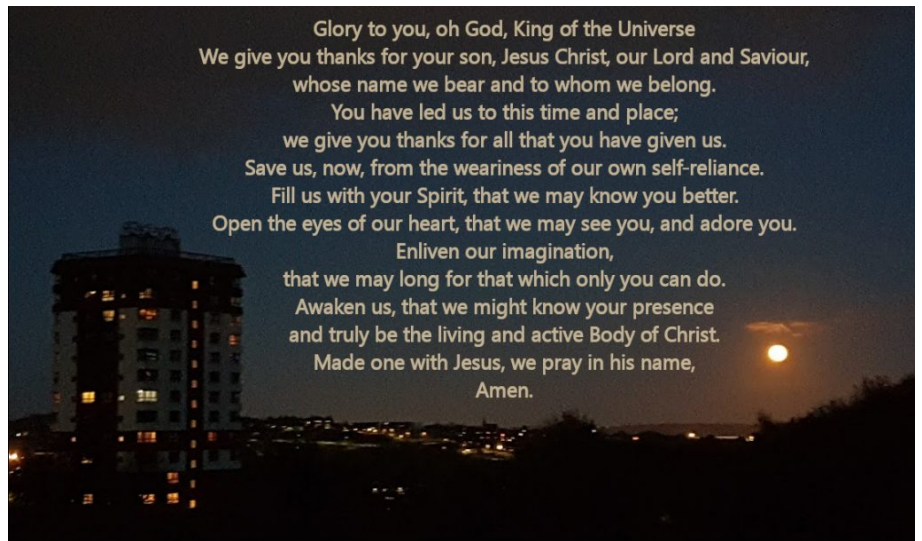


A Prayer For Our Church

Last week I was at a conference where the following words were used to describe our current circumstance:



Volatility
Uncertainty
Complexity
Ambiguity

I won't unpack those words here; they speak for themselves. They certainly describe something of what it's like to be working, living, and breathing within the context of a parish church (as well as more widely). The normal means and methods of planning and strategising are being lashed by this perfect storm.

And that's OK.

In fact, in so many ways, these are the exact circumstances in which the church of God should revel and excel. This is not because we are more stable, certain, simple, and clear than any other part of society, but because the gospel we cling to speaks of a God who is! He is a rock and a refuge. Lo, he is with us always, to the very end of the age. Including in the storms.

In the light of this, I have been struck, recently, by how St. Paul prayed for his churches in the midst of their own

volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous days. He didn't pray, first and foremost, for a change in their circumstances; he prayed for an opening of their eyes to see and *know* the one who is *with* them in all things.

¹⁶ *I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*
Ephesians 1:16-19a

This is my prayer for the church, also.

⁹ *...since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, ¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, ¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.*
Colossians 1:9-12

We have so much. We have theological and teaching resources. We have freedom to worship, and people to proclaim the word of life. We have resources of time and money. We have the necessary institutional frameworks. We absolutely have the

opportunities to serve, care, and speak of the way of Christ. We might pray for more of these things, but we have them already.

Our plate is full, so to speak. What we *need* is a desire to eat and drink of that which has been given to us. This is eucharistic mystery: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood; has eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day” (John 6:54). We are happy to arrange the room, set the table, even welcome and serve the dinner guests; we have planning meetings and strategy documents and even some slick slideshows to prove it! We would do it all, but one thing we lack: to sit down and *eat and drink* of Jesus himself.

Oh that we would behold him. See him. Know him better. Yearn for him. Long for him. That we would be in *orbit* around him and have *confidence* that when he is known, and followed, as the Way, Truth, and Life, then – and *only then* – will the life-filled kingdom of God be on earth as it is in heaven.

So “open the eyes of our heart”, Lord! Just as Paul prayed long ago. Give us the Spirit by which we may see you and *know* you. *Enlighten* us with a revelation of how you are with us, and call us, and shape us, and change us, and move us. *Awaken* us, Lord, to the truth of who you are. *Enliven* us that we might overflow with the marks of the one to whom we belong. The rest of it will come from that. Without that, the rest of it is wearying and ultimately worthless; and I think we know that in our hungry spiritual bellies.

To that end, I’ve written a prayer for the church communities to which I belong. It’s not particularly precise or poetic, but I wonder if you might join me in praying it with me each day as we head quickly towards advent, the season in which we wait for the Lord. We *will* wait for the Lord.

Glory to you, oh God, King of the Universe

We give you thanks for your son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and

Saviour,
whose name we bear and to whom we belong.
You have led us to this time and place;
we give you thanks for all that you have given us.
Save us, now, from the weariness of our own self-reliance.
Fill us with your Spirit, that we may know you better.
Open the eyes of our heart, that we may see you, and adore
you.
Enliven our imagination, that we may long for that which only
you can do.
Awaken us, that we might know your presence
and truly be the living and active Body of Christ.
Made one with Jesus, we pray in his name,
Amen.

Review: The Reset – Returning to the Heart of Worship and a Life of Undivided Devotion

The deconstruction is real. The pandemic season is lingering and the waves of its wake are more disruptive, more disturbing, more confusing than the sudden crisis with which it struck.

THE RE SET

RETURNING TO
THE HEART OF
WORSHIP AND
A LIFE OF
UNDIVIDED
DEVOTION

JEREMY RIDDLE

It's real everywhere. It is, certainly, in the church. Now is the time when things are being questioned. Now is the time of being undone.

We used to have forms and structures and predictable routines; we could hide in them and deflect away those deeper things we feared to face. Perhaps we imagined easing back into comfortable unchallenging modes of common life. But covid has ripped the covers off of us, and the substance, or otherwise, of our exposed core cannot be unseen. It *moves us*, it *frightens us*, it *shakes us*. Is it any surprise that even the biggest American denominations are being rocked and refined by scandal after scandal. It's in the UK too. Covid was not a *crisis* for the church, it has been a *catalyst*; the crisis is coming. Are we ready?

Jeremy Riddle is a world famous worship leader, currently on the team at Vineyard Anaheim in California, and formerly of Bethel. You *will* have heard his music. There might perhaps be one higher level in the pantheon of professional praisers (the Order of St. Tomlin perhaps?) but he's up there at the pinnacle of the religio-industrial complex. Wonderfully, beautifully, and above all *Christianly*, he's questioning it all.

I'm writing this book in the midst of a global pandemic that has shut down church services, programs, conferences, and Christian events of almost every kind. This is a moment of reset (Page 119)

The book isn't long. It isn't actually all that insightful, in the sense of saying something new. For instance, we've all known for some time that there is something "off" in the industry of Christian worship. It's refreshing to have it explicated from someone in the know. "The model [of the "Christian" music industry"] may still be useful to Christian music artists and bands," he says (page 88), "but apart from a deep work of repentance and reformation, I don't believe this industry is fit to carry and release the new sound of worship God is about to pour out." Later, he writes about the "lack of kingdom ethics and practice", "secular leadership", and the lack of witness and accountability within the supplier space of the Christian market. He looks for reformation with regard to event management, stage production, performance drive, social media, and influence. They are important critiques, and this isn't merely a tearing-down whinge; it's the launching place for a positive vision (more on that in a minute). And he shows his working.

Chapter by chapter he reveals his heart that we might "cease playing Christian music games" (Introduction). He reveals (Chapter 1) his perspective on the recent history of Christian music, and the "worship movements" which have dominated the charismatic world; he wants to reclaim something of the purer creativity that was there at the beginning of the charismatic renewal. I know what he means; I still separate the charismatic world into "old-school" Spirit-driven wing-and-a-prayer crazy-but-faithful, and the stage-managed program-driven risk-averse-consumerism dominant variant. He lays the foundation:

Worship is the sound of a covenantal people; a people

betrouthed to Jesus. It is the sound of their love, adoration, and zealous devotion to the only One found worthy! (Page 8)

He appeals for a greater purity (Chapter 2) that opposes idolatry, particularly that of *popularity*. He imagines worship that sounds a lot like **discipleship** – costly, eternally-minded, driven by love, and built on our weakness and the gift of life's pains in which we have nothing left but a life of faith. He wants to get our eyes off of our ourselves and onto Jesus (Chapter 3) and so be marked for a zeal for reform, beginning in the "internal temple" of our own hearts (page 37). Indeed, the shape of what it takes to become "wholehearted" (Chapter 4), is to embrace "*our death*" (page 41), the cruciform road of a life surrendered to God. This is the heart of worship, informed by the "joy set before" us (page 50).

If the call doesn't require you to lay your life down, it's less than the call of Jesus. If the call doesn't cost you everything you have to obtain it, it's less than the call of the gospel. (Page 47)

It was at this point, that my reading become less academic and more soul-searching. His deconstruction resonates with my own. In his chapter on "dreams" (Chapter 5), my own heart ached. I know what it's like to dream youthful dreams, and launch forward with missional zeal. I also know what it's like for my dreams to be my idols that were "keeping me from surrender" (page 53). But without dreams, the joy of the Lord is elusive. The chapter explicates the problem, and it took the rest of the book for that tension to resolve. Chapter 6 ("Born of the Spirit") begins to prod at that path. "The presence is a person", he says (page 64), and this is the beginning of the touchpoint for me. Here's **something I've learned from my own deconstruction: I miss Jesus.**

I've got a pretty good handle of the *doctrine* of Jesus. That

is necessary and good, and I appreciated how Riddle asserts the place of Biblical truth (Chapter 7). But, (to quote him quoting J I Packer), the goal of theology is *doxology* (page 77), and *that's* what I miss. In my youthful zeal, I was David dancing before the ark. In the desert of my undoing, I am Elijah in a cave of depression, missing the still small voice. I have struggled to yield to the Word of God, not because I despise it, but because, like Jeremiah, I don't want it to burn in my bones with nowhere to go. We often sit in silence, my Lord and I, and he is more patient than me.

