

Luke 13:1-9

I trained to be a priest at Cuddesdon, it will not surprise you to learn it was the country club amongst Theological Colleges: tweed, tea, and *The Daily Telegraph*. I learnt some theology, bought a barbour jacket and discovered brogues. Now, the Vice Principal there was a man we much admired. If you have worshipped here in the cathedral for years, you will know this man, Alastair Redfern. He was a canon here in the early 'nineties. He has just retired as Bishop of Derby. Alastair was splendid in all kinds of ways and a good preacher with a style all his own. His sermons used to start with lists. 'I want to talk about donkeys, doorknobs and doubt'. 'We must think about fireworks and faith'. I copied his style for a few years. As this sermon is going to go hither and thither slightly, let me nod towards Alastair and tell you I am going to talk about faith, a kingfisher, and an old rosewood desk. I stopped copying Alastair because, as you can hear, I am not very good at alliteration, his lists tripped off the tongue ('donkeys, doorknobs and doubt'), mine does not: faith, a kingfisher and an old rosewood desk.

We will start with the kingfisher. A little over a week ago, I was on Retreat in Devon, I had gone to read books and say my prayers. Another guest in the house got back from a walk and told me she had seen a kingfisher. That reminded me of a poem I know

*Prayer is like watching for
The kingfisher. All you can do is
Be there where he is like to appear, and
Wait.
Often nothing much happens;
There is space, silence and
Expectancy.
No visible signs, only the
Knowledge that he's been there
And may come again.
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.
But when you've almost stopped
Expecting it, a flash of brightness
Gives encouragement.*

Ann Lewin *Watching for the Kingfisher*, Canterbury Press (2009)

It is a poem about prayer. Actually, it is about the discipline of prayer the *difficulty* of prayer. Now, prayer is just conversation with God. There are different ways of talking, I can ask questions, I can band on and on, I can argue. I can do all of those things quite well, what I find more tricky is the kind of conversation when I have to *listen*. In the same way, there is prayer that is very vocal, thanksgiving perhaps, when you find the car keys, or remember the goodness of God. Then there is the kind of praying we will do this morning, *intercession*. Intercession is a good and necessary form of prayer, it is vocal and it has a list: Parliament, victims of terrorism, a fire in China, Parliament, a sick child, my tricky neighbour, Parliament, your cat, and not forgetting Parliament. Intercession is good; but we should notice that it is only our voice that we hear. Listening to God, now that is more difficult. My poem suggested

*All you can do is
Be there where he is like to appear*

To listen you must create some space, some silence, and then what you notice, more often than not, is that *nothing much happens*. There is no quick reward. So, this kind of prayer is effort, you have to keep doing it, you have to go back to the place where something happened once in expectancy. And, says the poem, you should notice that the very business of being there, waiting, hoping, that is actually a proper part of prayer

*Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.*

When you have done all that, now and then, not often, but sometimes, there is then, suddenly, a kingfisher, a *flash of brightness*

Another poet R S Thomas, a man who found prayer really hard work, had a different way of expressing the same idea. He thought prayer was like throwing gravel at a window

*hoping to attract
the loved one's
attention. ...*

He knew that all too often *nothing much happens*. He said.

*I would
have refrained long since
but that peering once
through my locked fingers
I thought that I detected
the movement of a curtain.*

R. S. Thomas, 'Folk Tale' *Selected Poems*, Penguin, (2003), p186.

So prayer is like watching for the kingfisher. There is the kingfisher I promised you. We are in the midst of Lent, the season of discipline. We can get confused by Lent, we can be a bit deflected by not eating fondant fancies and find ourselves oddly, thinking a lot about fondant fancies. Lent is actually *discipline*; it is the grinding out, over and again, of something that is not quite natural, or easy. It is the doing without an instant reward. Lent is very like a diet, or exercise; you have to keep at it. Prayer, Lent, they are neither of them things you do once and get the hang of. You have to keep doing them. Television weddings think that when we marry we say 'I do', but it is never *I do*; it is always *I will*. *I will* love, comfort and honour and I will go on doing it. Prayer and Lent are like marriage, 'I will', not 'I do'.

