

Epiphany 5 Year B

From the prophecy of Isaiah - 'Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength'. From today's Psalm - 'the Lord has pleasure in those who fear him, in those who await his gracious favour'. And from the Gospel according to St Mark 'In the morning whilst it was still dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed'. All three readings are speaking to us about prayer.

The problem for the people of Israel, in our first reading, seems to be that they had given up on prayer. Exiles in Babylon, they felt that God had abandoned them, so they abandoned God. I met someone once who told me she had given up on prayer because it didn't work; as if prayer was the equivalent of a magic spell - the magic didn't happen so why bother saying the spell. The Israelites have given up on God, but then along comes a new prophet (we call him second Isaiah, and his teaching is recorded in chapters 40-66 of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah) - and this Isaiah

brings them a message of hope, a declaration of God's grace, if they will just wait for the Lord. 'Have you not known? Have you not heard?' Of course they had known; of course they had heard - but in the face of their dire situation, as slaves in exile, they needed to be told again, to be reminded how great God is, how compassionate he is, how unlimited he is. They must trust that God will act for them, huddled in the ghettos of Babylon, displaced, oppressed, trying to remember, to cling on - but forgetting, forgetting their heritage, their tradition, their God. How long, how long? But, says Isaiah, God will give power to the faint and strengthen the powerless - and surely faint and powerless are apt descriptions of the exile community. Their failures in strength, in faith, in remembering will be counteracted through waiting on the Lord. This waiting is a state of being. Waiting is a lifestyle, a disposition, the ethic not just of individuals but of the whole community. It is a matter of trust. They do

not know God's plans - his understanding, his reasoning, is, after all, a mystery - but they are called to put themselves and their futures at his disposal. There is no quick fix, but those who faithfully wait for God renew their strength. Someday their waiting will pay off.

For Jesus, who has spent all his strength healing, teaching, consoling, caring throughout a long evening - the sick could not be brought to him earlier because the people had to wait for the end of the Sabbath - for Jesus waiting for God is how he renews his strength for the task ahead. He gets up very early, whilst it is still very dark, while the household is asleep - even exhausted he does not have a lie-in - and he finds a deserted place to pray. We do not know what he prayed or how he prayed, but we do know that the prayer kept him on the right track. When Peter finds him and tells him that 'everyone is searching for you', he knows he must move on. He has a message to proclaim and does not want to be distracted by local adulation. He

leaves Capernaum to walk in the pathway of God's purposes, to take the good news to the villages of Galilee.

Just as Jesus sought out space to be with his heavenly Father, we too need to set aside time to pray and to listen to God, so that we can be renewed for the service of the kingdom. Such spaces, such times rarely occur naturally. I am extremely privileged in that I am required by Canon Law to say Morning and Evening Prayer every day. It is a discipline I gladly embrace, and if for any reason I cannot start my day with an hour's prayer, I feel bereft. Now that I am retired and live alone the times that I say these 'Offices' are a movable feast. Many of you will have to seek out time and space deliberately.

Last year in Lent a few of us gathered (twice) to 'Think about Prayer'. At the second of these meetings we thought about the prayer of silence. Contemplative prayer has sometimes been described as listening for God, opening ourselves to God, waiting silently for God, even wasting

time with God. In contemplative prayer we seek to be aware of the presence of God and to remain silently and attentively in that presence, completely open to God. It is not just that words are unnecessary, they may even get in the way. Prayer involves listening as well as talking - and often we do all the talking and God can't get a word in edgeways. Don't get me wrong. Listening and talking are not mutually exclusive. It is just that we need both and we need to make space for both.

In the silence we sit and wait on God, hoping to be renewed and strengthened for the journey ahead along the path which God is calling us to walk - and somehow, I know not how, it is easier and seems more powerful when we do it together. This praying together in silence complements our daily prayer - it doesn't replace it - daily prayer where words are more normally used, petitions made, thanks given, apologies offered.

Contemplative prayer is the prayer of trust, waiting on God in the silence - 'the meaning is in the waiting', as R S Thomas puts it -

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throug
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

R. S. Thomas

Perhaps you could find time to 'wait' occasionally - Lent would be a good time to start - don't promise too much and then beat yourself up for failing. And if you do fail, simply apologise - and start again!

