



Yorkminster Park

BAPTIST CHURCH

Our Vision - Thoughtful Spirituality

Sermon preached by The Rev. Kerr Spiers on Thoughtful Spirituality

We're having a series of sermons in church these Sunday mornings where the text is taken from the church's Vision Statement and Mission Statement which we accepted some months ago. May I remind you of the first sentence of our Vision Statement:

We are a congregation who have established a place and a presence to worship God, proclaim the Kingdom of God and make the love of God in Christ known.

We have worked out some ways in which we believe that Vision Statement should be implemented and one of these ways is the way of thoughtful spirituality. In the Mission Statement it says:

We encourage thoughtful reflection on Scripture and provide occasions for increasing our sense of communion with God and for strengthening our hearts and minds in Christ.

So my theme this morning on this Day of Pentecost, appropriately enough, is the theme of spirituality. However, spirituality is a kind of slippery word now a days, is it not? It can mean a whole lot of different things.

One morning I listened to the radio and heard a little piece on the news. I believe it was to the effect that there was a plan "to introduce spirituality to the workplace". That is fine, but I just wonder what is meant by "spirituality" in that context. I certainly would not deny that there are all sorts of helpful spiritual experiences open to people outside of the Christian tradition. Many people go in for forms of meditation for example, which is an exploration of the spiritual side of their lives and their beings. "Spiritual" in the broad sense can include the aesthetic so that, for example, walking in a forest or sitting in a garden or going to a concert and hearing a great symphony, can all be included within this broader definition of spirituality. They minister, as it were, to the non-material dimensions of our lives.

So let us recognize the validity of these "spiritual" experiences that are open to people and then go on to say that really is not what the church or the Bible, or the Christian tradition have in mind when they invite us to explore the life of the spirit. Christian spirituality is something somewhat different from that. Christian spirituality is about a direct experience of the eternal. We can define it in various ways and we can use different language in which to describe it, but what it comes down to is this – that we believe that our human existence is not just a life of the body but of the spirit. It is not just a life of the senses, but it is a life of the soul. It means that we do not only have brains with which to accumulate knowledge, but we have a spirit within which we can find wisdom. So let me try to tie down with some exactness what we might mean by Christian spirituality.

There is a story told about Robert Louis Stevenson meeting one day with an old Scottish farm labourer. They had some conversation about a range of things and they came ultimately to speak about religion

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and the things of the spirit. The farm labourer summed up his religious faith, his credo as it were, by saying to Stevenson this: "he that has aye something ayont, need never fear". What he meant by that was he had something in reserve. There was something deeper down. There was something further through. There was some kind of deep subterranean spiritual well to his being from which he derived spiritual strength and resilience.

Some of you have cottages and you have your own water system attached to these cottages. That water comes from a well that might be 200 feet deep. They had to go down 200 feet until they struck water. So the water system of your cottage is sustained copiously from some deep well. I think this is what the farm labourer was saying to Robert Louis Stevenson. But maybe we cannot be content with the homey vernacular of a farm labourer. So we need a more refined definition of what we mean when we talk about Christian spirituality. Spirituality – isn't it experienced by direct intuition of the eternal? Or maybe we can sharpen it even more and define it more exactly, in one sentence perhaps, by saying that spirituality is experiencing a sense of the presence of God, the Lord whom the Hebrew psalmist speaks about when he speaks about being led by green pastures and still waters, the Lord who restores the soul. Spirituality is surely that further area of the religious life that has moved beyond getting answers about God, moved beyond that to the experience of actually practising the presence of God and knowing the experience of being linked through faith to the eternal spirit.

I'm sure that's what many of us long for, deep down in our hearts and souls. To move through beyond formal worship and cerebral religion to spiritual experience that brings us into the very light of the presence of the Lord. How can we get to that green pasture of the spirit? How can we arrive by the side of that oasis, that still water of the soul? How can we get through the gate into the green pasture of the presence of the Lord? Well I'm sure there are many gates into this green pasture of the Lord's presence.

Let me introduce a word that I believe is one of the strategic keys into this experience. It is the word "contemplation". In the history of the Christian church there is a great deal of experience of what have been called contemplative prayers. That is, say, devotional reflection that is converted into spiritual prayer that places us through faith in the very presence of the Lord himself. It is the psalmist who captures this experience again. He says "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty". That is to say, brought into the very presence of the Lord. But God's shadow, if I may put it this way, is a very great and large shadow and contemplation is the way by which we are brought from the outer fringes of the shadow of the Lord's presence, much nearer to the centre of His presence, much nearer to the reality of the presence of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It's by contemplative prayer that we come to that union with Christ that He himself spoke to us about in the passage, part of which was read this morning. Jesus said "I am the vine and ye are the branches". There is a picture of union and communion. There is a picture of the central stem of the vine that nourishes and gives life to all the branches and all the tentacles. There is an image of organic, nourishing, life-giving fellowship and communion. Jesus says, this is the nature of the spiritual relationship between me and those who trust in me, those who have put their faith in me, those who want to walk the way of life in my presence.

