

Service for Cashmere Presbyterian Church - Sunday 26 April 2020 Rev Hamish Galloway

Opening with the last post to remind us of ANZC day

Today we light the candle to remember those who served in the terrible conflicts that have assailed our world in the last 100 years or so:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

(Laurence Binyon)

Call to Worship

(inspired by Ezekiel 37: 1-14)



The prophet asks: Can our soul-weary bones live again?

We ask: Can we lift our spirits again after times of distress?

God's gift is sure and unmistakable:
God's Spirit poured out as new life into our hearts!

Let us celebrate the gift of God's new life,
And come with hearts and minds eager to receive!

Hymn for today:

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

Oh, may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed;
And guard us through all ills in this world, till the next!

All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
The Son, and Him Who reigns with Them in highest Heaven—
The one eternal God, Whom earth and Heav'n adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.

Reading: John 20

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you!"

Sermon: God is in our Bubble

The short passage from John's gospel today is a lockdown story. Actually the bible is full of lockdown stories if you think about it – I was thinking of Noah as he and his family locked down in the ark with the animals to protect themselves against the flood, or the Israelite slaves in Egypt who locked down so that the angel of death would Passover, or the forced lockdown for the exiles in Babylon, or Jesus forcibly locked down in the tomb. In each situation there are some common factors including the new beginnings that emerged after the time of lockdown and the fact that God did not desert them in their time of lockdown. He penetrates their lockdown bubble!

It is this second element that I want to focus on today.

The John passage has 5 dimensions that are very relevant to our current circumstances;

1. The disciples were in troubling times
2. They decided to lock themselves away for self-protection
3. They were fearful
4. Jesus penetrated their bubble
5. And as they embraced his presence with them he brought them a longed for peace

I think the first 4 things are a given – we are in troubling times, we have locked down for self-protection, we are fearful of the implications of COVID 19 both now but especially into the future, and yet as Christians we also believe that God is with us, that no matter where we are, or what is happening, God is with us.

It is the 5th dimension that I want to talk about today – how to embrace God with us in a way that allows us to experience his peace at a deep heart level, that peace that Paul describes as passing all human understanding:

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7)

Sometimes we put protective bubbles around ourselves that keep God and others out. Today I want to talk about allowing God to get below the surface of our lives and providing access to our hearts. There is a telling story about this in the Old Testament. Saul was chosen as the first King of Israel on the basis of superficial outward appearances – he was among other things, a foot taller than anyone else. But it became quickly very clear he was not prepared to allow God access to his heart. He looked good on the outside but not so good on the inside. As a result he became a tortured soul and there is a telling episode in 1 Samuel 13 where God's blessing is no longer able to rest on him, and God goes looking for another who will have a heart open to God:

Samuel said to Saul "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. ¹⁴ But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command." (1 Samuel 13)

And the man that God found was David – far from perfect and yet a man after God's own heart! What does that mean – we see it so wonderfully displayed in his life story and wholeheartedly articulated in the Psalms. This life story and then the songs and prayers he wrote demonstrate an ongoing, honest and transparent conversation with God, warts and all. They demonstrate for us the kind of prayer life that is not just superficial lip service but allows God access to our hearts. And that is what God wants, to breakthrough our protective bubbles and gain access to our hearts.

I had an experience when we were on holiday in Australia that made me think about this. We were staying at Bondi Beach. Bondi beach, it seems to me, has a very superficial culture with a focus on body and image. The gyms and trendy cafes thrive while the churches are dying.

And it came to focus for me one morning when I was seeking to do some body surfing at a beach called Bronte.