I think, this is where I'm at in my deconstruction: I am learning to speak. Not the preaching, praying, performing type of talk, rather I am learning to talk to Jesus again. He is present as a person, you see. I am learning to trust. I am no passivist, but I cannot generate the Kingdom of God. I cannot even build it. My agency is not my own, it is his, and all I can do is be used each day. I've spent too many years hiding in the striving, or curled up in a wearied whirl. Now it is time to simply be, *with him*, content to know and be known by him. I *miss* it, because I know it from my childlike youth. I want to *discover it*, because I've never been here before.

So come on, Jeremy Riddle! Tell me about "mothers and fathers of worship who have allowed their voices to be silenced, quieted and tamed" for whom "the pain of life, disappointment, personal failure and misunderstanding have taken the wind out of your sails" (page 119). There is prophetic truth in your words about old flames burning in our latter years, hungry for true, deep, yielding, cruciform, intimate, worship. This shakes and wakes my heart.

Here is a picture of "the future" (Chapter 10). We have encountered a similar vision in a number of places; it's not about a particular plan or movement, but a bringing together:

Here is what I desire to see: I desire to see the worship movement marry the prayer movement and the missions movement.

I firmly believe that if worship is re-anchored in ministry to the Lord and ministry to the world, it will explode with fresh life, creativity and power. (Page 111)

Time and time again, at the moment, we find a visceral reaction against “going back to the ways things were.” No one has the passion to *merely* put back the forms of church. Rather, we are hearing language of *integration* at every level. At the structural level it’s there – a push back at specialisations and homogenous units (imagine worshippers and evangelists and prophets and pastors together in community!). And it’s there in a desire to integrate worship life and work life and home life and inner life. There’s a yearning to live out of rhythms of grace in a Kingdom that is not just for Sunday mornings, but breakfast tables, and conversations in the park, and for when life sucks. At the same time as churches are starting to count how many are “coming back”, dispersed monastic communities like the Order of the Mustard Seed are facing surges of interest. In fact, they put out a podcast this year on “apostomonasticism.” It captures a similar vision to Riddle’s.

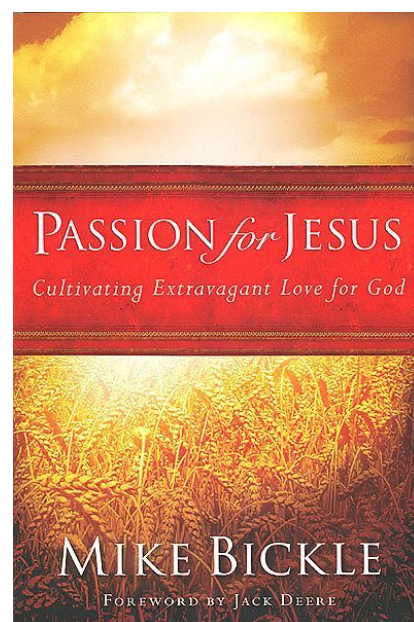
In the end, though, it’s a challenge. It challenges me personally. This books imagines “a new expression of an ancient kind of worship leader... leaders whose lives of devotion are once again rooted in the rhythms of prayer and the mission of Jesus” (page 112). I yearn for this, I *aspire* to it. And here’s the rub: It can’t be striven for, not by myself. It challenges us leaders because it gets to the heart of it all, the necessary “mark of intimacy” (page 114). I miss Jesus. I need to talk to him again.

As covid begins to wane, the real crisis is appearing. For us leaders it will be a new set of expectations, perhaps some pressure to perform in some wonderfully Christian, churchy way. It’s easy to cry “let’s get back into it.” My self-exhortation is to only have one primary pursuit: prayer first,

intimacy with Jesus first, to be the sheep that knows the shepherd's voice. It feels like we're starting from scratch, but that's ok. This is a waking-up season, an open-the-door-after-the-storm season, a sort-through-the-rubble season. It's a stripped-back-to-the-only-one-who-is-truly-real season. It's the season to sit at his feet. We are in a grace-filled reset.

Review: Passion for Jesus – Cultivating Extravagant Love for God

At the core of human identity is what we *desire*. As the saying goes, “What the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.” I think Cranmer said it, and it is true. I know it in myself; when I wrestle with who I *am*, I end up at questions of “What do I really love? What is my heart's desire? What *moves* me at my deepest?”



It's the same with church communities. We can talk about vision-casting and strategic planning and the rest of it, but 99% of the time a church's problems come down to this question of passion. What *moves* us? What do we *want*? Whom do we *desire*?

To be frank, the honest answer for most churches is that we are enamoured with ourselves: our way of doing things, our

past glories, our insecurities, our past pains, our desire to be bigger and stronger. Even when we are going about our worship (which is meant to be, by definition, God-focused), our eyes can drop to ourselves; to our feelings, our power, our benefits of being Christians. There's a fine-line between thanking God for making us worthy, clean, and beautiful as his bride, and staring adoringly into a mirror.

Mike Bickle's *Passion for Jesus* has, for this reason, been a refreshing read. Bickle is the founder of International House of Prayer, Kansas City (IHOPKC), a movement that is arguably the American correlation to the UK's Pete Greig and the 24-7 *Prayer Movement*. This book is his definitive, slightly autobiographical, tome, originally released in the 90's and updated a decade or so ago.

Bickle's mission is to move people to pray. His wisdom recognises that that is a thoroughly impossible task if we do not understand the centrality of God in our very identity, or if we misconstrue God and don't see his loving heart. And so he lays before us the truths of what God has revealed to us about himself. It's not just the theological categories of God's *nature*, but the personal categories of God's *character*, his emotions and passions.

...passion for Jesus does not come from natural human zeal or enthusiasm. Passion for Jesus comes first and foremost by seeing His passion for us. (Page 4)

Bickle explores this partly through his own story, and recounts the crises by which he came to reflect on and grasp God's love and affection. His project is to go to **the foundational place of desire in our walk with Jesus**. We could talk about Christian ethics, Christian morals, or the boundaries on the straight and narrow way that should bind our wayward heart. Bickle would rather talk about the beauty, glory, and intimacy of God. Rather than focusing on the edges

of the path, he would have our heart be drawn down the road.

Expositions of *intimacy* with God are rarely adequate. Bickle is better than most when he urges us to be lovers “fascinated with God’s beauty” (page 37). Like others on this topic, he draws on the Song of Songs – that romantic, even erotic, love song-play between King Solomon and the Shullamite girl. He does it reasonably well, despite some exegetical slips (I much prefer David Pawson’s exposition of the Song). Nevertheless, Bickle draws some valuable insights, particularly around **the dynamic of absence in the growth and expression of desire** (pages 127-128). This is crucial, because the *absence* of God, rather than *intimacy* with God, is what most Christians predominantly *feel*. Yet the Beloved turns that sorrow of absence into *yearning* and *searching* and courageous abandonment of comfort and security because of her *desire*. These are helpful reflections.

In a similar vein, he spends an entire chapter outlining “twelve expressions of God’s beauty” (page 132): God’s beautiful *light*, his *music*, his *fragrance*, and other unashamedly affective contemplations. It’s a fascinating exercise, and has informed the counsels of my own heart when I am praying and dwelling on God in my everyday.

But the reason it all works, and what sets Bickle apart from other writers and speakers in the charismatic and pentecostal scenes, is that **he doesn’t forget the *theology***. It is good, *beautiful*, theology influenced by the likes of Tozer, Piper, Packer, Edwards and “the devotional classics written by the Puritans” (page 171).

This book is nowhere near the slightly Freudian caricature of loving God as a starry-eyed swooning at Jesus and a desiring to be filled by his powerful Spirit. **Here is an exposition that not only reveals God’s love and affection, but his *transcendence* and *sovereignty***. Bickle warns of how a blindness to God’s magnificence is a “shocking disregard for Him” (page

28) and that a dismissal of God's holiness renders the cross of Christ insignificant. "They understand neither the greatness of their need nor the glory of God's gift" (page 32). This is the antidote to the prevailing false gospel of today's church, that we can have God on our terms.

When we gaze upon His loveliness, we will gladly die to those things that are not like Him. (page 35)

I particularly appreciated how Bickle makes use of Jesus' famous prayer in John 17. It's a prayer for *intimacy* ("that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you") and it includes our Lord's specific prayer for *us* ("for those who will believe in me through their message"). Too often this prayer gets turned into pious moralising manipulation: Don't disagree with me, don't you know that Jesus wanted us to be one, you wouldn't want to disappoint him, would you?" Bickle sees the prayer as a manifestation of God's sovereign heart; Jesus has prayed this prayer, as an act of love and affection for his people, and his Father *will* answer it. "The Holy Spirit *will* enable us to experience the deep things of God, as the apostle Paul taught" (page 42, emphasis mine).

