

SERMON: Yearning for God: 1 Kings 8. 22-30, 41-43; John 6. 56-69

Dear Father, you long to be close to each of us, your children. May we also yearn to seek you in all we do and say. Amen

I'm going to open with a question to you all: What would you say is the primary goal of our Christian journey?

I'd like to suggest that our Christian journey really has but one end goal: and that is to have an intimate relationship with our loving creator, our heavenly parent. We each have many and different things to learn along the way but we are all seeking and desperately need, the same end result – to know the deep love of our Father beyond any shadow of a doubt.

This shouldn't really surprise us. Genesis tells us that God created humanity so that He could have a relationship with us. And His heart was broken when the first two humans chose to not do that, yet the desire to be close to Him remains in our DNA. There is a yearning both within ourselves and in God to be in deep fellowship with each other. Today's Old Testament and gospel readings give us some insight into how that yearning has been expressed over the centuries. They also shed some light on how we may deepen our fellowship with God.

1 Kings 8. 22-30, 41-43

Solomon opens his prayer of dedication for the Temple with the words in verse 23: *“He said, “O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart,”*

Can you feel the passion in these words? Solomon is both praising Yahweh, and teaching the Israelites at the same time. He calls on his people to be humble servants of the one and only God of Israel, to whom they are to give their whole hearts! And in return their God will keep his covenant made through Moses and David and maintain His steadfast love for them. This prayer can't help but remind us of Jesus' First Great Commandment: to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength.

Our Lord is not a distant, impersonal deity. Far from it! He is a close, personal friend. And how do we build relationships with our friends? We talk with them and do things together and the longer we do that the deeper our friendship becomes. Solomon's Temple fulfilled these two roles. It was first and foremost a place of prayer. A place where the petitions of the Israelites and the foreigner could be heard by God and their forgiveness mercifully granted by Him. It was also a place for acts of worship and sacrifice to be performed together with their

God. The Temple was the central way in which the Israelites expressed their deep yearning for Yahweh.

But Solomon was indeed a wise man. In verses 27 to 30 he makes it clear that God is far greater than any Temple. His glory cannot be contained within any building, not in the Temple nor in any Christian church, no matter how grand or holy it may be. So Solomon pleads with God to always have His eyes upon the Temple and to listen to the prayers made within it. In essence, he prays that the Temple might be the meeting place for human need and divine mercy. He then goes on to make seven petitions which highlight this human need and for which God's mercy is sought.

Now there is, of course, a great need for this type of prayer both then and now. And yet the intersection between our needs and God's mercy is not something we can know fully or even less control. Why some people have their earthly needs met and others do not, is beyond our ken, but we are still called to ask God to help us in our times of trials. We cannot put human fetters on an almighty God, but we can seek to be closer to him despite our lack of understanding. Jesus gave us the example of how to pray that will ensure we do that:

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever.*

When we recite this prayer today I invite us each to reflect on its meaning with fresh eyes and heart. What does God's will look like for us as individuals and collectively as the body of Christ in our three parishes? How much are we yearning for our Father's kingdom to come here and now on earth as in heaven?

It's by talking to Jesus about these things and all the other myriad aspects of our lives that we build our relationship with Him. Jesus also gave us a very tangible act of remembrance that all his followers can and do share with Him. It is an act of friendship that binds us together with Him in love. It is the sacrament of Holy Communion.

In our gospel reading from John, Jesus tells us:

⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not

like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.'

The first thing to be clear about is that these verses do not mean that it is through taking the sacrament of Holy Communion that we gain eternal life. It is only our faith in Jesus and our repentance that opens that gateway.

William Barclay suggests that there are two meanings for what John wrote. The first is indeed a reference to the Lord's Supper and the Sacrament. It's as if John were saying: "*You cannot draw on the fullness of the Christian life and wonder unless you sit at that table of love.*" As Anglicans we accept that these words are to be read from a spiritual and metaphorical perspective not a literal one. The Holy Communion wine and wafers are symbols of the body and blood of Christ that remind us of the sacrifice made by Jesus for our sake. By choosing to remember Jesus in this way it is an act of obedience and love that strengthens our relationship with Him.

The second level of understanding goes to the meaning of Jesus abiding in us. Here John is stressing the humanity of Jesus. He is the Son of God come down from heaven to embody all that is human; all our joys and tribulations, all our strengths and weaknesses. Barclay expresses it passionately: "*When Jesus told us to eat His flesh and drink His blood, He was telling us to feed our hearts and souls and minds on His humanity, and He was telling us to revitalize our lives with His life until we are drenched and permeated and saturated and filled with the life of God.*"

This is abiding with Jesus! This is the relationship He longs for us to have with Him! This is what our DNA yearns for! And yet there are many things which can and do distract us from this underlying desire. How do you feel when you hear these words of truth? Are they hard to accept or do you embrace and believe them? That was the choice the followers of Jesus had back then and it is the same choice we have today. In verses 59 to 69 Jesus sees the dilemma some of his disciples are facing but he doesn't demand that they follow Him. No, instead he challenges them to make a choice. Do they want a passionate, loving, spiritual relationship with God through Him, or don't they? His Father will graciously bring us to Jesus, but the choice is always ours to accept or reject Him.

Some disciples fell away that day but: "⁶⁸ *Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'*"

This response reflects far more than an intellectual understanding of Christ's teachings. Christianity is not a philosophy we accept, nor a theory we can prove. It is fundamentally our personal relationship with Jesus. It is our heart response to Him that cannot be denied. It is the free giving of our love to Him simply because our heart will not allow us to do anything else.

Dear Father, thank you that you have led us to your Son. May we always choose Jesus over everything else in this world. And may we yearn to deepen our friendship with Him each and every day. Amen.