

Prelude “Verse” by Thomas Tomkins, played on the Laggan organ

Words of welcome

When we take time aside to worship God, we come, not so much to speak as to listen. So as we focus our minds on God, we sing or listen to a hymn that asks God to speak to us, and that in hearing his voice we may be changed.

Hymn: Lord, speak to me, that I may speak

Prayer:

Lord God, who are we to ask that you should speak to us? We have no rights before you, who are our creator. But you are also our loving Father and you have asked us to come to you and have promised to speak to us. So as we worship you just now, open our ears to hear your voice, even if you speak to us things that we are not expecting to hear.

Lord God, as your children we want to know you better, to know more of your love and to please you by the way that we return that love, in living as you ask us, and loving those you place before us. When we contemplate the various problems that besiege your creation, we want to be part of your solution, not to add to them by the way we live.

Teach us, Lord God, and teach us first how much we need you, so that we do not continue to try to live our lives in our own strength or by the wisdom of the world.

And hear us as we pray together as Jesus taught us, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name;
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever.
Amen.

Reading: 1 Kings 17:1-7

This short passage is the beginning of the story of Elijah. This is the first time he is mentioned in the Biblical record, his first public appearance, you might say. We do not follow his story through childhood and his youth. We do not know what he has been doing up until now, or why it is that he has the ear of the king, so that he can make his outrageous pronouncement that there will be neither dew nor rain for three years “except by my word.” (And the Biblical text leaves it beautifully unclear as to whether the “me” who is giving the word is God or Elijah!) The way that Elijah erupts onto the scene reminds us that the Bible is not telling the full story of anyone, except of God. We get bits of people’s stories, sometimes just a fleeting appearance, sometimes a bit more, but only as they show us something of how God is revealed in his actions and to his people.

So Elijah makes his entrance on the stage and he does so in the king’s presence and with an outrageous and very unwelcome message that God is bringing a drought. And then he goes to the Wadi Cherith to hide out. I wonder if when he is there, he reflects that he has maybe made a bit of a mess with his first message, his first attempt at royal prophecy. He has declared the drought but has forgotten to tell King Ahab that it is coming to remind the people not to turn from God in their worship – the people and the king who sets the tone of the nation. The picture we get of this burgeoning prophet is of one who is a bit green, a bit new at all this. He gets up his courage to blurt out half a message and then feels the need to run away and hide. And if you have ever dared to speak a message from God to someone –

even though it is a message of invitation and love – or if you have ever tried to tell someone about the difference your faith has made in your life, you probably know how Elijah feels.

When we do and say what we know that God wants, it can sometimes leave us feeling exposed. God's way in the world is not the general way. It is not the way of least resistance, the easiest thing. God asks us to live in a different way, a way that puts the worship of God first, not in ritual observance, but in how we approach every part of our lives – we thought about that last week. And when we do this, we will sometimes feel awkward and exposed. We will know that we don't fit in. And we will need our times by the Wadi Cherith – or whatever our own equivalent is – a place and a time when we can be alone and unobserved, to spend time in prayer with God – listening to him as well as speaking with him.

Time spent alone with God is something that many of the great Biblical figures have in common. Not only Elijah – who we see taking several times of retreat during his story – but also Elisha, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, who refused not to pray to God, come to mind. And, of course, Jesus. Our reading from the Gospel today begins with showing us Jesus in one of his times of retreat and prayer.

Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

Hymn: Eternal Father, strong to save

This story follows hard on the heels of the feeding of the five thousand. Like Elijah, Jesus has done something that will get him talked about – Elijah dared to speak in God's name to the king, Jesus knows that the stories about the feeding miracle will spread much faster than stories about what he is teaching. Actions always speak louder than words. And like Elijah, Jesus feels the need to be quiet and hidden and re-connect with his heavenly Father. He sends away the disciples first, and then the crowds so that no one will be with him or see just where he goes up the mountain to pray, nor will they hear what he says.

There is no way that we can overstate the importance to the Christian disciple of spending time with God in prayer. Praying through our lives with God is the only way to keep them and the different elements which make them up in perspective.

When we are really busy and have a lot of responsibility, praying to God helps us to keep our sense of our own importance in check: we are speaking to the God of the universe, and we think we are important?

When we are worried, bringing it to God can help give us peace of mind: we are speaking to the God of the universe who has promised never to leave nor forsake us: and we think that there is something that he can do nothing about?

