too much emphasis on 'just really wanting to thank you Lord' over and over and over again!

But the most important difference is in what I *do* as a result. The ‘holiness’ has to become ‘worldly’ if it is to be of any value. I can’t claim to have ever ‘heard’ God speaking to me but I have sometimes wept when contemplating the cross or when I enter into someone else’s suffering. I have resolved to take some action as result of being in church or established a new relationship with someone else there. Sometimes I have just sat alone or read a book and sensed a heightened awareness of my own or someone else’s thoughts. Is this prayer as it is ‘meant’ to be done? I have no idea. But I am sure that many other people who never go near a church could benefit from exploring such spaces and opportunities themselves, if only we didn’t put so many ‘religious’ obstacles in their way.

KEY QUOTE

When we are seeking to be a transforming influence on the world, or sharing in the hurts and sadnesses of other people, or reflecting on the meaning of our life and its failures and triumphs, or even when we are sharing in bread and wine together; we are not being ‘religious’, we are being fully human. That is how Jesus lived. That’s the Way.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- How do you understand prayer? What ‘works’ for you: silent prayer; a liturgy; music etc.?
- What do you think of the idea that all of life is prayer; that there is no sacred/secular distinction in life? Listen to or *read* [‘Everything is holy Now’](#), a song by Peter Mayer.
- Does ‘religion’ sometimes get in the way of people finding a sense of God or following the Way of Jesus? How?

Notes for November available from Mid-October