**Prayer and the Kingdom of God**

By far the most important and wisest piece of advice you will receive in this talk, in fact possibly during the course of this whole day, is what I am going to say first. It is drawn from long and challenging years of ministry and is the fruit of rich wisdom and insight. It’s this. Beware nuns. Nuns might look fine on the outside – prayerful, diligent, kindly. But don’t fall for it.

I worked with nuns when I ran a place of pilgrimage in Norfolk and here’s the kind of thing they do. One winter’s evening I received a phone call from the Shrine Church. One of the nuns said, ‘Father, Father the boiler has broken! It feels like the Arctic in church!’ I scooped up my colleague and we went across to the church. Now the boiler was housed in a small, damp, dark, rat-infested underground boiler room, which was accessed from the sacristy. Fearlessly, we switched on the lights on the external switch, unbolted the door and made our way down into the gloom.

We were quickly able to establish that the boiler was the big white thing. Having thus taken the repair job as far as we were technically able we were about to make our way back up the stairs when it happened. First, all the lights went off, plunging us into utter darkness. Then we heard an ominous scraping, a sound we knew to be that of a rusty bolt being slid back into its housing. Then we heard an eerie and ghostly cackle. And the tragic truth dawned on us. We had been imprisoned by nuns.

Suddenly the darkness seemed terrifying and all-enveloping. Suddenly the scratching of the rats and the strange sounds of the underworld were so much more apparent. And I found my heart gripped with fear. Nuns show no mercy. We could be here for ever. Panic began to set in, I could feel my breathing deepen, my heart rate quicken.

Fortunately my colleague kept his cool. ‘Okay sisters,’ he said. ‘Four Mars bars.’ ‘Eight Crunchies,’ came the response. We settled on six and were free. But I hope that story underlines the seriousness of my earlier advice. Beware nuns.

It was though a chastening experience in that boiler room. I ran that Shrine, I was used to making and enacting decisions, to directing the actions of staff. And suddenly, for five or so minutes, I was utterly powerless. I could do nothing but sit and wait and watch.

That powerlessness can stand as potent a symbol for what ministry can feel like in the contemporary world. In a secular nation, in a church with declining influence and which is so often preoccupied with its own internal concerns, powerlessness is what many of us feel a great deal of the time. We feel locked up.

Today, for example, we feel powerless in the face of Brexit. The most extraordinary political developments and machinations in generations, a full-scale constitutional crisis, a government whose ethical framework is hard to perceive, vast decisions being made in a hurry which will impact for decades on how our nation relates to the world, and as a Church we are finding it really hard to find our voice. What can we say that will not drag us down into the fathomless mire of Brexit bitterness? How do largely remain-voting church leaders speak into communities and congregations which voted to leave? Much of our response, certainly as Bishops, seems to be driven by the need to say something, anything rather than be silent. But our dialogue tends to sound a bit like nanny telling off the children. Let’s all be terribly nice shall we. Let’s face it, confronted by Brexit the church has rather lost its voice. We are powerless.

We feel powerless also confronted by large scale and growing injustice. As the machinery of central government is completely taken over by one single issue, inequality grows and the poor are left largely to one side. 4.1 million children in this country are being brought up in poverty. 4 million in-work individuals are living below the poverty line. The estates and inner urban areas of our nation are being ravaged by a new and terrifying four horsemen of the apocalypse. First, low paid work caused by employers who are passing on profits to shareholders rather than the employees who generate them in the first place. Second, Universal Benefit, most of it paid to people who are in work, but a system so inept and fundamentally immoral that it is driving families to misery. Third, hunger and the absolute scandal that the fifth largest economy in the world is unable to feed its own children. And fourth, debt with its concomitant issues of loan sharking, depression, relationship breakdown and suicide.

But where do we start? As Christians we know we have a responsibility. We know that a Gospel that is not lived out in service of the poor is an empty one. But what do we do? Service provider projects such as food banks make some contribution, but are such works of charity merely colluding with innately unjust structures? Complaining, campaigning and being a voice for justice in the political sphere is important work and makes us feel better. But is anyone listening? Does anyone in power care about what the Church says? Or are we just wasting our breath? In areas of deprivation, the lives of ordinary people are as tough as I can remember. People are desperate, and we feel powerless to know how to act.

