

Prayer Series (final week): Permanent prayer – Psalm 63 / 1 Thess 5:16-18

Who's this? (S) – ASK. Canon Andrew White, vicar of Baghdad. Amazing man – read an article this week – asked him ‘what are you doing currently?’ READ.

V. powerful – amazing what God is doing behind the scenes (never reported). Also struck by this phrase – ‘24-hr prayer cover’ – bunch of people praying constantly (prob in shifts).

Difficult topic – ‘permanent prayer’ (S) – wonder what you thought when you heard? – perhaps like Andrew’s team – first reaction ‘I can’t do that’. Backed up by verse in 1 Thess ‘pray continually’. Scary! Is that what we are meant to get to?

Well, that is a form of it – but not quite what I meant by it – what it mean is that sense of being permanently connected to God, of walking with him and being with Him all the time. May have *periods* of prayer, but also deeper sense of being with him, of involving him in every part of your day. As I put in the leaflet:

(S) *‘Prayer is a way of being. God is with us always and we can talk to Him anytime we want. As we grow in prayer, it moves from being something we do to something we are. How can we begin to live a ‘life of prayer’?’*

Think about that today using Psalm 63.

First – what sort of pray-er are you? (Ss)

- Plate juggler
- Base jumper
- Prayer surfer
- Triple D – daily dogged discipline
- Mystic – long periods, needs silence
- Brian – confused.com – no pattern at all

(S) Value in all of these – goal for all of us is to so integrate prayer into our lives that it's part of who we are: we pray in the crisis and the wave of glory, we're disciplined and spontaneous, we involve God in the everyday and in the awesome silence of his holiness. Basically we're just plugged into God, and we have that freedom where we not only *believe* that we can talk to him anytime, anywhere, about anything, but we just do it. Sometimes talk for a long time, sometimes say just a sentence / sometimes say a lot, sometimes say little / sometimes structured, sometimes spontaneous / - but we do it often and naturally, at home, in car, out for a walk – God just is an everyday reality.

Hope that as I've described it as such it sounds less like a chore and more like freedom, a real sense of being constantly in presence of God, talking naturally to him as you would talk to your best friend.

Loneliness once described not as having no-one to do something with, but no-one to do *nothing* with. Imagine if prayer with God became more like that – imagine doing nothing with God, just being and hanging out together and letting the content just happen?

So what do we learn from Psalm 63?

(S) Starts with thirst – thirst for God – (could be hunger, but in this case, thirst): READ v1.

Language of longing. Think of how it feels when someone you love goes away – and you miss them. And you long to be with them again. That's how David feels about God.

Language very apt – written in desert – connects that feeling with his desire for God. Anyone ever been really thirsty? – all you think about, a long cool drink. David: 'God I want to drink you.'

Note that life not hunky-dory – land is dry and parched. Not thirsting for God because everything is tickety-boo. This is real prayer, real hunger.

Suggests that *maybe* our prayer lives don't grow because we're not hungry for God, thirsty for His presence. Journey towards a life of prayer starts with simple prayer: 'help me to be hungry for you, to desire more of you, more of your presence.'

Really a prayer of surrender – allows me to introduce chap called Brother Lawrence (S) – 17th century monk - Practice of presence of God. Really what talking about today – how to walk with God all the time. Short and simple, profoundly influential. Not systematic teaching, but revolves around 3 observations – first is this: surrender to God – desire Him above all, and from that, the life that lives in His presence follows: READ EXCERPT p21

The surrendered life is the thirsty life – and so we seek the constant presence of God.

(S) Fed by experience – why does David hunger? – because he's experienced God. Prayer is not an intellectual exercise, but a real emotional, physical, practical one. Involves moments of deep awe, when he has really felt the presence of God – READ v2.

I meet many people who say they would believe if only they could experience something – not wrong. But question is – are they willing to pray, to ask God for that actually to happen? Be careful what you pray for (like last week!) – if you have that experience, you will probably find a hunger for God which will change you.

Not just dramatic, also deeper gentler experience of knowing who God is – READ v3. David knows that God loves him – and natural to want to spend time with people who truly love you. It's a joy, not a chore – like a real relationship it's sometimes mundane, but in the end joy wins out.

(S) 'God thank you that you love me' – simplest prayer of all. Naturally leads on to: help me to love you as you love me.

Back to Brother Lawrence – second key principle – what matters is not act itself but love with which it is done. This keeps us in the presence of God – READ p25. Might be thinking – what's this got to do with prayer: constant awareness of God's love fed BL's desire just to be with God

throughout the day. Same for David – READ v3-4. Awareness of love led him to praise and to prayer.

(S) Built on frequency – READ v6. Point here is not that David prayer for long periods of time, but he involved God in every part of his day. Might be a heavy sleeper – doesn't necessarily involve night! But he never went long without thinking about God.

One key tip for us today – practice checking in with God regularly. Might feel like a discipline at first, but soon becomes natural. Doesn't need to be some big formal thing – just a simple phrase or prayer doing something else, or maybe a moment's stillness and a few words 'thank you for your love, please be with me.'

What you'll find is that over time our hearts turn to God more and more easily. Brother Lawrence put it like this: READ EXCERPT p30.

One example really challenged me – Tim Mayfield – EXPAND – don't remember anything about sermon, but remember his prayer and sense that here was a man who lived in presence of God.

A word about structure: Structure can be good – monastic life built on rhythms, and even in CofE have morning, evening and night prayer. But don't rely too heavily on it – God wants our hearts and sense of constant availability to him. Golden rule in these things is that any form of human construction must be our servant not our master. Let it help you, but don't let it shackle you.

So (as I close) what is goal? (S) Sense of constant presence of God. Which after all, is what heaven will be. Often forget that God is at centre of heaven – easy to see heaven as a secular paradise, but bible insists that greatest joy of heaven will be constant presence of God. Best way to get ready for that is to start now.

Finish where I started with Canon Andrew White, and a quote from him. Asked to describe relationship with God in interview in 2009 and he said this: 'I have a very childlike faith. I have never doubted. I have always loved Jesus, and I have always known he loves me. I listen to him and he listens to me. So we're friends.'

This is the life of permanent prayer – life of freedom, of intimacy – not forced but joyful. Prayer becomes something which we *are*, connected permanently to the presence of God. As finish this series on prayer, let's ask God to make that our desire, our goal. And let's recommit to a life of prayer, the great adventure.