It takes the power of God to make God known to the human spirit. This knowledge enables us to love God... it takes God to love God, and it takes God to know God... The church will be filled with the knowledge of God. Jesus said it. His promises never fail. The Holy Spirit will use the release of this knowledge to awaken a deep intimacy with Jesus. A revival of the knowledge of God is coming, and as a result the church will be filled with holy passion for Jesus. Divinely imparted passion for Jesus is on the Holy Spirit's agenda as seen in Jesus' prayer. (Page 60, emphasis mine)

I have looked at the lukewarm, compromising church of our day and wondered, How shall these things be? Will such a glorious

revival come to pass? Then I remember Israel's negative spiritual condition during the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. The church's only hope is that God is rich in mercy. Therefore, at His appointed time, God will supernaturally intervene. The same flaming zeal in the heart of the Father that compelled Him to send Jesus the first time will manifest as He revives the compromising church in this generation. The zeal of the Lord of hosts shall perform it. (Page 62)

This book is not about twanging charismatic heart-strings, it is an eschatologically scoped book, standing awe-struck at the plans and purposes of God. It looks for a "church that is joyfully abandoned to Jesus' lordship" (page 76) as our Lord inherits the nations for his possession (Psalm 2:8).

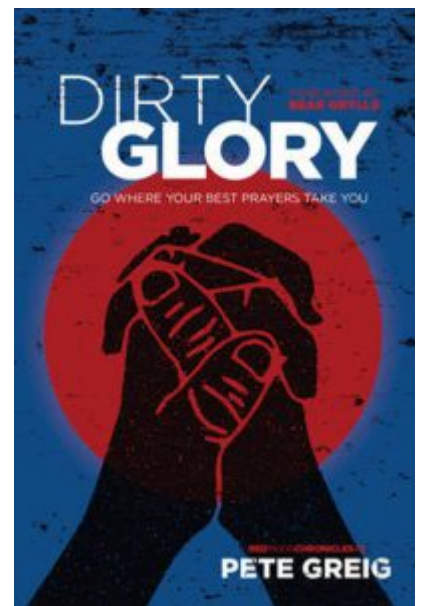
I went to a concert last night, where Andrew Peterson lifted our hearts and minds towards the things of God. We were *moved*. Ironically, I found myself downcast and dejected. I had been taken to something deep – to the plans and hearts of the Someone who made and bled for this world and for his people. And it had left me feeling lonely. This desire for God is the root and core of who we are. I delight that Gill and I have learned (and are still learning) to orbit it together. And there are many others to stand beside and share the awe. But, in general, I am weary of an unmoved church, especially in the West, consumed in itself and discarding its own on the path to self-preservation or self-engrandisement. I feel the same weariness in Bickle's book, but also hope, and joy, and confidence in Jesus. The gift of that is its value.

Review: Dirty Glory

Hey @PeteGreig. You don't know me, but I just blubbed my way through Dirty Glory. Fanned fire from both living flames and dormant embers. Holy mess. Not sure whether to say "thank you" nicely or wryly :-/. "For the sake of the world burn like a fire in me..." Groan. Now what? ☐

– Will Briggs (@WillBriggs) April 7, 2018

I remember a Bible college lecturer asking the class once, "What aspect of the gospel first impacted you?" For some it was about *truth*. For some it was about *forgiveness* and *renewal*. For others it was about *belonging* and *reconciliation*. The aim of the question was to get us to think about how the gospel is a *passionate* thing. How are we *moved, enlivened, stimulated* by the good news that Jesus, who calls us to himself, is King of this world?



There's a similar question about our sense of *vocation*, the part we play in God's mission. How does the command to "*Go and make disciples of all nations*" move us? For some it is a passion to *teach* and *preach*. For others, it's about *embracing* the broken with care and comfort. Some simply want to introduce people to Jesus. [Aside: there's a strangely fivefold shape to these missional passions].

It's a question worth pondering, because vocational fires dwindle. We come to plod from day to day, being as faithful as we can. Even church life can become a lurch from Sunday to Sunday; it can revolve around the management of buildings, and the placating of opinions. Individually, and together, we Christians are adept at curling up into ourselves and

maintaining a static equilibrium of spiritual excuses.

Sometimes we even forget what those old fires felt like. But then annoying books like Pete Greig's *Dirty Glory* come along and douse us in rocket-powering oxidiser.

I wasn't really expecting to begin to burn again when I read Greig's book. It was "just" another book; the standalone autobiographical sequel of "just" another hipster church leader and his well-marketed 24-7 prayer movement, (I mean, Bear Grylls wrote the foreword and everything!). I hadn't really looked into 24-7 much (it's mostly a UK-US thing and not as big in Australia). I'd heard enough to be both interested and slightly sceptical. And the thing is, I've read the book, and we've even visited Greig's Emmaus Road church in Guildford, and I *still* don't know much about the practicalities of the movement and the exact details of what they do. But there's something at the heart of this book, something in the intermingled testimonies and teachings, that has caused my heart to be strangely warmed.

Here are the principles that I can glean from what Greig has written:

Dissatisfaction. I get this. Without a sense of discontent, mission is reduced to "more of what we already have." Church health is reduced the *static health* of numbers and money, and not the *dynamic growth* of vision and depth.

I began to realise that it would now be possible to live the rest of my life as a minor entity on a Christian production line, busy and occasionally even applauded, peddling religious experiences without ever really nurturing the kind of inner garden that I admired in others, and which could make it all mean something in the end... It dawned on me, but only very slowly, that my inner turmoil could not be dismissed as a quarter-life crisis, it wasn't boredom, nor could it be attributed to a besetting sin from the

predictable checklist. Worryingly, nothing was wrong. Everything was right and yet I felt hollow. 'Within me', confessed St Augustine, 'was a famine of that inward food: Thyself, my God.' This hunger in my soul, I began to realise was not bad. In fact it was good: a gift of dissatisfaction directly from the Holy Spirit. (Pages 29-30)

For Greig, the touchstone of holy dissatisfaction is prayer. To express this he turns to the story of Jesus cleansing the temple, a house of prayer that had become filled with corrupt traders. He wants us to hear the rebuke of Jesus: "...[T]here could be large, impressive, popular churches... attracting large crowds... impressive buildings, strong brands, great wealth and a remarkable history..." but they might "evoke a similar rebuke" if "they have lost the fundamental heart of prayer", (page 44). From this, he develops his "blueprint" of *Presence, Prayer, Mission, Justice, and Joy* (page 45) which becomes the essence and structure of the book.

Presence speaks of the fundamental imperative in prayer to "seek his face always" (page 51). I have been exploring these thoughts in different ways recently, and I was able to rest in Greig's words here. What is fanned into flame is a posture of intimacy (page 71) and of surrender:

Urgent voices are calling us to abandon the familiar comforts of Christendom, to strike out into the unknown and rediscover the Nazarene. Let him hack our systems and take us back to the place of willing surrender in which we will simply do anything, go anywhere, say anything he tells us, whenever, wherever, whatever it takes... We need a theophany, a rediscovery of the terror of his proximity. (Page 57)

Learning to dwell (and even to sleep) in the love of the Father is offensive to the strategic part of our brains: a violation of the ego; a sort of dying. It can seem irresponsible... It can appear profligate... It can seem naive

and scandalous... It can appear selfish... It can seem rude... It can seem unstrategic... [but] 'To be a witness', says the writer Madeleine L'Engle, 'is to be a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist.' (Page 77)

Prayer speaks of power. Greig recounts some amazing stories of answered prayer, of course, but this isn't about hype. This is about simple prayers – bold, simple prayers – simply answered. It is also about “predictable valleys of the mundane” in between, in which “we mature; our faith fills up into faithfulness, we learn to push into community and into God's presence, which is, after all, the greatest miracle of all” (page 108).

Luke 18:8 asks, “Will the Son of Man find faith, when he comes?” and Greig ponders “a big, fat, screaming ‘if’ hanging over the people of God in every generation: will we, will we not, pray when trouble comes?” (page 118). It is a real question. I used to think about ministry and church and simply assume that, of course, we would pray. After two decades in church ministry, I am no longer that naive.

Whenever prayer is reduced to a clumsy technique for getting God to mutter a reluctant 'Amen' to our selfish desires, it is merely wishful thinking in a religious disguise. But when prayer is an 'Amen' to God's desires, it is profoundly Christian and powerful beyond measure. (page 126)

What is fanned into flame here is a connection of our worship with the renewal of the land. Greig draws on the promises to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 to do this, and takes us to “God's great project to see creation remade” (page 120). He speaks of prayer as a travailing and wrestling (page 129), as childbirth (page 130), and even of violence (page 131); to not have that in church makes as much sense as a soldier not having a gun, “a boxer his fists, or a theologian great tracts

of his Bible” (page 132).

I would pushback a little at Greig at this point, though, because he sometimes slips into a false progression: “Once the church is back to normal, pulsing with life, God’s great project is to see creation remade” (page 120). These are not distinct steps, as if once God has finished building the church, he’ll move on to the world! A church does not pulse to life unless it is *already* yearning for God’s great project. Christ grows his church as he calls us out into his world-changing purposes, not *before* he does. I think Greig gets this though.