And as Christians we feel powerless in the face of growing secularisation. The Gospel that is everything to us is nothing at all to 90% of the nation’s population. In a culture that is convinced that human fulfilment is something that can be purchased and consumed, we proclaim a Gospel of self-giving love. In a culture that is convinced that science, technology and rational thought have all the answers, we speak of a God who lives beyond the senses, who is too wonderful for the human mind to grasp. In a world that thinks that moral choices are private and personal and are informed solely by feeling or emotion, we stand up for a set of objective moral standards drawn from the scriptures that seem to many people old-fashioned and irrelevant. In a world that worships fame and celebrity status, we follow a man who never owned a thing, who dressed in rags, who slept in the open air and who died on a cross.

We struggle massively to frame the Gospel in ways that make sense or relate to people’s lives. So for the past fifty years we have seen an inexorable decline in church attendance and a huge reduction in the number of people who identify as Christians. The majority in the nation now define themselves as non-religious. Of course that’s not the global picture. Globally it’s an age of faith. Globally the church is growing faster than ever. But we are stuck inside this weird north-European bubble of post-Christianity. And it leaves us feeling utterly powerless.

So where do we start? How do we respond? I can see two broad answers at play in the church today. The first is denial. We pretend it isn’t happening. We get on with church life as it has always been. Problem? What problem! Many local churches opt for genteel decline, getting slowly smaller, engaging less and less with the local community, morphing almost unseen into cell-like mutual support structures rather than evangelising churches, turning in on themselves as if the big wide world out there isn’t happening. This is why in some sections of the church there is a recidivist backlash, especially amongst the young, in which people revive the liturgical styles and pastoral practices of the past, hoping that a retreat into a mythic Christianity might re-awaken some latent Christian memory hidden deep down in our nation’s collective conscience.

Or the other response, just as dangerous, is a crazed activism that leaves us all exhausted. Driven by stress and a deep-seated anxiety that institutional Christianity is about to die out, we throw vast amounts of resource and energy at initiative after initiative, measuring results before they have been properly launched, changing our minds and moving onto the next thing with the rapidity of a toddler in a toyshop. Cell church, Fan the Flame, Catholic Renewal, Every Member Ministry, Alpha, Start, the Decade of Evangelism, Springboard, Renewal and Reform, Toronto Blessing, church planting, Messy Church, Sporty Church, Resource Church, Green Church. That’s to say nothing of the conferences, the consultations, the intense gatherings in dreary retreat houses. I have been ordained just over 25 years and I could spend hours reeling off the latest ideas from every and any tradition, launched, lauded and then in many cases quietly left behind. If we could just find the right idea, the thinking goes, renewal will come. Just keep searching and one day we’ll find it.

And of course behind all this crazed activism lies a deep anxiety which risks making the church deeply unattractive so those on the outside. In so many churches the desire to develop and grow is motivated not by a passion for people to know life in Christ, but by panic. How do we keep the building open? How do we pay the bills? How do we maintain a priest in the vicarage? The man of peace who walked the Galilean hills can be all too easily forgotten in this crazed obsession with clinging on to patterns of church life invented for us by the Victorians. But who wants to join an anxious organisation obsessed with its past? Who wants to be part of the local church because they have a vacancy for a safeguarding officer? It’s not our activism or our anxiety that will draw people to Jesus Christ. It is our joy in believing, a joy that we are in danger of losing.

On the one hand, denial. On the other, activism. But neither seems to be having that much impact in a church where decline continues apace. So how should we respond to our powerlessness? The answer of course is prayer.

In the Last Supper Discourse in St John’s Gospel, Jesus gathers round the table a tiny band of disciples whom he has chosen and given the task of transforming the world. These are as hopeless a group of people as you could imagine, keystone cop disciples lacking learning, experience, cash, sophistication, ideas or anything else that might be in any way useful for the task. So at the last supper he teaches them and prepares them. As bread and wine rest on the table, he washes their feet as a model of service. He tells them they don’t need to fear because he is going to prepare a place for them. He promises the gift of the Holy Spirit. He uses the image of the vine to describe his ongoing relationship with them. He commands them to love. And then, as the culmination of all this teaching, he prays for them. In Chapter 17 he draws them into the heart of his own dialogue with the Father.

This is incredible stuff. When I was a little boy I used to sneak out of bed and hide in the hallway out of sight in order to overhear my mother’s phone calls with family and friends. I was desperate to hear what she really thought of me. I wanted to be inside the conversation. That is exactly what Jesus does with us in Chapter 17. We overhear a conversation within the very being of the Trinity. And by drawing us into prayer rather than teaching about prayer, Jesus models for the disciples exactly why prayer must lie at the very heart of the Christian life.