When we are full of joy about something or excited anticipation of some event, bringing it to God with thanksgiving can even enhance our joy: we are speaking to the God of the universe and he is part of all that is good and joyful in life.

When we feel frantic with things to do and we don't know what to do first, or how to decide what matters most, bringing it to God can help us to sort out priorities: we are speaking to the God of the universe, and he knows what will and will not all be the same in a hundred years from now!

So Jesus came from his long day of teaching and feeding and spent the hours of the late evening with God. And that was why the storm did not trouble him, why he could walk out to the struggling boat without sinking: that was why he never sunk in fear though his eventful life, and why no storms of events or opposition or indecision could deflect him from his purpose of living out God's life among us: he took time with God.

We know that this time with God did not stop the storms of life through which he lived: he did suffer opposition, even to the point of being put to death for what he taught and

lived; what his times of prayer did was to keep him focussed and faithful, sure of his Father's hand on him and presence with him.

And so he walked out to the storm-tossed disciples – the antithesis of calm, who were at the mercy of the elements, and the storm and even the water did not trouble him. And he showed that such peace as he knew, such confidence in God as he showed, was not only for him, but that he could give it to us as well when he called Peter out of the boat.

Of course, Peter could not all at once attain that level of peace, calm and confidence that Jesus had perfected through his time in the wilderness and his regular top-up retreats of prayer since then. To have faith takes practice, it is not a feeling but a habit of life. Peter was just beginning to learn his faith. All of us have to start somewhere. And what Peter had yet to learn was that a life of faith, whether it is shown in spectacular works or in quiet determination to let God, not the world, shape our lives, begins with the habit of prayer.

By the way, when Jesus gets into the boat, we are told that the disciples worshipped him. On this occasion their “worship” seems to have taken the form of the simple, though awe-filled, statement, “Truly, you are the Son of God.” Maybe, in the end, this is all that is required of us in terms of worship: that we should acknowledge who Jesus is – acknowledge it in word and then acknowledge it in the way we seek to follow him with our whole lives.

God grant that we develop a habit of prayer such as has always marked his servants, and that praying, we may live the life of faith that is the truest worship of him.

Hymn: Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you

Prayer:

The hymn writer James Montgomery said:

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,

The Christian's native air.

So drawing breath, let us come before God and pray.

Lord God, we cannot thank you enough for the gift of prayer, that we can, even as we are now, come into your presence, and be by your side, and tell you what is on our minds. We cannot thank you enough for the peace you give us when we have told you our concerns, and we go on through life confident that you have heard us, and that you, who are the God of the universe, will neither forget nor ignore what we have said, but will work in your wisdom. We cannot thank you enough. Help us to show our gratitude for this, one of the greatest of your gifts, by using it more. Teach us to pray.

We pray today for each other, for our church, not gathered, but scattered. We pray for the prayer services which are beginning, asking that as we start church anew, it will be in a way that is embedded in prayer, drawing all its guidance from you. Teach us to pray.

We pray for your church all around us, in this presbytery and in this land and across the world, that as we live through challenging and restricting times we may find that our freedom is in you, and that we are learning new ways to serve and worship and live our lives for you. We ask that you be with our friends in Libis and Kostalec, as they also are seeking ways to be your people for these days. Teach us to pray.

We pray for our nation and especially this week for the school children. We pray for the re-opening of the schools, asking for peace of mind for all, and for our children and their families to be kept safe from infection. Give patience to teachers and pupils alike, and may there be joy in a new beginning. And we pray for those who have had their non-exam results,

especially those who are disappointed. May these young people, who have had much to cope with find your way forward for their lives, whether they are returning to school or seeking to move onwards. Keep us in prayer for the rising generations, Lord, for our children and grandchildren and their contemporaries. Teach us to pray.

We pray for those who are lonely in these days, and those who are ill. We lift to you those who are worried about their future, either because of the uncertainty of the times, or because of the encroachment of old age. Help us find ways to serve those who are most at need, and to bring them to you. Teach us to pray.

We offer all these prayers and offer ourselves to a life of prayer, spent in the joy of your service and your presence. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

Hymn: Through the love of God our Saviour, all will be well

Benediction:

The blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Be with you and remain with you now and always. Amen.

Postlude: "A Maggot" which used to mean a light improvisatory piece, by Thomas Arne.