

WAITING ON GOD

Yesterday afternoon, a small group of us gathered at the church to put together the reports for the AGM. It was not the most successful of activities. For a start, the photocopying took forever. The problem with lower end copiers is that they are slow. So we waited, while the copier chugged away. And we waited, and waited. Then some of the pages got mixed up, so they had to be redone, so we waited some more. It was so irritating.

What happens when we wait interminably for something? Many of us get frustrated, or annoyed, or impatient. Why? Because we are just not good at waiting. Our culture instills in us the need to make use of every single minute, and not to waste time. More than that, it provides an array of products to make satisfaction as instant as possible - food preparation being a case in point. (Though I must say, I find the plethora of ready cooked meals at Woollies these days rather appealing....)

No, we are not good at waiting.

Both the Old Testament and Gospel passages today have something to say about waiting – but not run of the mill, irritating waiting. These readings have something to say about waiting on God. This is a different kind of waiting. It's not so much waiting for the passage of time until something happens, but an attentive, listening-focused waiting, such as a butler or servant might do for a master. It's more a 'waiting on' than 'waiting for'.

The last verse of the Isaiah passage says, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

In the Gospel reading, we see Jesus putting this principle into practice.

If you were here last week, you'll remember that Jesus healed a demon possessed man in the synagogue. He blew the people's minds when he did that, and it didn't take long for the word to spread. In today's story, Jesus went back with Peter to the family home, where his mother in law was seriously ill with a fever. He healed her of course – and word got out. Before they had even finished their meal, Mark tells us the whole town was crowding at the door bringing, their sick friends and relatives. Jesus healed many, and cast out many demons.

I bet it was a late night! But eventually they sent the people home and they turned in. No doubt the disciples would have been looking forward to watching Jesus pick up where he left off the next morning when all the crowds came back for more. -

Except it didn't work out that way. When the crowd started gathering round the house early the next morning, Jesus was missing!

Mark tells us that Jesus had risen very early in the morning, while it was still dark, and had gone off to a solitary place to pray. He probably only got a few hours sleep. Then when the disciples finally found him, he was refreshed and ready to continue with his ministry in another place.

Jesus had been 'waiting on God.' Time and again in the Gospels, we read of Jesus 'going up on to a mountain top or solitary place to pray' – often before or after a significant point in his ministry.

Both Matthew and Mark record Jesus going off on his own to pray after feeding the 5000. Luke records Jesus taking off to the mountain to pray before he chose his apostles. One time, Jesus took three disciples with him as he went up on the mountain to pray – and Jesus was transfigured before their eyes! And before Jesus faced the agony of the cross, he spent the night in solitary prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Among the many references to prayer in the New Testament, these accounts show us a particular type of prayer. 'Waiting on God' prayer. They are characterised by silence, privacy and a substantial length of time apart with God. For Jesus, these times were several hours at a stretch – not quite the same thing as a 15 minute or half hour daily "quiet time".

What does it mean to 'Wait on God?' Is it just another name for 'saying our prayers' or is it something different?

In the Isaiah passage, we learn two things about what it means to wait on God. There is more that can be said about waiting on God of course, but in this particular passage there are two things, and they are what distinguish 'waiting on God' from other types of prayer.

In today's reading, the prophet speaks to a depressed nation of Israel. They have been in captivity way too long and have all but lost hope. But now the prophet is speaking as if their captivity is almost over. He encourages the Israelites to reflect on this God whom they serve. He reminds them:

He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Isaiah encourages the people to believe in the goodness and love of God. Despite the difficult experiences they have had, Isaiah reassures them that God still carries them close to his heart.

He goes on to talk about the might and majesty of God, and then he says:
He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

Isaiah also paints a picture of an *awesome* God – a God to worship and revere: The powerful creator and sustainer of the universe. He is not only a God who carries his people close to his heart, but he is also a God of might and majesty and wisdom.

So, the first clue as to what it means to wait on God is this: **Waiting on God begins with worship.**

We need to acknowledge who God is – both his love, and his power and might! And we need to worship him and honour him.

This is perhaps a different approach to prayer for some of us. It's as natural as breathing to come to God with our requests, but it's not so second nature to just stop and recognise him for who he is, and worship him.

We need to remember that! **Waiting on God begins with worship.**

Then if we look back to the passage, we find the second clue about what it means to wait on God.

27 Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"?

Isaiah asks them point blank why they have given up on God. He goes on to say:

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

Isaiah encourages the people not to give up on God. Instead, he directs them to shift their focus. To stop looking at their troubles, and instead, turn their eyes back to God. He reminds them that God is the everlasting creator – and as such, he

won't ever give up on them. He won't grow tired or weary of them. In fact, he will give strength to the weary, and power to the weak.

So the second thing we learn about waiting on God from this passage is simply this - **we need to shift our focus!** Do we have things that are troubling us? Causing us unhappiness or concern? Are we worrying about anything? Are we discouraged? Then we should take our focus off those things, and focus instead on God. We need to release them into his keeping, and look then to God, not to our troubles.

That is waiting on God. Worshipping him, and releasing to him the things that trouble us in an attitude of trust.

As we wait on God we find that something supernatural begins to happen:

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah is not talking here about physical strength and stamina. It's more about spiritual endurance. Note that Isaiah is not promising an end to troubling circumstances. Instead, he promises renewed strength – the ability to hang in there.

Two weeks ago, I attended the funeral of my dear friend, and spiritual director, Ruth Dudley. Her passing has been a great loss to the Church. Ruth faced struggles and challenges in her life that would do most of us in. Yet in God's strength, she was able to rise above them. Her journey instilled in her an intimacy with God, and a wisdom beyond any earthly understanding. She had this to say about waiting on God:

Time out with God in a quiet place, just marinating in him - is what keeps me going. Maybe not quite flying, but not digging a hole in the ground either. It kept me going when my tiny baby boy died - and then a year later when I watched my firstborn die of cancer at not-yet-five years old. It kept me going through three miscarriages. It kept me going through years of another son's life of crime and time in prison. It kept me going through a lifetime of physical limitations and not inconsiderable pain.

It didn't make any difference to the 'fact' of the disasters or difficulties, but it did provide me with something into which my anchor could bite - and it stopped me going under.

So – waiting on God. For Jesus it was an essential part of his relationship with his Father. It provided him with strength when he was weary, determination to keep going, and an intimacy with his Father that brought him comfort and direction – in fact as he ‘waited on God’ Jesus found all that he needed to fulfil the father’s will. I pray that we too, might discover the richness of waiting on God. **Amen.**