Listen to what Jesus prays. *‘As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that world might believe that you have sent me.’* In prayer, we participate in the saving work of God in Christ. St Gregory of Nyssa writes that we are not spectators in the power of God, but participants in his very nature. In the incarnation God comes to share our life in Jesus, and as he shares our life so we who are of earth can share in his life. And prayer is the location of this participation. In prayer, we don’t just refresh ourselves or remind ourselves of the lovely things Jesus has done. No, we are caught right up in the drama. We participate in his saving work and are made one with him.

In prayer, the power of the cross is made contemporary as we participate in the sacrifice of Jesus. That death, the death we deserve because of our sins, becomes our death and we are set free. Through prayer, we participate in the resurrection and become inheritors of the Easter life, receiving salvation and the promise of eternity. Through prayer we are drawn into the very being of God in Christ’s ascension, praying alongside him as he intercedes for us with the Father. Through prayer the Spirit is released into the world that we might know Jesus more deeply. It is through prayer that we are in Christ and become one with Christ.

And the impact of this participation? ‘*That the world might believe.’* Our encounter as Christians with the world comes not from ideas and activism, but from profound and heartfelt prayer. That’s because, by participating in the being of God in prayer, we can find two things which enable us to engage with the world. The first is a deep joy. The second is a profound dissatisfaction.

The joy comes from assurance of salvation. I have a very intelligent and highly questioning godson. He is 15 years old, an occasional churchgoer and a boy of great integrity who is trying to work out how on earth faith can enter into dialogue with his passions which are science and technology. So when I see him I am bombarded with questions. How do you reconcile a creator God with scientific theory? Does God make rational sense? How can God be all good and all-powerful if there is still suffering in the world? What science lies behind belief in heaven?

And of course I argue and debate. But what I want him to do is pray more. He is trying to grope his way towards God using the language of logic rather than the language of love, human sophistication rather than trust. Human imagination and intellectual enquiry are essential parts of the Christian life, but they cannot alone navigate us towards God. Only prayer can do that. Only prayer can bring us the reassurance that we crave.

And when we pray, golly what a difference it makes. For as prayer brings us reassurance of God’s saving work in our lives, it can bring us also the deepest joy, a joy that springs from the knowledge that God has a plan for our lives and that in him we are safe for ever. Our message need no longer be, ‘Come and help us prop this decaying building,’ It can be, ‘Come and rejoice with us because Christ has set us free. Come and rejoice with us because we know that no level of suffering or pain can separate us from the love of God. Come and rejoice with us as part of a family who are invited to be one for ever in Jesus Christ. Come and rejoice with us as we share together in the banquet of eternity.’ It is our joy that will bring a lost nation back to Christ, not our anxiety or our fevered activity. It is our joy that enables us to engage in a meaningful way in this world that seems to have disempowered us. And that joy can only come when we pray.

Then second, prayer should instil in us a deep dissatisfaction, a profound unease with the way the world is that only prophetic action can address. In prayer, as we are made one with God, we anticipate the Kingdom. We live in God’s space as God’s world is thrown open to us, and so we see for a while the world as it should be. We see a world in which all are fed, in which all have dignity, in which all are equal, in which all find meaning and hope in right relationship with the God who made them and loves them. We see a world in which sin and injustice are no more, where bodies are healed and where tears are wiped from the eyes of the grieving. In prayer we glimpse God’s future.

And if we are doing that right, we can only be left with a profound and deeply disturbing unease with the way our world is now. How can we accept injustice if we have shared in the justice of God? How can we accept poverty when we have seen a world in which all have enough? How can we accept inequality when we have participated in a world where all are precious? It’s not an option.

So as we anticipate God’s world, we are bound to ask deep-seated and searching questions about our own. And that leaves us with a longing to act, to bring about change. Every significant social reformer in Christian history has rooted their lives in passionate and heartfelt prayer and from that prayer have sprung their convictions about a world transformed in the love of Christ. So prayer is subversive. To pray is to be a revolutionary. Every time you pray you are being political because from prayer springs a longing for a changed world.

Fr Philip Berrigan was a Jesuit priest and a friend of Thomas Merton, a man who campaigned tirelessly for human rights and who opposed the war in Vietnam. Listen to what he wrote in the 1970s:

*The time will shortly be upon us, if it is not already here, when the pursuit of contemplation becomes a strictly subversive activity… I am convinced that contemplation, including the common worship of the believing, is a political act of the highest value, implying the riskiest of consequences to those taking part.*

Berrigan knew that it is impossible both to pray and simultaneously accept an unjust status quo. A church that piously celebrates the Eucharist but then allows children to go hungry cannot call itself the body of Christ. A church that proudly teaches the scriptures but then allows homeless people to lie cold in the streets is preaching a Gospel of straw. A church that delights in the gift of the cross but then watches on and does nothing as families are torn apart by the misery of debt is not the church of Jesus Christ. It is a bunch of self-serving hypocrites. If your prayer does not drive you to action for a just world, it is not prayer. It is self-indulgence.

