

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we pray that Your Holy Spirit may rest upon us now, as we approach the study of Your holy Word, and that Your Spirit may make that Word a living message to our souls; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**The prophet Isaiah said, 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins.'**

*Isaiah 40: 1*

**In the Gospel of Mark, we read, 'As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'**

*St Mark 1: 2-3*

The voices of the prophets echo round this sanctuary from thousands of years ago. Their words give expression to the stirrings of the Spirit which they in their time felt in their hearts. It is quite marvellous to be united with fellow human beings who lived over two thousand years ago. Our lives are enriched, given depth and perspective, by listening to the voices of the ancients. It is very important to remember that the prophets wrote after the events which they describe, though they wrote in the future tense. What they were seeking to do was to interpret history and look for the hand of God. They passionately believed that God was involved, entangled, in human history and what they sought to do was to expose within historical events the hidden hand of God. Like you and me and millions of others besides, the prophets had had their imaginations fired and their hearts warmed by the Spirit and Mystery we call God. The American missionary, David Brainerd, worked among the Indians in

the eighteenth century. At a time when he was facing a number of obstacles, his journal entry of April, 1743 read:

In the morning, I enjoyed some sweet repose and rest in God; felt some strength and confidence in Him, and my soul in some measure refreshed and comforted. Spent most of the day in writing, and had some exercise of grace, sensible and comfortable. My soul seemed lifted above the deep waters wherein it has been so long almost drowned....

Brainerd's soul was refreshed and comforted. He enjoyed repose and rest in God. He tasted what each of us in some measure has tasted. This morning we are listening to Isaiah and John the Baptist but the more difficult question for me has nothing to do with their or anyone's personal experience of God. The more difficult question is: how do we discern and live out the will of God? The prophets had unshakeable faith but how did they turn that into discernment about the presence of God, the action of God and the will of God? Oh to have glasses through which we can see clearly the presence and acts of God and a hearing aid through which we hear in unambiguous tones the will of God!

Let me give you three examples.

David had a good job and was steadily being promoted. Life was basically good, with plenty of sport, which he loved, and friends who were fun. Then he started to feel a bit down. Before long this turned into what his GP called a major depression and he was signed off work. The presenting problem was quite simple. He really didn't want to go on doing what he was doing for the rest of his life. But what should he do instead? His mind flicked from one future to another. Sometimes he saw himself buying a smallholding in the country and living simply off the land with wholesome organic food. At other times he thought he might retrain as a social worker. Then, again, sometimes he said to

himself he would just take a year off and travel round the world. The possibilities were endless, some very unrealistic, all vague. For months David found himself in a state of radical indecision. He was now 40 – what on earth should he do with the rest of his life?<sup>1</sup>

The second story is of Belinda.

Belinda was about the same age as David and well settled in a ‘good enough’ marriage with one daughter, whom she adored. She had a part-time job and it was at work that she met someone with whom she had an immediate rapport. They shared the same sense of humour and could spend ages just laughing together. It wasn’t the sex, though that was part of it. It was the companionship, the doing things together and simply loving being together. Her new man, himself divorced many years before, suggested they spend the rest of their lives together. He put forward ways in which they could do this with the minimum hurt to Belinda’s husband and child. But Belinda was in agony. Her marriage was stable, she enjoyed many of the things she and her husband did together. She hated the thought of a break, with all the pain this would cause all round. For months she was in a state of anguish and became so thin that her husband, a kindly man, became seriously concerned. What on earth should she do?<sup>2</sup>

The third story is that of Joachim Fest. Fest was a German historian. He tried to get his countrymen to face up to their responsibility for the rise of Hitler.

Fest recalled, at the age of nine, overhearing a row between his parents over the fact that his father refused to join the Nazi party and as a result lost his job. His mother pleaded that a little hypocrisy was justified to ease the family’s hardship. Fest’s father replied, ‘Everyone else might join, but not me.... We are not little people in such matters.’ At his father’s request, Fest did not join the Hitler Youth but in 1944 volunteered for the army in order to avoid conscription into the Waffen SS. After the war, Fest and his father spoke about Fest’s

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<sup>1</sup> Harries, R *The Enchantment of Morality* p1

<sup>2</sup> Harries, R *The Enchantment of Morality* p150f

decision to join up. His father said, ‘You weren’t wrong, but I was the one who was right.’

By contrast to Fest’s decision to join the army, a letter written around the same time by a sixteen year old farm boy to his parents makes for sober reading:

Dear parents, I must give you bad news – I have been condemned to death, I and Gustave G. We did not sign up for SS, and so they condemned us to death. You wrote me, indeed, that I should not join the SS; my comrade, Gustave G, did not sign up either. Both of us would rather die than stain our consciences with such deeds of horror. I know what the SS has to do.<sup>3</sup>

Without glasses to see the presence and acts of God or a hearing aid to hear the will of God, how do we discern and live out the will of God? The pain and suffering of many human dilemmas is deep and lasting. How do we know what God wants? How do we know the right thing to do?