Mission reflects how God intends us to be a house of prayer *for the nations*. Greig takes us to stories of God’s people being present – in America, Ibiza, and (later in the book) “Boy’s Town” on the Mexican border. These are missionary stories of the old kind, like the ones that stirred Gill and I in our YWAM days. They are of ordinary folk stepping out in faith, daring to go where others would not, for the sake of bringing light to a life, to a place, to a generation.

There’s some decent missiology in Greig’s approach:

“In approaching any new culture our first task is always to remove our shoes, recognising that we are standing on holy ground. We are not bringing the Lord somewhere new, because he is already here. Our primary task, therefore, is to identify God’s fingerprints and to trace his footprints in the new environment.” (Page 208).

And he helpfully addresses our propensity to perform mission as some form of service provision by professionals:

“Our own journeys of salvation and spiritual formation will... become intertwined with those to whom Christ is sending us... We go to the lost and make space for them to preach to us, to teach us, to minister to our unbelief. This requires

stillness, and humility, a deeply anchored assurance in the gospel, and the ability to ask gently disruptive questions.”
(Page 213)

Justice is the touchpoint at which mission impacts the real world. “Prayer without action is just religion in hiding”, (page 238). Justice is where mission gets real. Greig quotes Bob Pierce as he tells us that “one of the most dangerous prayers you can ever pray: ‘Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God’” (page 247).

There’s a lengthy exposition of Kelly Teitsort’s ministry in Boy’s Town Mexico which fans these flames well. And Greig backs it up biblically: He runs a thread through the pre-exilic prophets (page 255), Christ’s cleansing of the temple, and his claim to fulfill Luke 4:18-19 (page 250) and then connects it to our own worship and mission. We are not just about reaching souls, we are about “recognising that “something [is] wrong systemically and it [is] only going to be changed by a profound cultural shift” (page 283).

“Compassion for the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner is not an optional extra for those with a strong social conscience. It bleeds from the heart of true Christian worship. When we care for the poor, we minister to Jesus himself.” (Page 254)

*When God freed the Israelites from captivity in Egypt he did it literally – not just metaphorically. Similarly, when Jesus forgave the sins of the paralysed man... he proceeded to heal him physically too... **Down the ages, it has always been the tendency of the rich to reduce salvation to a purely spiritual experience.** But if you’re hungry you need real bread before you will consider the heavenly variety. If you’re in chains you take the Bible verses about freedom very literally indeed. (Pages 278-279, emphasis mine)*

Joy is the outcome of faith as it works itself out through dissatisfaction. We are content with nothing else but the presence of God, manifest in power, mission, justice, etc. Jesus is our answer, and his presence is our joy, in with and through all circumstance. Greig spends much of this section talking about the fifteenth anniversary celebrations of his movement. He truly celebrates, but there is a warning away from triumphalism. He points us to the "Jesuit 'Litany of humility'... From the desire of being praised, *Deliver me, O Jesus...*" (Page 315).

So why does all this make me burn up (in a good way)? I'm not entirely sure.

There are certainly some points of personal connection. I know what it is like to share the journey with a chronically-ill wife ("I'm sick of being sick", page 116). I know what it's like to travel internationally as a family, involving our children in the discernment and the cost (page 300). My tears flowed as Greig spoke of his wife's graduation after "illness had robbed her of so many precious moments" (page 299). They flowed even more when I encountered the thought of "the Lord inviting us to pioneer together once again" (page 299).

I found myself repenting at points, or at least, crying out with a *desire* to repent. In our current season I know I have had to turn from the idolatry of comfort. I have had to repent of the faithlessness by which I have placed my sense of identity and worth, and the source of my family's protection and care, not in God's hands, but in broken ecclesial systems.

There was also times of frustration in my reading of this book. Having had my passions awakened, the engines are revved up and that is accompanied by a familiar sense of wheels spinning. No grip, nowhere to go. It's time to turn this towards intimacy, towards trusting God not just for the fire, but the fireplace in which to burn, and the specific promises for a specific people to cling to.

For me then, the greatest help was Greig's image of "Blue Camp 20." This is drawn from his time in America where he learned the history of his local town: It was once a camp, a place where pioneers, originally intending to go on further, often decided to settle down instead. It speaks of premature comfort with a road not yet travelled.

I was moved by Greig's confession of the temptation to "settle down here and stop pioneering... would it really be wrong to serve the Lord with a bit more cash, a bit more kudos, and a lot less rain?" (Page 141). Indeed, having experienced church planting, and time-limited placements, I am sometimes jealous of the seemingly comfortable run that some of my clerical colleagues get to enjoy! But then there's that annoying, calling, stimulating and painful fire: "I signed up to change the world. I never wanted to be like it." (Page 153).

It's easy to pioneer when you're too young to know what it will cost you, when you feel immortal and invincible and the whole of life is an adventure waiting to begin. But pioneering a second time is hard. Abraham was one of the few who never settled down – even in his old age he lived 'like a stranger in a foreign country... For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and build is God' (Heb. 11:9-10). (Page 143)

We tend to assume that Blue Camp 20 is the frontier from which we can pioneer into new territory geographically, or into new effectiveness professionally, but ultimately it is the place of testing from which we can pioneer into deeper intimacy with Jesus than ever before. We wrestle with God at Blue Camp 20... to come close to him in greater intimacy. We lay down comfort at Blue Camp 20... We pioneer from Blue Camp 20 not to achieve something for God, but to receive something from him – a deeper fellowship with him in his death and resurrection (Phil. 3:10-11). (Pages 147-148)

Perhaps all that is happened in me is that Greig's prayer for his book has been answered. It has deepened my thirst, because it has "rubbed salt on my lips" and woken me up, (page 12). It has had me shaking off the protections and pretenses of being a performing parson. It has had me reflecting on the past and the present. It has got me dreaming for the future. It has got me longing for his kingdom to come, real, substantial, local, global.

I no longer have the vigour and brashness of my youth and younger pioneering days. I know what real mission costs. I have regrets, and I have hopes. And all I can do is pray, to the glorious God who meets us in the dirt. Somehow, that's where life happens, and I long for more of it.

I give you back today the prayers I have prayed that are not answered – yet. The seeds I've sown that haven't borne a harvest – yet. The dreams I've buried that haven't risen – yet. Restore the years, the prayers, the trust that the locusts have eaten. Remember me, Lord, redeem my life, and answer my oldest, truest, prayers. Amen.

(Page 307)

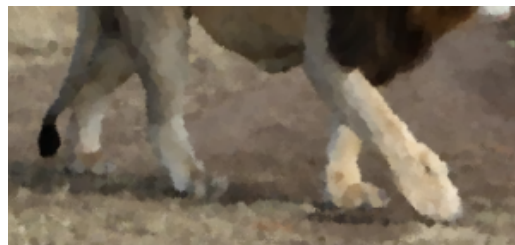
Q&A: How can we cultivate a 'space' for God to move?

Anonymous asks:

In your experience, how can we cultivate a 'space' for God to move in a way that is natural & supernatural, expected & unexpected? How do we do this in different contexts? Church, work, school, family, relationships etc?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

What a great question. If we dived in deep we would have enough to write books and books. We can only skim over the surface here.



So let's begin by considering what it might mean for "God to move"...

It is partly, I think, an *experiential* question. It's the same sort of thing when we talk about God being "present"; the raw theological truth is that God is *omni*-present, he *is* everywhere, but that doesn't mean that we are talking nonsense. There are times when we have a greater *sense* of the presence of God than at other times. The psalms (e.g. Psalm 73:28) speak of the "nearness" of God as something to be experienced, he is a God who can be *found*. The implication is that sometimes we might "*grope for him*" like someone stumbling in the dark, and this is our *experience* even though, in reality, "*he is not far from each one of us.*".

Similarly, then, when we talk about God "moving," the raw theological truth is that God is *always* active. What we are talking about is our *experience* of God's activity. Sometimes it is a vague sense of the *wind blowing*. Other times it is a clear sense of direction or even *divine frustration*.. Sometimes the Spirit is "*present to heal*", so to speak, and sometimes it is *otherwise*. In my own experience, there are seasons when I do not *experience* God's movement; prayer seems lifeless, life seems hard, sin looms, and all ambitions and pursuits seem to turn to dust.

In all this I am glad of the way you have phrased your

question. You have said “cultivating *space* for God to move” and this is different to what we are usually tempted to do: to *cultivate* the movement of God itself. When God seems to be absent or static, we long to *experience* his presence and movement, and we try and mimic that experience. We resort to positive thinking, hype, self-determination, and even belligerence. A lot of the prosperity gospel “name it and claim it” manipulation happens in this space, and we need to be wary of it.

Not that there is anything innately wrong with a little bit of positive thinking, though. Deliberate choices to use our body positively have their place in raising our eyes and counting our blessings. Because the flip side of trying to generate the movement of God is to believe the lie that he *isn't* moving at all. Ezekiel's *depression*, after seeing God work wondrously on Mt. Carmel, is both understandable and instructive. He is locked into a narrative that almost assumes defeat: “ I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

Taken to their end, these two responses of not experiencing God at work, close us to the truth that God is actually at work, whether we like it or not. The first presumes that his movement depends on our inflated experience. The second presumes that his movement can not overcome our deflated experience. Neither is what we are looking for.