I love to body surf, and I would love you to have an image of me zipping along the top of a wave! But on this occasion, I had to get through a deep channel to get to where the waves were. And the channel was not only deep, it also had a strong sideways rip. As I tried to navigate my way through the channel the first time I found myself out of my depth, being swept sideways and unable to reach the people only a few metres ahead of me who were standing on the higher sand bar waiting for the next wave to body surf. It seemed to me a bit of a metaphor for life – at times we find ourselves struggling, out of our depth and being pulled in a direction we don't like when actually people around us seem to be just fine. So I retreated to shore, gathered my strength and had another go. This time was even worse – I just could not make headway and found myself struggling for breath. I was at the point of putting my hand high in the air to signal to the lifeguards I needed saving! But I didn't, I was too proud. I did not want to let other know I needed help – how embarrassing that would have been. So I struggled on, dangerous as it was. I eventually made it to the higher ground, exhausted. But it made me think about how preciously we protect our outward image, how slow we can be to acknowledge when we are out of our depth and we need help!

I highlight that because I think we tend to mask the inner world. Before Christmas I listened to a podcast of a highly effective woman CEO who talked about the pressure on her to be upbeat and fabulous all the time. The truth was that she was dealing with a whole lot of inner pain. Her growth as a person only really got going when she was able to peel back the layers of positivity makeup and started to deal with the reality of the pain. In other words, letting God into the bubble of self-sufficiency we often surround ourselves with.

God is interested in all of us, not just the superficial stuff. And he wants to engage with us in depth at every point in our journey. Drawing on the kind of openhearted relationship David had with God, Richard Foster has written a book on prayer, 'Prayer – Finding the Heart's True Home', that is designed to allow God access to our hearts. He submits that we need to be done with superficial living and superficial religion and develop a heartfelt and authentic prayer relationship with God. His basic message is this: God wants access to our hearts. He brings focus to the kind of prayer that helps us to attend to the thoughts, pain, attitudes and feelings that lie in the deep recesses of the mind and heart. These are areas God seeks to draw near to us and to bring transformation. And this is the kind of prayer that connects us with God in this time of disconnection.

Richard Foster outlines a number of wonderful principles that I think are great helps for us in allowing God into our bubble:

1. SIMPLE PRAYER –

'Give us today our daily bread' Matthew 6:11

Simple prayer is the daily ongoing conversation with God which brings him into every moment of our lives unfiltered. Thoughts and feelings, sights and sounds, words and actions.

Foster says: "In Simple Prayer we bring ourselves before God just as we are, warts and all. Like children before a loving father, we open our hearts and make our requests.... We simply and unpretentiously share your concerns and make our petitions." (p. 9)

It is not always attractive because some of our thoughts, feelings, words and actions can be a bit off at times! But CS Lewis puts it this way: 'lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us'

In this way we allow God access to the real me in an ongoing way – you have full access God.

I had a breakthrough in my prayer life in 1987 when I went on a 7 day silent retreat. I only had God to speak to and in my loneliness I found myself talking to God all day every day. Suddenly, my prayer life was no longer driven by 30-minute early morning appointments but was an ongoing conversation with God.

These days this is expressed best when I am gardening when I find myself and God alone together for hours in our shared thought processes. I love that.

It is very simple indeed but as Foster says:

'To be spiritually fit to scale the Himalayas of the spirit we need the regular exercise in the hills and valleys of life'

2. PRAYERS OF ANQUISH (combining 2 categories; abandonment and tears)

The prayer we pray when we feel deep anguish that we feel when circumstances go against us, or we mess up big time or we feel we have been abandoned by God. We are in good company – Jesus prayed it

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:6)

Famous American preacher George Buttrick once said that he sometime felt like 'he was beating on heaven's doors with bruised knuckles in the dark'

He was not alone – someone has observed that the pages of the psalms are wet with the tears of the writer, and so many great Christians from Martin Luther, St John of the Cross to Mother Teresa talk of this kind of prayer. My experience of years of talking with people about their prayer life leads me to believe that we all have times like this.