In his book, *The Rainbow*, D H Lawrence tells the story of Ursula. Ursula tries to relate what she heard in church on Sunday to her everyday experience. The text of the Sunday sermon was, ‘Sell all thou hast, and give to the poor.’ In Ursula’s village, there was a family called Wherry, who were poor. Lawrence wrote:

Did [Ursula] want to sell her pearl-backed brush and mirror, her silver candlestick, her pendant, her lovely little necklace, and go dressed in drab like the Wherry’s: the unlovely uncombed Wherrys, who were the ‘poor’ to her? She did not.

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<sup>3</sup> Gollwitzer, H, Kuhn, K, Schneider, R *Dying We Live* p13

She walked this Monday morning on the verge of misery. For she *did* want to do what is right. And she *didn't* want to do what the gospels said. She didn't want to be poor – really poor. The thought was a horror to her: to live like the Wherrys, so ugly, to be at the mercy of everybody. ‘Sell all thou hast, and give to the poor.’ One could not do it in real life. How dreary and hopeless it made her feel.

One of the insights of the Reformation was lay vocation: one did not have to be a monk or nun to serve God. The Reformers said that it was possible to serve God in a secular job just as much as in holy orders and the latter was not superior to the others. How do we discern and live out the will of God? The demands placed upon a monk may be different from those of a managing director, a defence minister or a parent, but each one must face the same difficulty. Each Christian has to wrestle with their calling, to act responsibly and take into account the consequences of their decisions and actions. Every decision is a moral decision. Jesus said that we must turn the other cheek, but it would be irresponsible for a country not to have the means to defend itself. Jesus said give your money to the poor, but it would be irresponsible for a parent not to provide for their child and it would be irresponsible of a monk not to ensure good financial and fabric management of the monastery.

The Bible is not there to provide an answer to our every dilemma. When Jesus is asked to settle a dispute about property, he replies, ‘Who set me over you to judge or arbitrate?’ He went on, ‘Beware! Be on your guard against greed of every kind, for even when someone has more than enough, his possessions do

not give him life.’ Jesus gave a moral teaching but how that teaching was to be applied, personally and specifically, was left to those involved in the dilemma.

In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins asks:

Do we really need policing – whether by God or each other – in order to stop us from behaving in a selfish and criminal manner? I dearly want to believe that I do not need such surveillance – and nor, dear reader, do you.<sup>4</sup>

Dawkins seems to suggest that we need neither policing nor armed forces. As a species, we are rational, civilised and humane. This is surely the Dawkins delusion. The Christian faith starts from the premise that humanity is fallen. It is in this fallen, imperfect world with selfish, at times uncivilised and inhumane people that we are to discern and live out the will of God. In our prayers at Communion we pray:

Most merciful God,  
we confess that we have sinned,  
in thought, word and deed,  
through our own fault,  
and in common with others.  
We are truly sorry  
and turn humbly from our sins.

These words are not false piety, but rooted in everyday human reality. It is in this messy, morally-confusing and complex world that we are to discern the will of God.

We need an intensely passionate, wise faith. The ethics which we will deliver in this life will not be the ethics of heaven. We live in a period of tension,

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<sup>4</sup> Dawkins, R *The God Delusion* p223

somewhere between our fallen nature and the beauty, truth and justice of heaven. Mother Teresa would say, 'Now let us do something beautiful for God,' but it can be very difficult to translate our passion for the Mystery into Christ-like action.

What can I leave you with? Prayer: prayer means 'putting oneself in the presence of God.' I do not mean that you should expect to see a vision, hear a voice or open the Bible at the right chapter and verse. I do mean placing our consciousness in the presence of God: read His Word, re-orientate oneself to focussing upon Him and thereby drawing strength and comfort from Him.

Many times I have felt tired, empty, without direction and the deep treasure of Scripture and reading the writings of the saints has been nothing less than spiritual nourishment. But, as other-worldly and transforming as that is, the dilemmas we face, the decisions we are required to make about our life, remain our decisions. We may long for clear, unequivocal guidance. It is natural and right to take our burdens to God but the decision is our decision. God calls us to stand on our own feet and take full responsibility for our decisions.

Prayer does not mean us talking or, at the very least, not talking all the time. It is a question of letting oneself be soaked in meditation on the Scriptures or other writings. Bonhoeffer wrote:

In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us for this day

and for our Christian life, that it is not only God's Word for the church but God's Word for us individually. We expose ourselves to the specific word until it addresses us personally.<sup>5</sup>

Bonhoeffer does not for a moment mean that a specific answer will appear before us to a problem we are facing but, soaked, drowned, in God's Word and presence, we will feel strengthened, comforted and uplifted. Let me close with the words of John Henry Newman:

Life passes, riches fly away, popularity is fickle, the senses decay, the world changes, friends die. One alone is constant; One alone is true to us; One alone can be true; One alone can be all things to us; One alone can supply our needs; One alone can train us up to our full perfection; One alone can give a meaning to our complex and intricate nature; One alone can give us tune and harmony; One alone can form and possess us.<sup>6</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer, D *Life Together* p63

<sup>6</sup> Newman, J H in John Henry Newman: Prayers, Poems and Meditations (Selected and Introduced by A N Wilson)