The reality is, is that Jesus *is* building his kingdom; the prayer of his people, “thy kingdom come”, *is* being answered. All authority in heaven and earth *has* been given to him; his kingdom *is* inaugurated and will reach its end, and in the meantime he *is* with us always to the end of the age, empowering us to immerse this world in his name and his ways (Matthew 28:18-20). Theologically speaking, that makes me a missional inaugurated-eschatology man.

We cultivate our *experience* of this work of Jesus when we respond to it in faith, actively seeking to follow him on his

terms. We diminish our experience of that movement, when we dictate our own terms. The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is control.

In practice, then, what does that look like? You ask for my experience, let me give you an overview:

It looks like plodding. I remember during our church planting days, when asked to reflect on our experience, I would say “It’s slog work for Jesus.” It looks like preaching week in and week out, in season and out of it. It looks like simply being *bothered* – bothering to care for people, to take time, to talk, to listen, to fix what can be fixed and to allow the rest of the serenity prayer to kick in as well. It looks like not avoiding responsibility but carrying whatever loads are given to us along the way. It looks like roads in the valley more than soaring above the mountain.

What we come to experience is that the movement of God can be incredibly ordinary, and awe-inspiring in that ordinariness if we care to look. We may want the hair-standing-on-end experience, but heaven cheers for the ordinary extraordinary life-bringing moment just as hard, probably more. e.g. I once returned to my church after a holiday to discover some of my brothers and sisters had taken it upon themselves to befriend and draw close to a survivor of child abuse who was taking a lonely stand in the witness box as she faced her abuser.

Some of the most profoundly applicable spiritual teaching I’ve heard has been from my wife... while she was talking to our children in the car, driving home from school, in a conversation that started with “How was your day?” We plod along, we seize the ordinary, we don’t avoid the mess, we simply *bother*. And God moves.

The regular rhythm of spiritual disciplines is part of this. You may have heard how God has moved at the Ffald-y-Brenin retreat centre in Wales. Their experience rests on their

regular rhythm of prayer that invades the landscape. They simply pray, and if God moves in someone, they simply entrust that person to God... and continue to pray. We have brought these sorts of rhythms into our family; morning prayer before school, thanking God around the table for something in the day. It is ordinary space, in which God can move.

It looks like waiting. This is similar to plodding, but has a slightly different direction. Plodding “gets on with the mission”. Waiting is worship, when God seems absent. Waiting is the space of emptiness.

There are many things about the world, church, and life in general that can seem impressive. I have learned in my experience to be less impressed. These things are usually “achievements” – scores, marks, promotions, wealth, numbers, activities, tasks, and programmes. None of them are bad in themselves, many of them are blessings in their way. And we want them. We want them, so we grasp them. We use our strength and our power to pursue them. I count myself in this! God is gracious, and sometimes he uses us, but I have learned that they are not usually the stuff of a “move of God” in the sense that we are talking about. We can’t seize God’s plan, we are called to active waiting.

The right response to “unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain” (Psalm 127:1) is to *wait*. This does not mean passivity (we keep on plodding after all!), nor does it mean a lack of expectancy in which we fail to seize opportunities. What it does mean is that we refuse to despise the fallow years. We refuse to fill our lives with busy self-justifying activities, a conglomeration of straws to cling to for the sake of self-worth. Rather, we offer ourselves, we put ourselves on the line for his sake by stopping and waiting.

In that waiting, God moves, sometimes more than ever. It is there that he brings about adaptive change in us – a change

in who we are, not just in what we might do. The sense of his absence draws us deeper into him. As the level of our spiritual fervour recedes hidden sins are revealed, insecurities manifest, and we find how shallow we actually are... and he calls us deeper.

The movement of God is deep. And we may not even know it until after it is over. A current favourite story of mine is the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24. The two on the road are despondent and low, plodding along in their experience of everything falling apart. We know that Jesus is with them, but *they* don't. It is not until afterwards do they realise that during their journey of despondency, their hearts had actually been burning the whole time. God moves when we wait; he makes our hearts burn.

It looks like active, discerning, worship. This is one of the things I have appreciated in the Soul Survivor movement (which also has its roots in plodding and waiting). They have high production values and excellent musical skills, but they have done well (by and large) to keep these as means rather than ends. They keep their eyes open to discern how God is moving during the time of worship. When they sense an experience of God they often stop the music and allow the silence.

What they are doing is using worship – musical declarations of God's grace and other words – as a form of creating space, encouraging an openness to God, expressing faith. I have found similar in other traditions: devout Anglo Catholics who find this space in ancient rites and the presence of God in the sacraments; reformed evangelicals who thirst for the spoken exposition which brings the Word alive.

There are some things in common to these worship experiences: 1) The focus is God, it is declarative rather than subjunctive ("Lord, you are" rather than "This is how I feel"); 2) The senses are entertained (*it is an experience*), but nothing is forced or coerced; 3) What is done is good in its own right –

praises are sung, sacraments administered, the word is preached – and even if there is no significant experience, there's a real sense in which good has been done, we have worshipped the Lord; 4) Time is taken as we diminish our control; whether it be 45 minutes of praise worship, bible teaching, or contemplative prayer, we give God the gift of time to do what he wants in us. You'd be surprised (or perhaps you wouldn't) how easy it is for a worship leader to be driven by the demands of the clock and the expectations of the flock about style more than substance.

These things from corporate worship can be brought into "school, work, family etc." Whatever we do, we take time to focus on God through something innately good (e.g. private or shared devotions), we allow him to move, we don't try and generate it, and so we rest in him.

It looks like response. Some people talk about seeking a move of God through *expectancy*. We are to pray with *expectancy*, mustering a belief that our prayers not only *will* be answered, but *must* be. I get what is meant, but it's hard to imagine it in practice: Somehow an attitude of "OK God, this is what I'm expecting" doesn't exactly create space for God to move; and anything that does happen could easily be taken as self-justification of prayers well prayed.

Rather, I think that sense of expectancy is better described like this: when we seek a move of God, we do so with a *readiness to respond*. If we ask God to "move in us" and he confronts us with our sin, our response should be to repent. If we feel called to pursue something, we should count the cost and act according to our faith. If we find someone or something laid on our hearts, we shouldn't let that pass but should pursue it further.

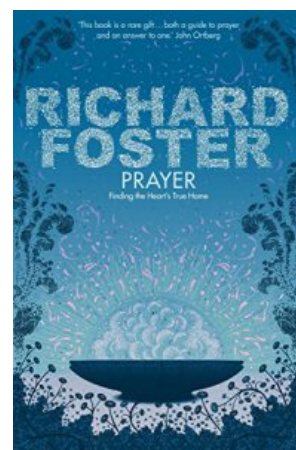
For me, that is more helpful than some of the caricatured answers you see: e.g. "The Holy Spirit can't work if you have sin in your life, a lack of expectancy, or if you don't have

enough faith.” Ouch. Rather, God *is* moving, and our experience of that movement simply doesn’t make sense if we don’t respond, so we get ready to respond.

To conclude: This is a big topic and a simple blog post can’t do it justice. But you ask for my experience, and this is where I’m coming from. Thank you for the question – I haven’t really had the opportunity to put words down on this topic before. You’ve stirred my thinking, and I’m sure my thoughts and words will develop.

Review: Prayer – Finding the Heart’s True Home

Richard Foster’s *Prayer* is a classic of the early ’90s but I’m glad that I have only just recently read it. I don’t think I would have truly understood it, or been impacted by it, if I had come to it before I’d lived some life.



Foster is, of course, known for his teaching on spiritual disciplines with contemporary application. This book is in the same vein. It is a compendium of independent chapters, each considering the sorts of prayer that we see in the biblical narrative and in Christian experience. A quick look at the table of contents reveals the gist: “Simple Prayer, Prayer of the Forsaken, The Prayer of Examen, The Prayer of Tears, The Prayer of Relinquishment...” and so on.

Foster takes us to the base foundation of spirituality, to the character of God himself. God is a God who speaks, and who listens, and who creates and restores the relationship between himself and his people. How we interact with him, i.e. how we *pray*, is the question that takes us into these depths. Like similar relational questions (e.g. "How do I speak and be closer to my husband, my wife, my child?") the answer is both simple ("Just speak!") and profoundly deep, even mysterious. Like all relational issues, it requires both deliberate action and humble response. Prayer is not something to "master, the way we master algebra or motor mechanics" (page 8), but "we come 'underneath', where we calmly and deliberately surrender control and become incompetent."

As I record my thoughts here I am not going to touch on every chapter, but on those parts that have challenged me, taken me deeper, or have reminded me of the gracious permission I have, as a child of God, to come to him in prayer.

Prayer of the Forsaken.

It is right that Foster touches on forsakenness early in the book. This sense, occasional or frequent, is part and parcel of the Christian experience; we feel as if we are praying to bronzed-over heavens, when everything would scream at us that God is absent. Foster has drawn on "old writers" to give me a new phrase, "*Deus Absconditus* – the God who is hidden" (page 17) for those times when God appears to have disappeared.

The prayer of the forsaken is the prayer of the pair on the *road to Emmaus* who stand with "downcast faces" because of their dashed hopes about the one who was "going to redeem Israel." They walk with Jesus, but he is hidden from them. It is the prayer of Jonah in the belly of the whale. It is the *prayer* of David, and Jesus himself, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Times of forsakenness are a given in the Christian pilgrimage

of life. And they are necessary. They take us to the bedrock of God's sovereign grace where we are stripped of any pretence that we might manipulate God in relationship or prayer.

