

Prayer - Adoration

A sermon given by Rev John A. Castle on 15 February 2015 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **Isaiah 6:1-8 (Isaiah's vision)**
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9 (The Transfiguration)

Revised Common Lectionary Year A - Sunday before Lent (not Isaiah reading)

Introduction – A Valentine's Day poem

Yesterday was Valentine's Day. So here's a poem I found on the internet:

*I worship you from afar;
You are the one, my shining star.
You have no idea how I pray
For you to be my Valentine on this special day.*

(Source: <http://heavy.com/social/2015/02/valentines-day-poems-2015-quotes-for-him-her-love/1/> accessed 14/2/2015)

I find it interesting that when I did an internet search for “love poems” this was the first poem that came up. It's perhaps not the greatest piece of poetry. But no doubt you were struck, as I was, by the religious language - “I worship you” and “I pray”. Being in love and spiritual experience have a lot in common. In fact, it might even be true to say that they are two different aspects of the same phenomenon. Both experiences take us out of ourselves, and beyond ourselves, into a realm full of exciting but largely unknown possibilities. Where could a relationship with this person lead? Will it meet my deepest unspoken needs? Who is God, and how might life be different if I got to know him more?

The meaning of Adoration

I've entitled this second sermon on prayer *Adoration* rather than *Worship*, to avoid the narrow sense that *worship* often has in people's minds. I'm not just talking about formal corporate worship – using liturgy, singing hymns and so on in a church service. Adoration conveys for me at least a sense of wonder, of awe, of focussing our whole attention on God. It is something that should be part of our individual prayer life, as well as being the way we behave when we are worshipping together. It is a very appropriate way of beginning your personal time of prayer every day. If we want to pray according to God's will, it's not a bad idea to spend some time thinking about God, his character and what he has revealed to us about his will for his world and our lives. A few minutes of adoration, focussing all our attention on God and expressing our appreciation, our wonder and our love.

There are as many ways to take part in adoration of God as there are of enjoying the company of someone we love. We can worship God through music and song, whether we are singing ourselves or just listening; we can worship through saying set prayers, or improvising our own, speaking out our wonder and appreciation for God's power and love. We can sit in silence in a room at home, or we can stand in the garden watching a sunset, or gazing at the Milky Way above our heads.

Which brings us to the psalm we sang earlier. The psalms are full of the adoration of God. Psalm 8 is a poetic response to God's glory in creation. Do you ever write poetry? Why not use Psalm 8 or Psalm 19 as a model and write God a poem expressing your own wonder at the marvels of his creation – in your own words, without trying to sound like the Bible.

Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6:1-8)

In our Old Testament reading today we heard Isaiah recounting his vision of God in the Temple. The way I read it, Isaiah was already in the Temple when he had the vision. In other words, he was already in the right place to meet with God, and God took the opportunity to meet with Isaiah. As Isaiah sees God lifted up on his throne, he becomes aware of the seraphim, fiery angelic beings, worshipping the Lord and crying out to each other "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory". Isaiah is overcome with a sense of God's purity and holiness, and feels deeply unworthy to be in the presence of such holiness. It is a common experience of those who draw near to God that they become more deeply aware of their own smallness and inadequacy.

But God's response to Isaiah is to send one of the seraphim with a burning coal to symbolically cleanse him. As we come to the altar today, we say *Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed*. At Holy Communion Jesus invites us to come near, not because we have somehow managed to deserve his love, but because he has voluntarily paid the price for our sin himself, a price we could never pay.

As Isaiah received the cleansing from the seraph, he heard God asking a question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" His response was "Here am I, send me". Let us not think that spending time in worship is just about making us feel better. When we truly meet with God in this way, it will always result in our will being more aligned with his will, and that could result in us going out to live differently, to be his ambassadors to the world around us.

The Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-9)

Our Gospel reading today tells of another vision or mystical experience. Peter, James and John were Jesus' three closest disciples. It was these three that Jesus had taken with him when he raised Jairus's daughter from the dead. Later he would ask the same three to stay awake with him in the Garden of Gethsemane while he wrestled in prayer with the terrible fate that awaited him on the Cross the next day.

This scene takes place in Galilee, just before Jesus begins his final journey to Jerusalem where he knows he will be arrested and crucified. The story has been set in the Lectionary for today, the last Sunday before Lent, to remind us that Lent is a journey towards Holy Week and Easter. Jesus knows he is about to face betrayal and suffering, and he goes away from the crowd to meet with the two representatives of God's work in the past, Moses and Elijah. Between them they represent all of God's revelation to his people Israel – Moses representing the Law and Elijah the Prophets. Personally, I think the main reason Jesus goes up the mountain is for his own sake – as a human being he needs to be recharged and refocused for this most difficult part of his mission.

But Jesus is also aware of the needs of his three key leaders. The glimpse of him in his divine glory which they see at the Transfiguration will help them later to make sense of the seemingly senseless tragedy of Jesus' sudden and violent death. And as they reflect later on this experience of seeing Jesus with Moses and Elijah they will understand that Jesus mission was to bring to fulfilment the plan that God had already been revealing through the Law and the Prophets.

Adoration can have a similar function for us. Spending time alone with Jesus can lead to a fuller revelation of who he is, and to new insights about God's purposes for the world.

The Fear of the Lord

Perhaps before I finish I should comment about one feature which we see both in the vision of Isaiah and the Transfiguration. Isaiah's response to seeing the majesty of Almighty God was to be greatly afraid. So too were the three disciples when they saw Jesus in his heavenly glory.

God is so completely beyond us, so utterly majestic and wonderful that these two visions could only have been of an infinitesimal part of the divine glory. It is not God's intention to frighten us into submission. But it is right that we should have a healthy respect for our Creator. This is what is meant in the Old Testament by *the fear of the Lord*. And you may remember that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10).

There's also a lovely verse in Psalm 25 which says *The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.* (Ps 25:14). It sums up what I have been talking about today – as we spend time in adoration, drawing close to God, acknowledging and appreciating his glory, his wisdom and his power, we will experience his love and friendship. He will help us to make more sense of his divine purposes, and strengthen us and inspire us to live out his purposes in our lives day by day.

Putting it into practice

Like any human relationship, developing a relationship with God takes time. We can spend time with him alone, and we can spend time with him in the company of others, whether in church on a Sunday or in a house group or prayer meeting. May I particularly commend to you the Day of Prayer and Fasting on Saturday week?

Let me finish with a reading from the spiritual writer Francis de Sales:

Those who are filled with an earthly love are always thinking of the object of their attachment, their heart brims with affection for it, their mouth is always full of its praise. When absent, they constantly speak their love in letters, engrave the treasured name on every tree.

In the same way those who love God are never tired of thinking of him, living for him, seeking him and talking to him. They would like to engrave the holy name of Jesus on the heart of every human being in the world.

To such people, everything speaks of God, and all creation joins them in praising the loved one.

(A thirst for God: Daily readings with St Francis de Sales, ed. Michael Hollings, Darton, Longman and Todd 1985)