

Reflection for 5th Sunday after Epiphany by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Sadly, and frustratingly, we are not able to gather for worship in our churches and it is looking likely this will continue for a few more weeks before we start to see any relaxation of the rules. However, that does not mean we cannot pray. Several of us, for example, are gathering for Evening Prayer from our homes via Zoom on Sundays and Wednesdays.

Today's gospel reading gives us an insight into Jesus' life of prayer and the way, particularly at key moments, the gospels record him at prayer.

Look back over the beginning of Mark's gospel and you see the narrative emerging. Jesus has been baptised by John, and then spent time in the wilderness in preparation, before moving to Capernaum and calling Peter, Andrew, James, and John, as the first disciples. His ministry begins with him speaking in the local synagogue and casting out the evil spirit from the man who interrupted him. Then, having cured Peter's mother-in-law, he is inundated with those who are sick and looking to be healed.

The dilemma facing Jesus at this point is does he stay where he is, where things are going well, at least in the early stages? Does he look for people to come to him at Capernaum? Alternatively, does he begin to move out from Capernaum and bring his message to a wider audience? Stay where he is, where things may be comfortable, at least until the initial bubble bursts, or move out and face new and unknown challenges.

It's a conundrum, so Jesus gets up early in the morning before dawn and goes out to a deserted place, and there he prays. There are two important images here that we can learn from - prayer and wilderness.

Try at some point sitting down and reading the whole of Mark's gospel, like you might a novel. What you may well notice is that there are three occasions when Mark records Jesus praying: firstly the occasion in today's reading, secondly after he has fed the five thousand and thirdly, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Each of these occasions are critical moments in his life. What Jesus is aware of is that, at these critical moments, he needs to be sustained by help from God the Father. In his own strength, even he will flounder.

That is something we need to be reminded about time and time again; in the busyness of life, we try to cope in our own strength and as result flounder and fall. Prayer and worship need to be the foundation onto which we build because, like Christ, it is there that we find the strength we need. It is there, too, that our relationship with God grows, develops and is strengthened.

What Jesus is aware of is the fragility of human nature and the way we are tempted not only to do things in our own strength but also to set the agenda ourselves, very much focused on ourselves. And one of the things he is doing in prayer is affirming his intention to fulfill the will of God, being submissive to the direction God the Father has for him. In this case it is to leave the comfort of Capernaum and move further afield: as he puts it to the disciples "Let

us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” In the same way in Gethsemane, it is a struggle between walking the way of the cross and the way of escape. *“Father,”* he prayed, *“my Father! All things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want.”*

As we struggle with life’s many decisions to do the will of God, to travel the path that he has for us - not the one we feel we would like to walk, prayer is a key element of doing just that, not always easy but vital.

Which brings us to the other image of the wilderness - a deserted place. On each occasion we see Jesus at prayer it is in a lonely place, in solitude and at night - in a sense harking back to the wilderness and the temptations of the devil. He is all too aware that amidst the noise of all that is going on around him, the crowds pushing in on every side, he cannot find the space he needs to talk with God; so he withdraws to a place of quiet.

Our modern world is full of all kinds of noise. Take this noise away and some people feel uncomfortable. The first time someone tries a silent retreat can be difficult; initially finding the silence unnerving, as time goes by they begin to appreciate the more fully the way it enables them to get closer to God. Each of us needs to find in our lives that wilderness or deserted place, that space where we, like Jesus, can be alone with God and not only talk to him but also hear what he has to say. A place where we can struggle with the temptations that are so often around us.

In recording for us the way Jesus uses prayer as he handles life’s critical moments Mark is giving us two messages about the place of prayer; the way we pray and the space we need.

Let me close this reflection with some words from William Temple which sum up very well the place of prayer and worship in the life of the Christian.

Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of imagination by his beauty; the opening of heart to his love; the surrender of will to his purpose - and all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all our actual sin.