That is the next thing that should be said about our sense of the absence of God, namely that we are entering into a living relationship that begins and develops in mutual freedom. God grants us perfect freedom because he desires creatures who freely choose to be in relationship with him. Through the Prayer of the Forsaken we are learning to give God the same freedom. Relationships of this kind can never be manipulated or forced. (Page 20)

Such seasons are seasons of refining that burn hot. We question ourselves, and "nagging questions assail us with a force they never had before" (Page 23)... "'Is there any real meaning in the universe?' 'Does God really love me?'"

Through all of this, paradoxically, God is purifying our faith by threatening to destroy it. We are led to a profound and holy distrust of all superficial drives and human strivings. We know more deeply than ever before our capacity for infinite self-deception. Slowly we are being taken off vain securities and false allegiances. Our trust in all exterior and interior results is being shattered so that we can learn faith in God alone. Through our barrenness of soul God is producing detachment, humility, patience, perseverance. (Page 23)

In the last year we have experienced a sense of this forsakenness. One instructive experience stands out for me: At a summer festival in 2017, ironically surrounded by the joy and bustle of the worshipping people of God, we found ourselves in this dark place – a deep sense of being lonely, abandoned, forsaken. As I breathed and paced myself to get to the next workshop a leader approached me and gave me a word that had been impressed upon him as he saw me randomly within

the crowd. What was that word of the Lord in the midst of emptiness, frailty, darkness, and lost hope? "God is saying, he is giving you the courage of a lion." It broke me, I wept, and it was bitter. It was bitter, but right.

True courage rests not on ourselves, but on faith. The prayer of the forsaken takes us deeper yet; faith rests on trust.

When you are unable to put your spiritual life into drive, do not put it into reverse; put it into neutral... Trust is confidence in the character of God... I do not understand what God is doing or even where God is, but I know that he is out do me good." This is trust. (Page 25)

We cry out to the infinite mercy of God. We learn that "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" finds its answer in "Into your hands, I commit my spirit."

The Prayer of Relinquishment.

There is faithfulness in the simple prayer of petition, in which our needs are laid out before our Lord and provider. But I have noticed that this form of petition can actually play an opposite role; we often use it as a defense *against* the leading of the Spirit. We lay out our needs before God and say "Lord, bless us" with a heart that actually says "I am going this way. I am doing these things. Now do your part, God, and make them work." We build self-reliant castles, and hold our petitionary facade as evidence of faithfulness.

I have noted this tendency in my own journey with Jesus, sometimes with a desperate internal monologue: "Look at these things, fix them, sort them, don't let me fall! I've turned up to work, where are you?" In an era of church which is fundamentally performance-driven, and amongst my generation of church leaders who are so readily anxiety-driven, I have heard this insecure form of "prayer" echoed time and time again.

The prayer of relinquishment calls us away from this dysfunction. It is the spiritual equivalent of a trust exercise, or, as Foster describes, “a person falling into the arms of Jesus, with a thirst-quenching sense of ‘ahhh!’” (page 50). Yet while this “soul-satisfying rest” is the end result of the Prayer of Relinquishment, it is not the journey.

The journey is *Gethsemane*. It is “yet not my will but yours be done”, prayed not as a catch-all default at the end of a prayer, but as a positive deliberate choice to submit our plans, our desires, our lives to the will of God. “All of my ambitions, hopes and plans,” sings Robin Mark, “I surrender these into your hands.”

We pray. We struggle. We weep. We go back and forth, back and forth, weighing option after option. We pray again, struggle again, weep again. (Page 53)

Indeed, “relinquishment brings to us a priceless treasure: *the crucifixion of the will*.” (Page 55) Personally speaking, given my first name, I can almost take this literally! And it *is* a treasure. In many ways, the battle of the cross was won at Gethsemane; from this point in the garden, Jesus endures for the sake of the joy set before him.

There is death to the self-life. But there is also a releasing with hope... It means freedom from the self-sins: self-sufficiency, self-pity, self-absorption, self-abuse, self-aggrandizement, self-castigation, self-deception, self-exaltation, self-depreciation, self-indulgence, self-hatred and a host of others just like them. (Page 56)

The Prayer of Suffering

When the journey with Jesus takes us to fields of forsakenness, or roads of relinquishment, our prayer can bear substantial internal fruit; we grow spiritually and the path

leads to maturity. But prayer is not all about introspection. As his book concludes, Foster's focus becomes increasingly external, even missional. He turns to intercession, to what he calls "radical" prayer, and to a vision for church as missional community (Page 268) that the rest of us are only just starting to realise.

The prayer of *suffering* embraces the missional concept of *incarnation*. This is not to undermine, as some have taken it, the salvation-bringing incarnation of Jesus. Rather, it takes the character of God in Christ as a *model* for how we obey the Great Commission and are *sent as Christ was sent*.

Christ serves us not from above and beyond our condition, but from *within* it. And so Paul can *speak* of a participation in the afflictions of Christ as part and parcel of his participation in his mission. And Peter can extend that participation in both *suffering and glory* to his readers, and so to us. In this sense we talk about suffering as *redemptive*, the same sense in which confession, preaching, evangelism, and other forms of witness are redemptive. The prayer of suffering expresses it.

In redemptive suffering we stand with people in their sin and in their sorrow. There can be no sterile, arms-length purity. Their suffering is a messy business and we must be prepared to step smack into the middle of the mess. We are 'crucified' not just for others but with others. (Page 234)

This is a conscious shouldering of the sins and sorrows of others in order that they may be healed and given new life. George MacDonald notes, 'The Son of God suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their suffering might be like his.' (Page 238)

As Foster points out, (page 233), the concept of suffering is almost anathema to the consumerist culture of comfort that coerces conformity in the contemporary church. But this,

itself, can create the redemptive suffering. Uncomfortable prophets and travailing intercessors are politely pushed aside or even directly silenced; their suffering and sorrow embodies the plight of the church and they cry out in the anguish of the church's self-abuse. And so Jesus *yearns* for his Jerusalem and Moses refuses to give up the Golden-Calf-enslaved people of God:

'I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin' (Exod. 32:30b). And this is exactly what he does, boldly standing between God and the people, arguing with God to withhold his hand of judgment. Listen to the next words Moses speaks: 'But now, if you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written' (Exod. 32:32). What a prayer! What a reckless, mediatorial, suffering prayer! It is exactly the kind of prayer in which we are privileged to participate. (Page 257)

What I have learned from Foster here is that this form of suffering is not only *permitted*, but *valued* in the dynamic of Jesus with his followers. In recent years I have come across many of the faithful who have been all but submerged in the bloody mess that flows from the machinations of our religious organisations. I have come across the abused with their wounds flowing. I have witnessed the weary weeping of senior leaders overcome by the inertia of apathy. I have seen the delicate shells of those discounted, despised, condescended to and cut off by orphan-hearted panderers. I can count myself amongst both the wounding and the wounded.

The prayer of suffering turns this pain towards redemption. *Daniel* prays in the pain of exile, confessing the sins of those others that sent him there. Jesus, impaled by the nails of desperate human rebellion, *prays* for their forgiveness and Stephen *later* echoes him as the stones descend and Saul looks on. Their prayers *availeth* much, *redeemeth* much. They are prayers of suffering.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that when we pray for our enemies, 'we are taking their distress and poverty, their guilt and perdition upon ourselves, and pleading to God for them. We are doing vicariously for them what they cannot do for themselves.' (Page 240)

There is intimacy in this prayer, and it brings intimacy to our mission with Jesus. Only in intimacy can we pummel the chest of our heavenly Father, offering prayers of "holy violence to God" (Page 241). Only in intimacy can the accusatory cry of the *martyrs*, "How long, oh Lord?" find its answer in the divine heart.

This is not anger. It is not whining. It is, as Martin Luther puts it, 'a continuous violent action of the spirit as it is lifted up to God'. We are engaging in serious business. Our prayers are important, having effect with God. We want God to know the earnestness of our heart. We beat on the doors of heaven because we want to be heard on high. We agonize. We cry out. We shout. We pray with sobs and tears. Our prayers become the groanings of a struggling faith. (Pages 241-242)

Foster has reminded us here that suffering can be redemptive and should be released, not suppressed, in prayer. It is not wrong to demand a divine audience. It is not wrong to be more persistent than the *widow*. It is entirely right to bring our cause before our righteous, just, and loving Father. Maybe our cause is unjust; he can meet us in our prayer and change our heart. But maybe it is true, and we have been unknowingly sharing the heart of God, who mourns with those who mourn, and is stirred to redemptive action.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Q&A: Should we pray for blessings for unbelievers?

Sarah A writes:

Hi Will,

Should we as individuals or churches offer prayer for unbelievers for God to intervene in day to day challenges or bring his blessings on a situation?

I completely appreciate that the motivation to offer this is loving and evangelistic and that God of course can use these interactions for his glory.

