

And before him no creature is hidden.

In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit . Amen

People sometimes ask me what the most important thing I do as Vicar of Charlbury is. Whilst there is so much wonderful stuff this church is doing, from I always give the same answer. I pray.

Now, I am not saying this to appear holier than thou. If you are sitting there thinking- it's all well and good for him: he's paid to pray! It's tougher for us in the pews- let me assure you that my prayer life is very far from perfect. There are days when my prayer is rushed, when it necessarily happens elsewhere, when it is interrupted. Days when it feels, to quote our first lesson, like it is dividing joints from marrow.

And there is this fundamental truth- prayer can be difficult. There are those who think it is like a wish list which we roll off before God, a sort of cosmic ordering system. In truth prayer is more inspiring than that. It is the moment where we bring the things of our lives- our hopes our fears, the things we dare not speak even- and place them before the Divine . It is the moment when we acknowledge in the words of our first lesson from Hebrews stand unhidden before God. Prayer is a moment when all of the externals; the artifices and facades which we necessarily construct for and of ourselves, are stripped away. It is, in this sense, the moment we are most authentically ourselves. And that is difficult. I don't claim to be inherently better at it than anyone, but I do know how important it is. For me, and for this place, that regular prayer occurs.

Prayer then is less something that we do and more a mode of being. To be people of prayer is the ultimate destiny of all Christians- to stand, with all the extraneous aspects of human life stripped away- before God. And embrace and be embraced by his perfect love.

The following is a prayer of Thomas Ken, the saintly Bishop of Bath and Wells in the late 17th century. It is almost a stream of consciousness but give a clear sense of prayer as this baring of the soul.

Thou O heavenly Guide of our Devotion and our Love,  
by teaching us to pray, hast shewed us  
that Prayer is our treasury where all Blessings are kept,  
our Armoury where all our strength and weapons are stored,  
the only great preservative,  
and the very vital heat of Divine Love.  
Give me grace to call on thee at all times by diligent Prayer.

Ah Lord, I know my Devotion has daily  
many unavoidable and necessary interruptions,

and I cannot always be actually praying,  
all I can do is to beg of thy Love,  
to keep my heart always in an habitual disposition to Devotion,  
and in mindfulness of thy divine presence,

O my God, as thy infinite Love  
is ever-streaming in Blessings on me;  
O let my Soul be ever breathing Love to thee.

Ken knows there are interruptions to our prayer, that there are times when prayer is difficult, yet for him it is as natural as breath. The soul breathing love to God, therein is the essence of prayer.

Now all that is tough. The letter of the Hebrews uses language of the sword. Prayer can feel as if it is bringing things up which are painful. But the difficult truth is that, as Hebrews makes clear, these things are not hidden from God anyway.

And it is precisely because it is difficult that prayer is not just the most important thing we can do; it is more than that. It is the most important mode of being that we can have. We are blessed that this place has been a place of prayer for so long. Its very stones are soaked in prayer. Prayer informs and inspires all we do because it has to. It is the living out of our belief that is at the heart of our gospel reading- that for mortals it is impossible but with God all things are possible.

Think- how might you engage more deeply with prayer.

Crucially, because it is so difficult it is something that we don't have to do alone. We are blessed in this church with a prayer team. People who will pray with or for you. People to whom you can say- this thing is difficult or sad or this thing requires me to give thanks or in which I want to rejoice and they will quietly, prayerfully, discreetly, bring it to God. Might you join them- in praying for others or might you bring to them something in your life that you wish to lay before God? They meet after this service if so.

Or you might consider joining me for the rhythm of daily prayer- morning and evening. The times are always outside on the board. It might only be once a week or a month, but joining ourselves to the rhythm of prayer that has sustained this place for thousands of years is not only good for us, not only spiritually refreshing- it is, as I always tell people- the most important thing we can do.

In the name etc.