These days when you say anything on the radio you inevitably then get abuse, and I have one correspondent who is particularly determined. How dare you speak out on Brexit or poverty or social integration or the environment of whatever, he says. You should be getting on with your praying. He’s right. I should be getting on with my praying. Because when we pray our passion to speak and act in the face of injustice is multiplied a thousand times over.

But this is where we face up to the problem. Somehow or other in the complacent west we have managed to neutralise prayer. Philip Berrigan talks about the commodification of prayer in the west and how people use prayer to hide from rather than confront the world. He writes, *‘They meditate to become neutral, to put a ground between them and the horror around them.’*

So what’s going wrong? Several things. Sometimes we individualise prayer and make out that it is no more than internal dialogue between us and God with few if any external consequences. Prayer becomes simply a means to feed one’s own personal relationship with God. I think we can see this in the fate that in certain quarters has befallen Spiritual Direction. When Vincent de Paul started to see Fr Bérulle as his spiritual director in the early seventeenth century it was because he wanted to feel equipped for the mission field and ready to use all his energy to address injustice. Direction was not for his personal benefit at all. It was so he might be more effective as an evangelist. Today all too often we have managed to turn Spiritual Direction into a branch of the wellbeing industry or a form of counselling on the cheap with a bit of Jesus shoe-horned in when you remember. Very often it is about me, my relationship with my God, my happiness, my mental stability. The call to give everything away in service too often gets forgotten in a ministry that is in danger of losing its cutting edge. If you are a spiritual director, remember that your task is to prepare and send confident disciples into the mission field. Direction is not for the benefit of the directee. It is for the world. It is not about what we receive. It is about what we can give away.

At other times we internalise prayer so that it becomes a way of looking in at ourselves rather than out into the world. Prayer becomes a way in which we find comfort in God, or feel more loved. It’s about emotion and personal wellbeing rather than prophesy or service. This colludes with contemporary misconceptions which presume that answers to problems can be found from within, that what we need to grow is our self-esteem or self-respect or personal resilience. But true prayer is not individual but communal and relational. It demonstrates to us that alone we are nothing, that we rely utterly on God and the church into which he calls us.

Or the most frequent way in which we neutralise prayer is by not doing it at all. And when that happens the symptoms are all too clear to see. Take for example your own Diocese. You serve some of the most deprived communities in the country and are one of the newer dioceses with very little by way of historic asset. Your Diocese is in the position of having to cut back clergy posts and seek ways of saving money. Meanwhile older Dioceses in the south are sitting on vast amounts of under-used historic asset, much of it in land. Their parishes are better staffed, their share assessments are much lower, their buildings are in better condition and yet they seem to feel no responsibility, financial or moral, for dioceses like yours and mine which are struggling. That could not happen, it would not be possible, in a church that took seriously the power of prayer. Sustained structural inequalities in the Church of England are strong evidence of a church that has stopped praying.

If we want to address our powerlessness, if we want to make a difference in the world, if we want to find our prophetic voice, if we want to be the people God longs for us to be, we need to discover anew the raw power of prayer. We need to recover prayer not as personal sustenance but as a radical and prophetic act.

To illustrate let me look at the shape of the prayer that makes the Church which is the Eucharist. As the prayer which Jesus commands us to make on the eve of his death, the Eucharist is the source, the pattern and the prototype of all Christian praying. In its movement and in its component prayers it can show us how prayer becomes acrtion.

So the first thing we do in the Eucharist is to pray by confessing sin. We name sin for what it is, we confront the world’s injustices and we acknowledge the part that we ourselves have played in fostering injustice through our silence or our words or our actions. To pray is to act. So true confession will then translate itself into action as we go into the world with the voice of prophecy, naming the sin that traps the poor in poverty, that despoils creation, that fosters and upholds unjust structures, that delights in inequality. And we can name it boldly because we have first acknowledged it in ourselves. We know we have a God who deals with sin through the power of the cross, and as those who are forgiven, we proclaim the possibility of forgiveness and a fresh start to all.

Next in the Eucharist we pray as we proclaim God’s word. The scriptures are spoken out, attended to, reflected upon. Their words burn within us as Jesus speaks to us as he did to the disciples on the Emmaus road. To pray is to act. So a proper proclamation of the word will then translate itself into action as we go out to share that word with others. The worst form of deprivation is to be deprived of ever hearing the saving news of God in Christ. As those who know freedom through the good news, so we who pray must also tell the Gospel story to others. We do it that through invitation, through testimony, through persuasion and through clear and bold preaching. If we know Christ through his Word, we cannot be silenced. We must share that word of life with those who are lost in the darkness of unbelief.

