

The Adventure of Prayer

4. BEING ATTENTIVE

Today's talk is part of a series entitled 'The Adventure of Prayer'. It started with David talking on 'Being loved', then Liz on 'How do I pray?'; last week Penny talked to us about 'Prayer Ministry'; today, I've been asked to speak on 'Being attentive'.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 (which Pam read for us) has a long list of things we should **be attentive** to at different times in our lives. One verse in particular stands out in relation to being attentive in prayer: 'a time for silence and a time for speech'; there are times when we need urgently to talk to God, and there are times when we need to be quiet but, at the same time, to **listen** very **attentively**.

The gospel reading, Matthew 25 1-13, is Jesus's well-known story of the ten girls waiting to greet the bridegroom at a wedding with their lamps; five were foolish and had forgotten to take extra oil for their lamps, whereas the 5 prudent had done so. The passage ends with the warning 'Keep awake then, for you never know the day or the hour' – in other words, 'remain attentive', as I trust you are at this moment!

One dictionary I consulted defines 'Attentive' by three phrases 'paying close attention', 'concentrating', and 'being considerate of the needs of others'. In other words, *intentionally* focussing our mind on something or someone. So, I suggest it is appropriate for the Trinity season that there are three aspects of being **attentive**: being **focussed**; being **thoughtful**; and being **observant**; and doing those three things both for **ourselves and for others**.

Who or what should we be attentive to? *We should be attentive – to God; we should be attentive to those around us; and we should be attentive to ourselves – our current situation and background.*

Let's look at those three in reverse order. Being attentive to **ourselves** and our needs is relatively easy and often the focus of our prayer; we are naturally concerned about our own problems, so "Lord, give me guidance for this or that difficult situation" comes easily and naturally to us.

Being attentive in prayer to **those around us** is also relatively easy. Our newsheet provides a list of people in the parish who have asked for our prayers; we may be acutely aware that a relative or friend is ill or having some particular problem; and our newspapers alert us daily to the fact that many people around the world are in need of prayer.

For most people, I guess, being attentive to **God** is possibly the hardest of the three, because God does not force his presence on us, particularly when our minds are busy with more mundane matters. To be attentive to God we must *consciously and intentionally* focus our minds on God's presence. We need to do this because our brains have evolved to help us survive in a busy, multifaceted world with many different challenges and rewards, and our mind, therefore, has a tendency to wander (at least mine does) to determine what are the possible hazards or rewards of the present moment. Normal daily life certainly presents many distractions. So how should we deal with this? If you wanted to convey a really important message to a loved one you wouldn't, I'm sure, try to do so in the middle of a bus journey or when watching a show together. No! you'd seek out a quiet spot or quiet moment to talk with them. **God** cannot quiet and still our very active minds for us. So, to be **attentive** to God, **we ourselves** must seek places and ways to be quiet, to concentrate our minds and our thinking on God; and that can actually be **very** hard. I guess that is one reason why children are taught and adults often do use the quiet time at the end of the day for prayer. The problem this creates is that – at that point in the day - we are usually pretty tired – and

so it's not the best time to really focus one's deepest thoughts. For that reason it is good to find some time during the day when we are wide awake but can also be quiet in order to be attentive to God. Thankfully, like many difficult tasks, this gets easier with practice.

Now let's consider **How** we are to be attentive?

Being attentive also has **three components**: there's a *listening* component – actively listening; a *speaking or talking* component – whether talking to a friend or to God; and what I will call a '*stillness*' component.

In our relationships with other people, at times and depending on the circumstances, we need to really **listen** hard to what they are saying, not only the words, but also to catch any subtle change in their voice that indicates that what they are saying is something that particularly concerns or troubles them. We therefore need to focus both on the exact words and on the tone, the way in which they are said. There are many ways in which we can listen to God; the listening can be relatively passive, listening to God's words in the bible and in preaching – but any sort of listening should be **active** listening. Perhaps it's only me, but have **you** ever found that, when the passage being read in church is a **very** familiar one, there can be a tendency for the intensity of your attention to drop, and for your mind to wander onto some pressing or concerning problem. Listening to and for God, has to be **active** listening and that is best done in a silent room or space to allow God's 'still, small voice' to appear in the silence of our mind. That is why Jesus instructed his disciples (in Matthew 6:6) 'When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your father who is in secret' To pray we should consciously clear our minds of all the business of our life – to listen for that 'still, small voice'.

At times, of course, we need to be **talking actively** to God or to a friend. Talking actively to a **friend** can be easy or difficult depending on what we have to say, but whether it is easy or difficult, we should always be *attentive* to the friend's **reaction** to what we are saying. Talking actively to **God** in prayer *should* never be difficult. However, we can often be so busy telling God about *our* problem, *our* needs, or *our* concerns that we don't give enough space in what we are saying to pause and to try to sense God's reaction and answer to what we are saying. For that reason it is probably good practice to talk to God about our concerns one at a time, taking a long pause after each, in order to wait for our mind to be conscious of God's response.

The third component – the '**stillness component**' is really just an extension of that. Sometimes our words can simply – get in the way! There will surely be occasions when the most deep and appropriate communication with a friend who has a problem or concern, is simply to **be** with them, holding them quietly before God in thought; no words or actions being needed.

There's a third component to be '**being attentive**' which also has three aspects, and that is our **body posture** when we pray. What posture do you find makes it easiest to pray? Prayer can, of course be done in any posture. Traditionally, people have prayed **kneeling**, a posture often used to **ask** or petition for something. Children are often taught to pray kneeling quietly at the side of the bed; prayers in a mosque have an even more extreme form of kneeling, with the face on the ground. In church we increasingly sit for many prayers, but what are often called fast 'arrow' prayers can be said when we are on the move. However, it is never the *position*, but the **content** of the prayer that is the important thing. We should always find the position and posture that allows us to concentrate best on the **content** of the prayer. I can't leave the topic of the posture for prayer without noting that, in most prayer postures, the hands are pressed together for prayer and the eyes closed. This originated, I'm sure, because our hands and eyes are our most important sensory organs; having our eyes closed and hands together prevents them from sending distracting signals to our mind when

we pray. The focus should always be on the content, not the position of our prayer. One thing is clear – there is no ‘right way’ of **being attentive** in prayer; what works in one situation may be inappropriate in another, and what is most helpful for one person may not work well for someone else.

Lastly, the Trinity season reminds us that the God to whom we pray has **three aspects**: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thankfully, we don’t have to worry about which of the three to pray to, because they form **one** God. And that God, it goes without saying, is **always being attentive** to and watching over us! Amen.