That brings us near to the heart of Christian spirituality. But someone may say to me: "Well this is deeply mystical. This is beyond my reach. For me religion is service and action and interaction. It's something much more down to earth than this kind of spiritual union and mystical fellowship with the Lord that

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you're speaking about now." My friends, we are making a fundamental mistake if we think that spirituality is to be severed from practicality. That the life of the spirit is something that is a million miles removed from the life that we live in Toronto, hour by hour and day by day. If we think that there is no connection between these two, I think we're making a fundamental mistake.

James S. Stewart, known to some of the older generation of this congregation, was not only a great preacher, but I think he was a master of the spiritual life. In one of his sermons he says this in speaking about the relationship between practicality and spirituality:

"We wince at pin-pricks, and get flurried and fussy and nervous, and can't relax; we feel that everything is getting on top of us, and life is too much for us, and we are quite losing our interior peace. There is no real remedy for that condition but this – a closer walk with God. But that is the healing secret; that is the Christian therapy. You must not start that difficult day, that overcrowded programme that sets you working against time, that worrying task, that trying interview, that fretting, nervy bit of the road so full of stress and strain – you mustn't start it without taking first some moments to remember God, who is the abiding central peace of the great universe, and the only giver of a quiet, untroubled heart."

That is the link between spirituality and practicality and I would strengthen what Stewart says that we not only need to remember God in order that we can recover this inner sense of communion and beyond that this inner sense of being able to cope; we not only need to remember God, but we need to go beyond that and actually place ourselves in God's presence.

There are many ways in which we can do this. We can do this if our life style permits it, by a quiet time by ourselves at some point of the day. We can do this through the reflective reading of scripture. We can do this by taking time to read some wise words from the great classic devotional literature of the church. We can do this by emptying our minds of everything else and opening our minds and souls up to the presence and the glory and the love of God. Paul says: "He who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in the spirit". Do you see what he means? If we are united with the Lord, then that shows through in the spirit in which we live our lives and meet people and speak to people and generally pass the business of the day.

But you might think that I'm speaking about spirituality as if it were some individualistic trudge through some lonely spiritual wilderness. Something that is confined to ourselves through which we must find our own spiritual way. No, not at all. A church should be an oasis by the way that should take our spiritual quest out of the individual area and set it in a community spiritual setting. Let me go back to our Mission Statement where it says that: "We encourage thoughtful reflection on scripture, provide occasions for increasing our sense of communion with God and for strengthening our minds in Christ". There are important things in that text. One is the thoughtful reflection on scripture. Holy scripture is the bread of our faith. But we can only feed on it if to some extent we have got the recipe right. Scripture can be used in a way that gives rise to wrong, destructive and evil things. So for example, Bible people opposed the use of anaesthesia because Eve had been condemned to the pain of childbirth as a sign of the fall. So Bible people persecuted Galileo when he promoted his idea that the earth went round the sun and not the other way around. On biblical grounds, because Joshua called a halt to the rotation of the sun in the Old Testament. We heard read the other morning how Paul says that women must be

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kept silent in church: "Let not a woman's voice be heard in church". So we have to set these texts in their religious and social and historical settings. Otherwise we can begin to prove anything from the Bible and it takes away from its being the channel through which the message of the Lord comes to us for the blessing of our souls.

So the recipe has to be right. It has to be thoughtful reflection. It has to be intelligent spirituality so that the channels are not silted up with all sorts of stuff. So that we can come to the point where actually we hear scripture and we listen to it and we receive it in the words the Psalmist describes when he says: "I will hide your word in my heart as one who finds a great treasure". I think it can be said that there is no deep spirituality where there is no deep reflection on scripture that leads into contemplative prayer.

Prayer and scripture – these are the channels into spirituality. When I think of the truly spiritual people that I have known in my life, I think I cannot separate their spirituality from these things – scripture and prayer. Not so much that they have all necessarily known all the texts from Genesis to Revelation. That depends on the kind of memory you have and all sorts of other things. But they were steeped in the central spirit of holy scripture. It was evident in their lives and in their devotion and in the practicality of their lives.

Did I say they were steeped in the spirit? Does spirit there have a capital letter? For this is Pentecost. This is the day when we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the waiting disciples in Jerusalem.

Finally, it is, my friends, the Holy Spirit who is the author of our spirituality. No one can say that Jesus is Lord ultimately except by the Spirit. It is through the Spirit that we are led into the experience of Christian spirituality, of union with God and communion with Christ, the Living and Risen Saviour. Jesus said: "I will ask the Father and he will give you another counsellor to be with you forever: the Spirit of truth and on that day you will realize that I am in the Father and you are in me and I am in you". There you have the language of spiritual communion. There you have the ultimate words of spirituality. It's the language of the soul that has finally crossed the bridge from formal religion and cerebral theology. Crossed that bridge to the love of Jesus and to the love of God. That is the humble and undemonstrative but authentic sign of the spiritual man or the spiritual woman. Spirit of God, descend upon my heart; Wean it from earth, through all its pulses move. Stoop to my weakness, mighty as thou art; And make me love you as I ought to love. That my friends is surely where the journey of spirituality leads us. It ends up in our being able to love God, more as we ought. To have a deep sense of union and communion with Him who is the living vine. And that is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.