

17 March 2018

**God Given** (John 12: 20-26)

*Harvest Festival*

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I want to begin tonight's reflection with a little 'gathering', a little 'harvesting' of the fruits of our Lent so far. As you know, we've been exploring the theme of prayer – seeking to reflect on the fundamental or underlying dynamics of radical, transforming prayer.

Four weeks ago I said that the beginning of prayer lies with intention, orientation. In the sacrament of Christian baptism, candidates are asked, 'Do you turn to Christ?' and they answer, 'I turn to Christ'. Prayer involves the same kind of whole-hearted, whole-person turn. Truly to pray, you have to turn towards and want God – not a set of outcomes, or a pre-ordered range of guaranteed benefits – just God. Of course, our sense of 'wanting' God and our conviction in turning, may be pretty ambiguous or unsure. We might not feel too clear at all whether God is what we desire or have much confidence God's out there anyway; we might fear we're being led into false consciousness or wasting our time. That's OK – all that matters for prayer is to begin. It's the way of prayer itself that draws you into an ever-deepening sense of the reality that's been calling you all along.

What then is this way? How do we enact this process of turning to God? Three weeks ago I said that prayer is essentially a practice of attention – focused, yet non-grasping attention. It involves learning to direct our gaze, the energy of our consciousness, beyond ourselves – steadily, undistractedly, patiently. It's not making God up, or thinking obsessively *about* God. First and foremost, it means simply ceasing to fritter our lives away on futile habits of mind or trivial concerns. It involves turning our attention from what's less real, so that there's space within and among us, for what's more real – for God – to break through.

Sounds simple enough! Yet as we continue, we can find this a difficult, a 'narrow' way. We may experience ourselves in various degrees lost, exposed or deconstructed. I once had a theological student complain to me that his whole life felt like a construction site – I took this as a good sign! What's going in these experiences? It's that as we come more fully towards God's light, some of our ways of seeing and being are revealed to be illusory, destructive or self-limiting. The tradition speaks of 'purification'. Frances reflected wonderfully two weeks ago on the process of 'dismantling' that can be part of our experience of prayer and of discipleship – where 'dismantling' means both pulling down outworn structures (as in Jesus' cleansing of the temple) and unmasking (as in taking off our cloaks, our 'mantles'). There is suffering involved here. But it's what Richard Rohr calls 'necessary' (as opposed to 'neurotic') suffering – it's the suffering we undergo as we learn to recognize and then slowly let go our defended-ness and self-sufficiency, so as to dwell naked and unashamed before God.

Then last week, Scott spoke about the significance in all this of our embodied presence. Prayer requires us to show up, not only 'inwardly' or 'mentally' (as we Westerners tend to think) but bodily. Bodily in community, bodily in posture, bodily receiving God's body through the sacraments. Prayer is not what you think – Laurence Freeman says. It's the disposition of the whole of us, body, mind and spirit towards God and it involves the transformation of the whole of us, body, mind and spirit. That's why, Laurence says, people get better looking when they meditate! It's also why the authenticity of our prayer is proved by our way of being in the world – how we treat our own bodies, the bodies of others, and the body of creation.

So far then, over these first four weeks of Lent, we've been exploring primarily our part in the work of prayer – our commitment of intention and attention, our willingness to be exposed or undone before God, and wholly, bodily present and involved. Tonight, I want to touch on the great mystery that undergirds all this. And that is, before we've done any of this work, God is. God is given and endlessly giving,

and the point of all our spiritual labour is simply to bring us to the point where we may receive.

To pray as Christ prayed, 'to be contemplative as Christ is contemplative', Rowan Williams says, 'is to be open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts'. He goes on: 'With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow'.<sup>1</sup> And that, very simply, is the heart of prayer – becoming radically, unstintingly receptive to the self-giving of God, so as to grow endlessly into love, 'so delighted and engaged by the glory of what we look towards' says Williams 'that we are prepared to embark on a journey without end to find our way more deeply into it, into the heart of the Trinitarian life'.

This is the grain of wheat falling to the ground – the self-yielding into God from whom is received ever more fruit and life. Refusing to fall into this ground is to cut oneself off from life – in the hyperbolic language of John's gospel: 'those who love their life' – that is, those who cling to their life separated out from the life of God – they 'lose it', while 'those who hate their life' – who do not cling to life on their own terms – they 'will keep it for eternal life'. Jesus knows that it's as he gives himself over (in his case literally to death) that, paradoxically, he is most truly alive and that the abundant and giving life of God is most fully 'glorified' or made visible, which is why, with the irony typical of John's gospel, Jesus answers the Greeks' request to see him precisely by preparing to disappear.

How though may we know that God really is this kind of giving reality? How do we come to share Jesus' faith, and so become apt to receive God in this radical way? Jesus suggests that one way to begin learning this trust is to look at the given-ness of life itself. The other reading I wondered about having tonight was the famous passage on not worrying in Luke's gospel, where Jesus encourages his disciples to deepen their receptivity to God's endless giving. 'Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear ... Consider

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome', October 2012, s.6.

the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them' (Luke 12: 22-24).

I was conscious this might seem an odd choice for a harvest festival, since we're celebrating just the kind of pro-active provisioning that Jesus seems not to endorse. After all, we have spectacularly here before us the fruits of our sowing and reaping and our putting of produce into the storehouse of pickles, jams and preserves. But, of course, Jesus' point is not that human beings need not practice agriculture. It's that though we can participate in cultivating and nurturing life, we rely totally in the end on its sheer given-ness. 'Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?'

There is nothing you have that hasn't ultimately been given you. Harvest reminds us powerfully of this – yes, we celebrate our labour and care and pest control strategies – but just look at the wonder of what's before us ... can any of you by striving produce the marvelous golden skin of a squash, the bursting flavour of a ripe tomato, the delicate complexity of a zucchini flower ... it's sheer gift, gratuity. Contemplating nature is one way of learning to trust in God as giver of life.

And yet, I suspect analogies like this only take us so far. Ultimately, we have to discover God's trustworthy giving-ness for ourselves. How do we come to this knowledge, this deeply felt awareness? We persevere in the way of prayer – turning as best we can in God's direction, attending to the mystery beyond ourselves, consenting to the necessary darkness and suffering of the path, and just stubbornly, persistently, bodily showing up. We be like a 'grain of wheat falling into the earth', given over as wholly as we can bear to God. And then one day we just know ... that God is, and has always been, given to us.