

PENTECOST 7

Jesus said to the scribe, "You are not far from the Kingdom of Heaven". Mark 12:34.

What was it about the scribe, I wonder, which brought forward this comment from Jesus; "You are not far from the Kingdom of Heaven"? It may have been the man's understanding of the Old Testament scriptures; it might have been something in his bearing which marked him out as a man of God - someone who has spent time with God. Sometimes you can recognise in people - like Mother Theresa or Archbishop Desmond Tutu - a quality of character which comes from time spent with God. It was said of Moses that the "skin of his face shone while he talked with God, and people were afraid to come near him".

In our high tech. world it becomes increasingly difficult to find time to talk with God. We live in a world of action and high productivity. The practice of the presence of God takes a low priority in a world which values 'doing' above 'being'. Virtue lies in doing - in achieving - rather than in contemplation. The poet wrote "What is this life, so full of care, we have no time to stand and stare, no time ----- cows". (My favourite poem when I was in school - my teacher accused me of being an idle dreamer).

At present, in the western world, there are signs of a recovery of the spiritual dimension in life. I think that it began with the Beatles - but that may be because my spiritual awakening began in the Beatles era. Many people are turning to Eastern religions - to Buddhism or to Islam - for the practice of contemplation - partly I believe, as a consequence of the dryness of much of the Churches' spirituality.

In his book "Be still and know" Michael Ramsey says -

"Silence enables us to become aware of God, so let mind and imagination dwell upon his truth; let prayer be listening to God rather than talking to Him,. In this way we will discover our true selves in a way that is not always possible when we are making, or listening to, noise. There comes, Ramsey says, an interior silence in which the soul discovers itself in a new way and a new dimension of energy is released which brings peace; a peace which the restless life can miss".

So what can we do about it? How can we find space and time to be still and know God in the silence? Let me offer some possible ways.

1. Holidays - this time of the year we are taking, or thinking about taking, holidays. Time to stop and think about our life styles and whether we are happy with them. Holidays can be truly holy-days if we wish them to be - days of reflection and contemplation. Alternatively they can be purely escapist - get away from it all! The choice is there for us to make.

2. Our Sunday worship - in September we will be starting a new schedule for Church services in the Benefice. There are practical reasons for this - one being that I need more time to meet with you after services. But in addition I hope to provide a more varied spiritual diet. Over the last thirty years there has been a

widespread movement in the church - called the Parish Communion movement - which has which has brought the Eucharist into prominence as the central act of the church's worship. In many ways this has been good. The Sacraments of the Holy Communion and Baptism are the so called Dominical Sacraments - ie. they were ordained by Christ and are therefore central to the church's life. The Parish communion movement had the effect of moving the Communion service from 8 am to mid-morning so the sacramental life of the church should be enhanced. Sadly however, this has almost wiped out the services of Morning and Evening Prayer from the church's calendar. Among other things, this means that those who are not confirmed are excluded from the worshipping life of the church. I hope that we can redress the balance and hence enrich the spiritual life of the Benefice by introducing Morning and Evening Prayer into our schedule. There will of course be a Eucharist every Sunday in one or other of the churches in the Benefice.

Thirdly, we can practice the presence of God in our lives by setting aside a daily time for meditation and prayer. If it is possible to attend the church at times when Morning or Evening Prayer are being said by myself or a reader, then please feel free to join us. If not then try to find a specific time or times during the day when you can pray alone so that the routine can become part of your life-style.

Forgive me if I sound like a school teacher giving sound advice. It's not meant to sound like that. I stand in as much need as anyone of spiritual discipline.

If these things are neglected we run the risk of drying up spiritually and of moving further away from the Kingdom of God.

To sum up briefly, I would recommend the following:-

- 1 A regular holiday - a Spiritual refreshment.
- 2 A regular and varied pattern of Sunday worship - to include Morning and Evening Prayer.
- 3 Private daily prayer - either in a church building or not.

May our Lord say then of us, as he said of the scribe, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God".

AMEN