But is it right to be offering this kind of prayer? It seems to be offering prayer for what God can do rather than seeking him for who he is. Clearly an unbeliever's first and greatest need is to come to repentance and find Jesus. To me, offering prayer for problems or asking for blessings seems to put God in the role of fixer with the Christian acting as an intermediary therefore bypassing the need for a relationship between God and the one who wants prayer. But we know that only Jesus is the intermediary between man and God and the promise of Hebrews 4:14 – 16 is for Christians who now have access to the throne of God to receive mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

1 John 5:14 – 16 tells us that if we ask anything according to God's will, he hears us. So does God hear these kind of prayers?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thanks Sarah,

Great question. In summary, you ask “Should we pray for unbelievers for God to intervene or bring blessings?” In summary, my answer is “Yes.” Does he “hear these kind of prayers”? Yes, but as with all pastoral encounters, praying for someone in this way comes with a responsibility to exercise care, faithfulness, and discernment.

There’s a lot going on behind this answer, though, and I’d like to unpack it if I may. The first thing to consider, although it may seem like a simplistic question, is this:

What do we mean by “unbeliever” anyway?

I’m not sure I actually like the term “unbeliever” as it’s a little denigrating: everybody believes in *something* after all.

But clearly we do need to grasp some sort of distinction between those who do and do not believe those things that *Paul* tells us are of “first importance”, “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day.” We are at least talking about those who do not have a personal faith in Jesus.

That’s simple enough. If we start there, it is biblical example that leads us to conclude that praying for someone who doesn’t have this faith is not only permissible, but it is often desirable.

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus himself intervened in the lives of many who had not yet put their faith in him in a formal sense. Similarly, in *Matthew 10*, he commissions the disciples to go and “freely give” just as they have “freely received” and in practice that means that they are to “heal those who are ill, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” I think that puts us in the ballpark of “praying for God to intervene in day to day challenges and to bring his blessings on a situation”, to use your words.



I find the example of Peter and John in Acts 3 particularly informative. Here the lame man does not ask for salvation, not even healing; he is simply asking for money. Peter and John do not take the opportunity to evangelise to him (although the end result has the man dancing in praise to God), rather we get the following famous line (emphasised below):

When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, 'Look at us!' So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, 'Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.

This phenomenon appears to be writ large in Acts 5:12-16 where we read that "a great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured." None of this appears to depend on those involved having a pre-existing state of belief in Jesus. In fact, usually the intervention and intercession *leads* to belief.

We could just about leave it there, but **let's push a little deeper.**

That push begins with something of a counterpoint to what I've just suggested: You see, one problem in using the examples I have is that all those who are being blessed are, in some

way, *already part of the people of God*. That is, they are members of the Jewish people, under the covenant promises of God. The miracles, blessings, and interventions that we see being ministered through Jesus and his disciples are not so much prayers for unbelievers, but a demonstration that God's promises to his people have been fulfilled.

This, itself, is gospel: The kingdom of God is here, the blessings of the covenant are fulfilled in Jesus; enter into the hope of your people. Or simply, in application, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!"

In some sense, then, these blessings and interventions are "in-house." The covenant blessings come to God's people when the covenant is obeyed, (just consider *Deuteronomy 28* if you have the time). It is no surprise, then that these blessings of healing, restoration, and divine intervention are made manifest through the faithful *obedience* of Christ, especially in his death. The blessings now flow, through him, to the "*lost sheep of Israel*". Examples such as the healing of the lame man in Acts 3 are not so much about "praying for unbelievers who are on the outside" but "demonstrating that the gospel is true on the inside."

But that doesn't mean I've contradicted myself. What we've done is dug down to the roots of the gospel, and found them grounded on the covenant promises of God. So let's go back to that covenant:

What is at the heart of the promises of God?

Look at the covenant that God makes with Abram (later called Abraham) in *Genesis 12*:

*'I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and **you will be a blessing**.
I will bless those who bless you,*

*and whoever curses you I will curse;
and **all peoples on earth**
will be blessed through you.'*

Here's the impetus: Whatever blessing comes to God's people, it is to flow out into the world. Whatever blessing we have in Christ, we are to share it.

So perhaps we should turn to a different biblical example to interact with your question. Consider something like Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman in *Matthew 15* as he heals her daughter. This example is particularly telling: Both the woman and Jesus make a point about blessings for those who are currently *outside* of covenant grace. The dialogue about Jesus only going to the "lost sheep of Israel" and whether or not she might "eat the crumbs that fall from the table" serves not to diminish but *amplify* the faith she has exhibited outside of the fold. She was not yet been brought into the fold, so to speak, but the blessings can and do *flow* to her. Her prayer *was* heard and it was answered. Jesus is simply doing what the promises of God demand; sharing the blessing.

So our very foundation, the grounding of God's words of promise that sets the shape of who we are in Jesus, shifts us to look outwards. Seeking the blessing of those who are "outside" in some sense is not just one possible outworking of our own belief and covenant inclusion, it's *essential* to its very character. We bless because we are blessed, we freely give because we have freely received. **We, who are in Christ, are to act as he acted, and continues to act through his Spirit in us.**

To pray for a person who is not yet "in Christ" doesn't usurp Christ's role as an intermediary, it *exercises* it, as long as we pray according to his character. We can only pray from the basis of the covenant blessing we have in him, i.e. we can only pray in *his* name. To offer to pray for someone in their

circumstances, is therefore an act that *reveals* Jesus more than it hides him. To pray for someone in their circumstances is to act *according to* the promises that God has fulfilled in Jesus, not against them.

That's the foundation I'm coming from, in answering your question. There are, however, a couple of things to tease out:

Firstly, you write *"It seems to be offering prayer for what God can do rather than seeking him for who he is. Clearly an unbeliever's first and greatest need is to come to repentance and find Jesus. To me, offering prayer for problems or asking for blessings seems to put God in the role of fixer with the Christian acting as an intermediary therefore bypassing the need for a relationship between God and the one who wants prayer."*

I think I get what you mean, but excuse me if I miss the mark.

Clearly, our longing for people to share in the blessings of God is ultimately met if they, too, become a part of the covenant people; if they turn to Jesus in faith, and receive forgiveness, renewal, and all the other things. But we cannot separate prayer for other forms of blessing from this. If comfort, healing, or divine intervention comes from answered prayer, this is more likely to draw people to the ultimate blessing rather than hide it. To separate prayer for salvation from prayer for blessing in general creates a **false dichotomy**.

But **secondly**, your concerns are valid, and should remind us to **be careful** in how we pray. In some way, this is why I bother to go to some of the depths that I do in answering these sorts of questions. If we pray as if "God is a fixer" then that is the "gospel" that we will proclaim in those prayers; and, especially in the event that the "fix" doesn't come as we thought it might, we might *hinder* people's view of God.

But if we pray from an understanding of who we are in Christ,

covered by his grace, filled with his spirit, inheriting his blessing, that is what we reveal. We know how we pray for ourselves and for our fellow brothers and Christians, with confidence in God's character, with an understanding of how he works all things together for good, with an assurance of God's love even in the midst of suffering. We pray from the same place when we pray for those who don't share this understanding, and we must be additionally careful to ensure that this understanding, and our meaning, is clear.

I've seen it done badly. I've also seen it done well. I've been to big events where it's all about the guru fixing things on some messiah's behalf. I've also been to big events where sweet prayer and intercession has been offered, and things were gently and clearly explained along the way; the heart of God was spoken of, shared, manifested.

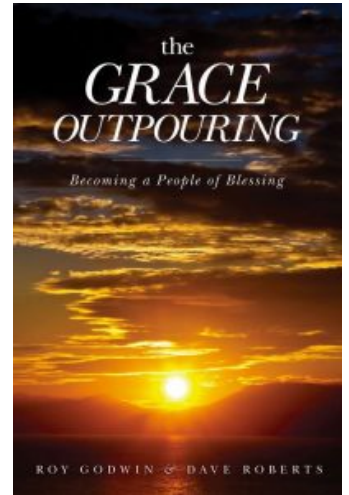
In short, wisdom is required. Whether it be a "Healing On The Streets" ministry, or an opportunity that comes from a conversation with a friend, as we come to our Father on their behalf, we need to ensure that our words help them to come along with us.

In the end, that's the sweet childlike dynamic on which it all rests. We have found the one who is our, Saviour, Lord and Leader, who has the words of eternal life, the blessings of eternity. In him we are caught up into our Creator. This is a precious, beautiful, sacred thing. It's not ours to hide, but we share it carefully, with wonder, joy, and delight. And who knows what our Lord will do?

Review: The Grace Outpouring

This book comes from Welsh retreat centre Ffald-y-brenin, but that place, and author, Roy Godwin, are not the point.

Here's something from the book, in Roy's words, that gets to the heart of the real issue for me:



A number of years ago I felt a cry rising up in my inmost being – “There has to be more than this.” As I remembered my dreams of what living as a child of God would be like, there was that cry again. There has to be more than this. I was stirred by memories of great days in the past when God had seemed so close, but that’s where they were – in the past. Oh God, there must be more than this.

***Looking at church initiated the same cry.** There is so much good, so many signs of blessing in many local churches and fellowships, but looking more broadly at the national scene raised the question “Is this really all that the Father has in mind for the bride of his Son?” (pp180-181, emphasis mine)*

This book taps into a divine sense of dissatisfaction. I don't think it's unique to our time and place; I see it echoed in the lives of many Christian saints, both historical and contemporary. It's a dissatisfaction that is eschatological in nature (*Romans 8:22-23*) and speaks to the sense that until our Lord returns there is still more gospel work to be done.

The Great Commission to go and make disciples remains in place.

