

Sermon

The Archbishop of York

St Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 13 and verse 23, Jesus said, "but as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it and who indeed bears fruit." For the past few months during this difficult challenging time of lockdown, which we're just emerging from, I've been part of a small group of people who've been producing resources to help us pray. Yes, pray in our homes, but pray throughout our lives. And as we have been preparing these resources it's brought us face to face with the question, well what is prayer?

And although there is no single answer, there are various things that people say to describe the life of prayer. Some people for instance say prayer is like eating, it's something you do each day, you need a regular discipline about it, it's good for you. Some people, well St Paul, for instance he says in that rather provocative way of his, he says, pray all the time. Well I don't quite think he means do that activity we call prayer all the time, I think he means, make your life a prayer, make the whole of your life a hymn of praise to God, so it's rather like saying, prayer is like breathing. It's something you do all the time to keep you alive. But yes, prayer is like eating, it's regular, it needs discipline, yes it could be, should be like breathing, it should be something that's happening all the time. But let me give you my kind of current working definition of prayer, but I want to come at it through the lens of that Gospel story we've just heard; the parable of the sower. Because it's a strange and in itself rather provocative little story.

My feeling is that for the people who heard it the first time, that Jesus said it, that is without the explanation, which the disciples got, and we got later on. I think they would have been quite bewildered by the story, after all they were themselves in the main, you know fishermen and peasant farmers, they knew about sowing seeds, so they would hear the story and say, well how come some of the seed fell on the path, you know, why were you so wasteful of the seed, and why didn't you clear the stones out of the rocky ground, and if there are birds coming to eat the seed why for goodness sake didn't you build a scarecrow? They would have heard the story and been I think rather irritated by it. This sower obviously didn't know much about sowing, and yet he got the most magnificent harvest. And isn't this perhaps the point of the story?

In fact, isn't it the point of the whole Gospel, that Jesus comes? He comes to us, not to reward the rewardable, not to love the loveable, he comes to us to bring us into relationship with God, to plant the seed which is his word, his life in our hearts so that our lives might be fruitful.

Why? Well, because he loves us so much. That is the startling beautiful heart of the Gospel story. That God comes to us even though we didn't build the scarecrow, clear the ground, even though we were wasteful, so here's my kind of working definition of prayer: yes, it's like eating, yes it's like breathing, but most of all, it's like loving. Prayer is the lover coming into the presence of the beloved and saying, I love you.

And what I like about that definition of prayer is it puts all the emphasis where it belongs which is not with us, but with God. God is the great lover, God is the great lover who out of his great love for us and for all the world comes to us in his Son Jesus Christ to plant his word, his life, his hope, in our hearts that our lives might be fruitful as we in prayer enter into relationship with the God who in Jesus is revealed as this community of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we join in the very life of God when we pray, when we worship, why we're doing it here around this table, in this great house of prayer, in sharing bread and wine.

Prayer is what God does in us through the Holy Spirit. What we call prayer is just our response, however faltering, however uncertain, whenever we open our hearts, our minds, our voices to God and tell God our hopes, tell God our fears, express to God our hopes and our love, then not only do we become people of prayer, but we enter again into relationship with God.