It is tempting to give up. Or it is tempting to superficially pretend that everything is ok. But that would not be a biblical way to go on this. The biblical answer is to honestly cry out to God with a fist raised if necessary. Indeed, Foster sees that this kind of prayer is not a rabbit hole down which our faith disappears, but rather a major highway to transformation. Indeed it seems to me this kind of prayer experience teaches us

- To be honest with God
- To be patient
- To be spiritually hungry
- To see we are in relationship with a person not a formula

3. THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN – this is the prayer of Psalm 139

'You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.'

Foster writes that "[The prayer of examen] has two basic aspects, like two sides of a door. The first is the examen of consciousness through which we discover how God has been present to us throughout the day and how we have responded to his loving presence. The second aspect is an examen of conscience in which we uncover those areas that need cleansing, purifying, and healing." (pp. 27, 28)

I think this is about building into your day a habitual process of consciousness of good and bad things before the Lord

- Foster talks about a time in his life when each evening he would go out and shoot basketball hoops and use that time to process with God the highs and lows of his day
- Each day I try to use the Sacred Space internet app that has a section called consciousness where you are asked to bring before God things that you are thankful for and things that you need to confess.
- And I have built into my life regular exchanges with a couple of friends where we discuss points of praise and points of regret

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)

“What is it, this Prayer of Tears? It is being ‘cut to the heart’ over our distance and offense to the goodness of God (Acts 2:37). Foster says it is weeping over our sins and the sins of the world.” (p. 37)

4. THE PRAYER OF RELINQUISHMENT

This is the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” (Matt 26:39)

The prayer of relinquishment is “a grace-filled releasing of our will and a flowing into the will of the Father. It...moves us from the struggling to the releasing.” (p. 47)

It can be like falling into the comfort of bed at night after a tough day.

5. FORMATION PRAYER –

Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel. (Jer 18:6)

I love the song that goes:

*Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.*

This is about being constantly changed by God, ongoing conversion through openness to His Holy Spirit. The scholar HCG Moule talks about a perpetual progression and growth into grace through ‘a long series of deepening surrenders in habit and action. And a larger discovery of self and the Lord, of His will, taking effect in the ‘shining’ of a transfigured life’

6. COVENANT PRAYER

¹⁰ Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. (Daniel 6)

There are a number of patterns of prayerfulness seen in scripture and in the lives of Christians. The key here is a commitment to a pattern, a rhythm – quality time set aside to talk and listen.

Conclusion

I have recently read the book *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*

Eleanor is socially awkward and leads a solitary lifestyle. She has no friends or social contacts, and every weekend consumes two bottles of vodka.

Not considering that she has a problem, Eleanor repeatedly describes herself as "absolutely fine". She is intent on keeping everyone out of her bubble.

Yet as the plot unfolds we find that she is not actually ok, rather she is desperately lonely, physically and emotionally scarred by her past, she is self-medicating with her weekly dose of vodka. It takes a complete breakdown, the love of a friend, support from her workplace and some excellent counselling to get her to the point where, while she is not completely fine, she is doing so much better (... setting up the sequel novel maybe?!)

We all have a bit of Eleanor in us – as Christians we also have another pathway to wellness and maturity – it is this allowing God to attend to our pain through the pathway to prayer and to be transformed accordingly!

Practically speaking I invite you to consider this by reflecting on the inventory I have prepared and attached to the email I sent out with the link to the video of this service or attached as an appendix to the written script.

Our prayer for others come from a selection of prayers written by World Vision for this time:

Jesus, during Your ministry on Earth You showed Your power and caring by healing people of all ages and stations of life from physical, mental, and spiritual ailments. Be present now to people who need Your loving touch because of COVID-19. May they feel Your power of healing through the care of doctors and nurses.

Take away the fear, anxiety, and feelings of isolation from people receiving treatment or under quarantine. Give them a sense of purpose in pursuing health and protecting others from exposure to the disease. Protect their families and friends and bring peace to all who love them.

Dear Lord, we lift to You our concern for people who are more likely than others to become severely ill from COVID-19 — the elderly and people with chronic health conditions. Protect them from harm and be their comfort in this time of uncertainty and, for many, preventive isolation from loved ones.

