

Beatitudes 2 – A Contemplative Church (Matthew 5:1-10, Psalm 63)

If I was to use the word contemplation, what images does the word conjure up for you? Perhaps it makes you think of monks, dressed in a cowl and kneeling in an abbey before a statue of the Virgin Mary. Perhaps you're one of those people that always has real difficulty choosing what to eat in a restaurant, and when you're confronted with the menu, you spend minutes in agonised contemplation – is it the chicken and leek pie or the pasta carbonara today? What do I feel like? Or perhaps it's just another word for sleeping – maybe you've got a relative who tends to fall asleep in the chair after lunch and says something like: 'I'm not snoozing, I'm contemplating.'

Either way, it's not an easy word is it? It's long and it sounds intimidating. But it's not as complicated as it sounds – it basically means giving something our full attention for a period of time. It comes from the Latin word for temple or sacred space, so in particular it has always had the implication of giving time and attention to spiritual things.

But that very sense of focused attention makes it's particularly hard to address today – thanks to modern technology and the changes that has made to the way we do life, we're probably the worst society in history at not being able to concentrate on anything for very long.

So this is a hard subject to address. In fact, I would say it's doubly hard, because deep down most of us feel guilty that we don't spend enough time on spiritual matters, so it's very easy to preach a sermon which just feeds that guilt, and all you come away with is more guilt about not trying hard enough to contemplate God. And generally I find that guilt trips rarely achieve anything worthwhile in life.

So if we can all start by agreeing that we *know* that investing focused time on our faith is fundamentally a good thing to do, indeed of vital importance; but we also *know* that almost all of us don't do enough of it – we can sidestep the guilt and focus positively on things that might inspire us towards the kind of deep, intimate spiritual life that deep down most of us really want – we just don't know how to get there. (Are we agreed? Good!)

So let's start first of all by saying that, thankfully, Jesus is a realist too – he begins his Beatitudes by saying pretty much what we've just said: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.' In other words: **blessed are you who know your spiritual poverty**. If we retain a healthy realism about how weak we are, Jesus is actually saying something quite amazing – if that healthy realism leads us to cast ourselves on him, we get to share in the kingdom of heaven. It does need that step, of course: Jesus is looking at crowds who've travelled all that way to meet him and hear him – in other words their sense of need has led them to seek Jesus. But to those people, Jesus makes the most fantastic promise: yours is the kingdom of heaven.

So let's start where we are, and instead of guilt, let's allow that humble recognition of our spiritual poverty to draw us back to Jesus, to seek him for power to know the grace and love of God that we long for. Jesus is totally invested in this quest of ours – it's not all about *our* efforts.

The crazy thing is, even in cultivating a desire to spend more time and energy on him, we can ask him for help. Actually if you think about it, it's not that crazy at all: we all do it with our children – they buy their Christmas presents for us from the pocket money that we've just given them.

It's like that with Jesus – even in our seeking, he provides the means for us to do it. So let's start by taking this first beatitude at face value and asking Jesus for his help. Help that he gladly gives us, just like a parent with their child.

From that startpoint, I'm just going to share one main thought and a couple of tips today. The main thought in fact comes directly from that parent/child idea. **The key to developing a contemplative spiritual life all comes down to how we see God.** The truth is that we enjoy spending time with people we love – that's normal, isn't it? The problem for many of us is that we too often go back to seeing God as only a distant authority figure – and therefore someone we're scared of spending time with, someone we avoid (since, let's be honest, all humans have a bit of a problem with authority, that's human nature). One of my favourite films is Monsters Inc – and one of my favourite scenes is when Sully the monster is training, and Mikey is encouraging him – 'You're the big scary boss, you're the big scary boss....' That's sometimes what we do with God – we spend our time telling him – 'You're.....'

And of course he is great – he's the king, the judge. But the key here is balance. In fact, the key is really the Trinity. (Glaze over!) The Trinity is hard to get our heads around, but it's so important. We don't worship 'God' in a general sense, we worship Father, Son and Spirit – or Father, Best Friend and Helper/Encourager, to use the language of the new testament. That's a whole new way of seeing God – **when we contemplate God, actually what we're doing is growing to see God more and more as Parent, Best Friend and Helper/Encourager.**

Not all of us have a good father figure, so I do want to tread carefully here, it may not be easy to grow into all 3 dimensions. But I do think that the more we see God as a family member or friend, the easier it is to want to spend time with him.

And if you want a practical tip on how to be more contemplative, I suggest applying the same kinds of thought processes to spending time with God as you do to your spouse or best friend. In your personal prayers, stop using religious language and talk to him like someone you're close to! Sit in a chair and imagine Jesus sat opposite you and talk to him like your best friend.

Or: I imagine many of you at work will check in during the day with a short text to your spouse. Why not get into the habit at the same time of checking in briefly with Jesus – 'Jesus thank you for your love. Thank you that you're with me. I love you too.' The contemplative life is not primarily about spending 4 ½ hours looking at an icon, it's doing the sorts of things you'd do with your partner or best friend. We choose not to think of God as a distant authority figure but more as a treasured family relationship or friend.

(And blokes squirming at this point about using phrases like 'I love you Jesus' – I get it. I'm a bloke, it's not easy for me either. But we've got to get over ourselves. Think of it as more of a man hug if that makes it easier – you know, strong grip, mutual respect. And you might find that if you can say it to God, it gets a bit easier to say it to your family!)

And if we push this idea of forming a deep friendship, the third of those key beatitudes of today starts to look realistic – 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'. Since Jesus is pure in heart, we could paraphrase this as: 'blessed are those who want to live the kind of life I live.' But again, that's a lot easier to get your head around if Jesus is your best friend, and not just a weird hippy teacher we're supposed to emulate.

I think about my daughter Amelie. Amelie's always been a bit of a tomboy – but even Amelie had her Disney princess phase, like nearly every girl. And the inspiration was Amy, who was her best friend when she was 3. Amy had started the princess phase a few months before Amelie, and when Amelie saw Amy's princess party dress it was like the light-switch of revelation flicking on. She wanted to be *like Amy* – and so for 3 years we succumbed to the tentacles of the evil Disney empire, with its limitless ways to get you to spend money – the Belle dress, the colouring books and videos and toys and who knows what else.

Our best friends naturally influence us – if they recommend a book, we'll probably read it. If they like a restaurant, we'll try it too. If they give us some loving criticism, we'll hear it when we wouldn't take it from someone else.

'Blessed are those who want to be like their best friend, for they will see God.' Suddenly that looks a lot more desirable, even achievable, doesn't it?

One final tip about developing a contemplative side to your life – experiment. As a parent you get advice from all sides. I used to joke with people that 50% of the advice you get is useful, the trick working out which 50%. You try one thing with your first child and it works a treat, you try it again with your second and it fails miserably – so you try something else. It's the same with various types of spiritual exercise. Try stuff – experiment. If you enjoy it and it brings you closer to Jesus, keep doing it. If you hate it, fall asleep or whatever, try something else. I love personal retreats, I don't get on well with guided ones. I can't sit and look at an icon for ages, but I love sitting quietly in my chair with a lit candle. I've tried most things, I now know mostly what helps me get closer to Jesus.

As I close, **in the end it comes down to a decision.** The truth is that some of us prefer to keep God as a distant authority figure so we can keep him at arm's length, we can give ourselves permission to rebel against him. Intimacy is risky – or so we tell ourselves. Except it isn't if the person you're getting close to is the only completely good being in the entire universe.

If falling in love with a flawed human is still immensely exciting and satisfying, how much better might it be to do the same with the Lord of the universe? (PRAY)