In our experience, Gill and I have encountered people and

places that are entirely satisfied with the status quo. Any dissatisfaction is a commiseration about the good old days rather than a cry for more. This is a dry place to be.

But for those who are dissatisfied the next question, of course is “What do we do with it?” How do we act on it? We have seen a variety of responses. All are well-intentioned, but some are problematic. The essence of the problem is this tension: in order to get good things done we take control, but nothing will satisfy if we do it in with and for ourselves.

We’ve seen it in mission agencies where the dissatisfaction leads to impatience, lack of care, vision without process, and ineffectiveness. We’ve seen it in congregations where that dissatisfaction turns into yet another program which is an attempt to scratch the itch so as to return to comfort, or prove worth, or not seem lazy, or simply “do what good churches should do.” We’ve both been driven in these sort of ways. It’s a frustrating place to be.

There’s a difficult tension at the heart of an effective ecclesial spirituality – to be dissatisfied, stirred, motivated, urgent, expectant; and let God be God and *build through us*, not in spite of us. It isn’t quietist or passive – things get still get done. But it *is* built upon a foundation of prayer, and being attentive to God’s Word and the providential promptings of His Spirit.

The Grace Outpouring hits us at the sweet spot of that tension. It promotes the dissatisfaction, it stirs us to action, and so it pivots us to turn to prayer, expectant prayer.

Roy, and co-writer Dave Roberts, do this simply by sharing the story of Ffald-y-brenin. Yes there’s some explanation and some reasonable theologising and all the other things that get a point across, but in the end they just want to share what God has been doing. Dave writes in his foreword:

...as people who model our lives on a storyteller, we're best advised to do as he did and tell the stories of what God has done. So we invite you to join us as this story unfolds. We'll draw out principles and go to the root sources in Scripture, but we hope that what you read will help paint pictures on the canvas of your imagination that will allow you to be provoked by the Holy Spirit to prayer, compassion, and a mind-set that desires to bless others. (p14)

I can't do justice to the story here, but it truly does creatively provoke.

Along the way we do encounter some of the definitive Ffald-y-brenin experiences. To consider two of them:

Blessing: In the story Roy shares how his was initially an "accidental" tradition – to speak a blessing over all those who come to Ffald-y-brenin. To be a recipient of it is profound. Gill and I experienced this first-hand when we travelled to the centre a few weeks ago; tired and exhausted from a long day of travel and some of the complexities and perplexities of life we were shown to our room, and then to the chapel, where life-giving utterly-relevant personal words were spoken over us in Christ's name. I hadn't read the book before we went; I wasn't expecting it! It set us on course for a deep and meaningful time with God.

We don't always know what to do with "blessing." In some popular thinking blessings are almost like magic, talismanic words; this is usually unhelpful, and inhibits access to the gospel. For others, "blessing" is simply an indistinct form of prayer. Roy is right when he distinguishes blessing from intercession; as he points out to offer a blessing in Christ's name is a bold, daring, and necessarily humble action of someone who takes seriously the priesthood of believers and the ambassadorial nature of the Christian vocation, and seeks to exercise it with generous care. It may not be a rigorous

theological treatise, but I admire the thoughtfulness:

We're invoking the very character of God himself into the lives of those we pray for. They're getting a foretaste of being adopted into God's family. We're opening a door for them to glimpse something of the kingdom of God. God is saying, "I'm going to bless you with everything I've blessed my children with." (p36)

There is something right and properly kerygmatic in turning our holy dissatisfaction into words of blessing, to articulate, to *proclaim* the creative life-giving heart of our Lord and Saviour specifically, personally, and locally.

House of Prayer / New Monasticism: In the story a Welsh Christian retreat centre becomes a "House of Prayer" and Roy expands and expounds this by referring not only to the daily rhythm of prayer that is exercised at the centre, but also to the outward-looking movements that are as near as hospitality and acts of service, as far as intercessions for nations and global movements, and as deep as the revivals of the Celtic and modern Welsh church. I reflected earlier about how this compares to our English context.

Gill and I have brought the daily rhythm of prayer into our home and are seeking to share it in some form with our church.

The daily reminder, using words of Scripture to cause us to bring to mind the characteristics and promises of a faithful God, has blessed us. We have somewhere to give that holy dissatisfaction a proper beginning, a turning to God, a daily repentance, a discipline of intercession and expectation.

Towards the end of the book Roy connects the dots with the amorphous movement that is becoming known as the "New Monasticism." It has deep and ancient roots of course. In current manifestations it invokes simplicity, purity and accountability in ways that express the holy dissatisfaction in profoundly counter-cultural ways. They are ways that tear

down middle class idols.

...Local House of Prayer involves sacrifice, just as it did in the Old Testament times. Among our offerings we will bring our worship (not necessarily singing) and the spirit of the community around us. We will need to set aside our rights, judgmental attitudes, pride, and self-righteousness. We will lay down our bodies and our patterns of thinking as living sacrifices for God's glory and his purposes. (pp167-168)



After returning from our recent visit to Ffald-y-brenin, Gill and I have been pondering these things. What I have read of here, and what we have encountered has informed our dissatisfaction. It has renewed our passion for God's Word and Spirit, and a determination to rely on him, rather than to burn-out in our own strength.

These things have been stimulated by our visit, and we will return. But it's not about the place, or the person. It's about doing the hard yards of following God. Of seeking him in the dissatisfaction, not collapsing it, not running away from it, but facing the pain and patience of it, and actively pursuing his way; so that at the end of it all he is glorified as God's people are blessed to be a blessing.

Can England be Loved?

I have learned that the Scottish love Scotland.
And the Welsh love Wales. But do the
English love England?



As I've shared this observation with my English friends, and as it becomes clear what the final question is going to be, before I even ask it they are shaking their heads with a wry expression, "No, no we don't."

Love? It's as if it's a category mistake. I'm not sure what the prevailing sentiment actually is: Respect? Concern? Admiration? Affection? Options that have been volunteered to me range from the negative ("We *resent* our society.") to the self-deprecating ("We're a little bit embarrassed about England.") to the faux-humble ("We know we're good we don't need to flaunt it.") to the perplexed ("Well, we don't know who we are anymore.") Of course, support for cricket and rugby teams cannot be questioned, and is a common expression of loyalty. But love? What does that even *mean*?

As an "outsider" observer I can offer some musings about why this is the case: Perhaps England as a concept isn't "local" enough; we can speak of love much more readily for Yorkshire, or Cornwall, or Norfolk! Perhaps England doesn't have the experience of shared and common adversity that is present in the history of the other UK countries; there has been very little to knit the country together in it's own identity. If you're English, or you know England, I'd love to hear your thoughts and opinions!

The motivation for my thinking about this is missiological and prayerful. It was sparked by the opportunity Gill and I had recently of spending time in retreat at Ffald-y-brenin in Wales. As part of the rhythm of prayer there they include a "Caleb prayer for Wales." It's a prayer for mercy and

revival:

*O High King of Heaven,
Have mercy on our Land.
Revive your Church.
Send the Holy Spirit for the sake of the lost, the least, and
the broken.
May your Kingdom come to our nation.
in Jesus' mighty name.
Amen*

Prayed by the Welsh, this prayer is gentle but fervent, and with deep deep roots. It recalls revivals of the past and yearns and longs for new things in the present. It *imagines* life-giving restorative reconnection with God intermingling with the valleys and the hills, the families and the industrial cities. It looks to "Jesus' mighty name" as a hope for the lost, the least, and the broken. It is prayed confidently in acknowledgement of God's will, because they love their land, and they want God's best for it. The prayer reveals a missiological heart.

But if "love for England" is an ungraspable concept, what do we have that can stir us for God's mission? What is it that wells up (or *could* well up) within the English to pray this prayer for their land? What is the missiological heart for England?

My conclusion is this: England is and can be *loved*. It can be loved with a missiological heart – even those big detached chunks of Southern England that are geographically defined more by their train line to London than their sense of "nationhood," community, or place.

My prayer for myself, and for the church, is that we would grow in this love. That we would be more and more *moved* with the heart of God. This means to be prayerfully weeping because of the sin we see, and the destructive things we know

are hidden away to fester, and the roots of idolatry now writ large in the whole Western world. It means travelling for lives and communities to be convicted, awakened, and turned towards life-pertaining things. And above all it means hope – to be trusting in God’s mercy as we dare to believe that the villages and market-towns, the estates and seething throngs of commuters, can somehow encounter and embrace, together, a living experience with a risen Saviour.

Can England be loved? Yes. But it will take, as they say with a phrase now full of meaning, the “love of the Lord.”

Q&A: Does the Anglican Church believe that praying to Saints is OK?

Anonymous asks: does the anglican church believe rhat praying to saints is okay, because i seem to get rather contradictory answers... .

No we don’t. One of our defining formularies is the 39 Articles and Article 22 states:

The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.

Which pretty much sums it up really. If God is not the object of our prayers, and the agent of our prayers, then we are asserting that we can reach out to God in our own strength, or

through the strength of someone else. This undermines the work of Christ and suggests that we do not have absolute need of him – something that goes against the heart of the Christian faith. Christ alone is our mediator.

We do respect the “Saints” as particular exemplars of the faith and count them amongst the “church triumphant” – but we count them as forebears – brothers and sisters in service, not the captains that we follow.