Next in the Eucharist we pray as we create community. The peace is not a little break and a handshake. It is about the formation of the new community of the redeemed in and under Christ. In this Kingdom-community all have a place, all are honoured, all have an unique part to play. To pray is to act. So to share the peace properly means that we then go into the world to build a society which reflects the Kingdom-community that we anticipate in the Eucharist. That means we make a stand for the dignity of human life from conception to the grave, we give voice to victims of prejudice and abuse, we listen to the stories of the marginalised, we place our best leaders and our richest resources with those who are most deprived. Of course human sin means that we will never finally achieve the task of building the new Jerusalem here on earth. But that will not stop us trying. To share peace with your neighbour means pledging yourself to work for a society which reflects and anticipates God’s kingdom, for each bear the hallmark of Christ.

Next in the Eucharist we pray as we transfigure creation. We take ordinary stuff, ordinary bread, ordinary wine. Things of almost no value. And then, regardless of what theological device you use to explain it, something changes. That ordinary bread and ordinary wine signify the divine in ways that we can never fully comprehend. Stuff becomes holy. We encounter the God who suffuses all creation by virtue of the Incarnation. To pray is to act. To witness what the Spirit does with bread and wine means that we go into the world convinced afresh of the God-given preciousness of the created world. I don’t know why, as Christians, we so often struggle to find a convincing voice in the environmental movement. Theologically we should be right at the forefront of it. We know that this world is God’s and that it is good. We know that we are its stewards. We know that to plunder it, to exploit it, to treat it as if it were our own is sinful. A genuine eucharistic sharing means we must change our lives to be in harmony with creation, and it means finding our voices in the battle for sustainability. I was struck once again in a question and answer session with a Year 6 class that the environment was the thing they most cared about and most worried about. To reconnect with that generation we need to recover a theology of creation. And that can only spring from prayer.

Next in the Eucharist we pray as we are fed. All are given same. A small piece of bread. A little sip of wine. But as all are given the same, so all are given enough. For this is the living bread come down from heaven and those who eat of this bread will live for ever. To pray is to act. To eat that bread and to drink that wine means we are sent into the world to feed the hungry. Do not share in that bread unless you have thought through the radical, prophetic, political dimensions of what you are doing. Someone who shares in the bread of the Eucharist can never rest whilst their brothers or sisters go hungry. That hunger might be for physical food, it might be for forgiveness, it might be for purpose, it might be for something to make sense of their lives. It doesn’t matter. Jesus feeds us and he sends us to feed the world.

Then finally in the Eucharist, we pray as we leave the assembly. In Blackburn Cathedral over the west door there is the most astonishing sculpture by John Haywood. It is vast, at least thirty foot high, and it shows Christ, massive and gloriously risen yet still wounded and bearing the agonies and contortions of the cross. Behind him there appears at first to be an abstract pattern comprising lines of metal rods, some running from top to bottom, some from right to left, some criss-crossing. But after a while you begin to make sense of the patterns. The abstract shape emerges as the shuttle that would have passed to and fro along the loom. The lines of metal are the warp and weft of the cotton weaving process. The Risen Christ, alive but still wounded, is set against the backdrop of the cotton industry that once dominated Lancashire but which has now all but gone.

The message of the sculpture is clear. You may be leaving behind you Jesus in the Eucharist. Now go and seek him out in the world. Find him in the work place and in all the business of getting and spending and making money. Find him in your homes, in those you love and in the places where you feel comforted. Find him on the streets and in the mundane transactions of everyday life. Find him in the sick and in those for whom every new day is mocked by suffering. Find him in the street drinker and the sex worker. Find him in those laden down with debt or oppressed by the gig economy and the zero-hours contract. Find him in the lonely child, find him in the victim of sexual abuse, find him in the beaten woman, find him weeping over this disfigured planet. Find him in the school yard, find him in the hospital, find him in the hungry and the cold and the lonely, in the anxious and the depressed and in those who are so downcast that they have no idea what their life is even for. Find him in the teenager who thinks they are ugly or fat. Find him in the old man who goes week after week and sees no one. If you have found Christ here at this table, now find him out there. And when you find him, use your God-given gifts to build a world fit for these beautiful people so that they might know the Christ who died to save them. Leap up from your knees in joy to build a world that declares the Father’s kingdom. That’s prayer.

**+Philip Burnley**

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