I will, discipline, doing it over and over; always an act of will. Hold that thought.

Let's look briefly at that slightly strange gospel reading we heard. We met Jesus *en route* to Jerusalem in Luke's gospel. He spends time getting there, people want to him to turn back, they know it will not end well, there is fear; a gathering gloom. On this journey, already hard enough there is news that some faithful Jews – Galileans – have been murdered by Pontius Pilate, while preparing animals for sacrifice in the temple. That explains that awkward phrase

the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices

It sounds as though Jesus is being invited to get cross and condemn the Romans. He refuses to do that. He turns it, instead, into a story an opportunity to talk about repentance. He adds another anecdote about people killed when a tower collapsed. So, you have one group murdered, suddenly, in an atrocity and others killed in an accident. 'Death is sudden', says Jesus, 'it is wayward, unpredictable'. You have to know that and you have to repent constantly, you do not know when your account will be due, you must be ready and repentant.

This is a very Lenten gospel; this is the point you make in Lent. We must repent, now. Here is another story. A little over a thousand years ago, Aelfric, Abbot of Eynsham, preached a sermon about a man who refused to go to church on Ash Wednesday. Just days later, this man was killed during a boar hunt. Just like Jesus Aelfric was not shocked that people die suddenly. That is commonplace and familiar. If you were thinking of a boar hunt this afternoon, beware, it could seriously damage your health. What interested Aelfric, just like Jesus, was that here was a man who had not taken his chance to repent and who died in sin. Here was a man who died and would not rise again. Here was someone who died *forever*.

So, faith demands that we repent, and that we go on doing it. Faith is repentance, over and over. Remember - this sermon is about a kingfisher, faith, and old rosewood desk. Now, it is just the desk that is left.

On that retreat I mentioned, I was reading a book of sermons by a man called Austin Farrar. Farrar was an Oxford priest, Warden of Keble College when he died, in 1968. He was reckoned the greatest preacher of his age and when I was a student, in the 1970s, people talked about him. That happens less today, but I go back to the odd sermon, now and again. On retreat, I thought I should read more. That is where I met the old rosewood desk. It is the title of a sermon. Farrar had that desk in his study; it was a gift to him when he was a boy. He describes opening the secret drawer in the desk and finding a painting he had hidden as a boy. He describes being taken back to his childhood and wondering 'Was that me, am I still the same?' Then he wonders what it would be like to find, years later, the card you got at your confirmation; a note of the promises you made long ago. What would you think about that? 'Was that me, am I still the same, did I keep my promise?'

You see, what I discovered on retreat, is that Farrar was very interested in how you *stay* faithful, how you *go on* being a Christian. It is an interesting question. So much of what we hear, at the moment, is about making a decision, giving your life to Christ, being converted. It is dramatic, sudden, and it is once for all. It is exciting, but it does run the risk of being 'I do', not 'I will'. Farrar, I discovered, was less interested in a *once and for all* big decision, and much more interested in how we live with that decision. He was interested in how we stay faithful. How do we deal with temptation, selfishness, or distractedness. The answer, he said, was to repent, to keep on repenting. Farrar thought that all of us need to that constantly, to go back and do it again; repent, put ourselves aside, turn back to God. He did not say this, but it is as if a bit of Lent was lifelong. We have to keep turning back to God.

There will be challenges for you, in your faith. For me, and I suppose it has something to do with being a Dean there is a challenge in trusting in God. I keep thinking I should be doing more, trying harder, another agenda, a bit more *any other business*. That is why I need to repent, why I need to keep repenting. The more I go back to that place where God *is like to appear*, the more I learn the lesson. Not once, not 'I do', but over and over, putting myself aside, turning to God. Christianity is a life we have to live, and you have to practice, repeat the lessons, it is how you learn.

That has helped me; I hope that it helps you just a little. It helped me on my retreat, a kingfisher, faith and old rosewood desk.

As I was turning all these thoughts over, I went for a walk, the afternoon before I came home, down by the canal. There, in a grey afternoon there was, splendidly, a flash of brightness. There was the kingfisher. I saw the kingfisher.

*Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.
But when you've almost stopped
Expecting it, a flash of brightness
Gives encouragement.*