God, as more people get sick around the world, healthcare workers and first responders are working longer hours with fewer supplies and with more risk of contracting the new coronavirus themselves. Renew their energy and sustain them on long shifts. Bring Your protection upon them as they work with patients. Multiply their supplies so they have the protective items needed to stay safe on the job.

Inspire and invigorate the research doctors developing better tests to diagnose the virus, create vaccines to prevent it, and identify protocols to eliminate the disease's spread.

Father, we seek Your wisdom daily. Be with people making decisions that affect the lives and futures of our families, communities, countries, and the wider world. We pray that they communicate clearly, truthfully, and calmly — with each other and with the public — and that their messages are received and heeded. May truth and empathy be the touchstones of people setting policies for our protection.

Holy Spirit, as families continue to adjust to everyone being home as businesses and schools close, we ask that You guide people in their new realities. Give spouses grace for each other. Prompt worn-out parents to speak words of kindness and encouragement to their children. Help children find creative ways to experience the beauty of all You have created and continue learning.

Jesus, we thank You for Your faithfulness in how you have guided and equipped people in their jobs and have provided in the past. It can be scary and overwhelming not knowing how bills and obligations will be met or to not be able to provide for families. As people feel financial strain during the uncertainty, bring them comfort and peace, reminding them that You are there for them. Provide for them in their times of need.

Lord, we are so grateful for all the people who continue to work each day so that people are able to eat. We ask that You bless and protect them as they serve. Give them grace to handle disgruntled customers during supplies shortages. Keep their bodies healthy as they unload and stock boxes of supplies. Keep their cars and trucks running smoothly as they deliver needed supplies and food people have ordered online. And please protect them all from contracting the new coronavirus.

Appendix

Letting God into my bubble

Following up on a sermon preached for Sunday 26 April 2020

Personal Inventory

A personal inventory around the kind of prayers that help to attend to the thoughts, pain, attitudes and feelings that lie in the deep recesses of the mind and heart. These are areas God seeks to bring transformation.

Richard Foster's book 'Prayer – Finding the Heart's True Home' talks about 7 kinds of prayer that allow God into our lives at a more honest level. How are you doing with the following areas of your prayer life:

1. SIMPLE PRAYER –

'Give us today our daily bread' Matthew 6:11

This is the daily ongoing conversation with God which brings him into every moment of our lives unfiltered. Thoughts and feelings, sights and sounds, words and actions.

How do I rate on a 10 point scale, 10 being doing great here:

1 _____ 5 _____ 10

2. PRAYER OF THE FORSAKEN

The prayer we pray when we sense that we have been abandoned by God. We are in good company – Jesus prayed it

"My God, my God, why have you **forsaken me?**" (Matthew 27:6)

1 _____ 5 _____ 10

3. THE PRAYER OF TEARS –

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)

This is about weeping over our sins and the sins of the world.

There is something very emotionally connecting with God about this – emotional availability is a key to good relationship and to growth as a person.

1 _____ 5 _____ 10

4. THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN – this is the prayer of Psalm 139
'You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.'

This is about building into your day a habitual process of consciousness of good and bad things before the Lord

1_____5_____10

5. THE PRAYER OF RELINQUISHMENT

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Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matt 26:39)

The prayer of relinquishment is a grace-filled releasing of our will and a flowing into the will of the Father. It moves us from the struggling to the releasing.

1_____5_____10

6. FORMATION PRAYER –

Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel. (Jer 18:6)

This is about being constantly changed by God, ongoing conversion through openness to His Holy Spirit.

1_____5_____10

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¹⁰ Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. (Daniel 6)

There are a number of patterns of prayerfulness seen in scripture and in the lives of Christians. The key here is a commitment to a pattern, a rhythm – quality time set aside to talk and listen.

1_____5_____10

Rank yourself on each of these – 10 is great, 5 is average. Where could you do better and how might you lift your prayer life in this area?