

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 14 JUNE 2015

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

1 Kings 19: 11-13; Psalm 69: 1-3, 13; Matthew 14: 22-33;

Romans 8: 26-27

“Angelus”

Picture: Jean-Francois Millet, ‘The Angelus’,



<http://www.artway.eu/artway.php?id=628&lang=en&action=show&type=imagemeditations>

Earlier this week, I came across this painting by Millet. It is called ‘Angelus’ and it depicts a man and a woman praying in a field. The picture is one of stillness. The man, the woman, and everything around them seems to have stopped for a moment's pause. In the distance the Church spire points to light in a multi-coloured sky. In the foreground the pitchfork and the wheelbarrow look as though they have just been abandoned. A sack of potatoes at their feet and bags of fruit on the wheelbarrow show the fruit of their labours. The only thing that moves are some birds in the far distance, but everything else is still.

They are praying the Angelus. This is a prayer from the thirteenth century that is prayed three times a day, at 8am, noon and 6pm, commemorating the incarnation. Traditionally it consists of three hail Mary's and a prayer of thanksgiving for Christ's reincarnation.

I don't know if the Angelus prayer was at the basis of a practice I grew up with, but the picture reminded me of it. In the village where I grew up, the Church bells would be rung three times a day, at 8am, noon and 6pm. At 8am, it was the sign that morning coffee wasn't far away (9am). At 12 noon, it indicated that it was nearly lunch time (12.30pm). At 6pm, it told us it was dinner time. That's at least what I always thought, until I came across the Angelus and realised that not only did the Church bells ring to tell us it was time to eat, it told us to pray. Wherever we were, whatever we were doing, we would stop, look up at the spire, and thankfully acknowledge God, Jesus and the Spirit as part of our lives. It was a very short prayer and most of the time I didn't even consciously think about it, but every time the Church bells rang, I would stop, look up and check in with Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In hindsight, I think this archaic tradition was not such a bad idea. It kept me close to God, helped me change and stop to focus regularly and literally helped me to look up and check in, half the time without even realising it.

Having since read a lot about meditation and mindfulness practice, as well as studying theories and practices of modern hypnosis and psychotherapy, research has shown this kind of focussing and checking in to be helpful for relaxation, concentration and even in combatting things like anxiety and depression. I've realised there was a lot of wisdom in these ancient prayer practices. Wisdom we have, for a large part, lost.

For many of us, prayer has narrowed itself down to something we do, an exercise of the mind, a mostly one-sided conversation about what goes on in our lives, what we find difficult, what we are happy about, and what we would like to see changed in the rest of the world. A way of prayer that is particularly strong in the Churches of the Reformation. A way of consciously, deliberately, and purposefully addressing God.

Research shows that more than 60% of people with no faith affiliation whatsoever engage in this kind of prayer on a daily basis. "Thank God!" or "Please God!" passing the lips of millions every day. Most of them believing, even if they do not believe in a God or higher power, that prayer works or makes a difference. Odd?

Perhaps not. Perhaps they are right. Research also shows that focus changes not only our own behaviour, but also that of others around us.

I don't know if you've followed the programmes of Michael Moseley, a British doctor turned television personality who goes around the world testing all sorts of interesting theories and ideas about health, body, mind and soul. In one of his programmes, we learn that Michael suffers from gloominess and insomnia and he goes in search of a cure. One of the things he does is click on pictures of smiling faces on a computer screen for a couple of minutes every day. It improves his mood. Why? Well, that is not entirely clear, but him focussing on smiling faces, and actively trying to find them amongst other non-smiling faces, seems to direct his brain away from the gloom he is used to, towards a more cheerful way of looking at the world in general. After a couple of weeks, his wife comments on the fact that he is smiling more and she, also, feels more cheerful because he is.

A very simple thing. But apparently it works. And I imagine that when we pray, something similar is happening. For a brief time, we focus, and we believe that this focussing makes a difference. And as we focus, something changes in our attitude, our outlook and our engagement in whatever it is we are praying about.

Praying for asylum seekers in detention centres every day will most likely keep them in your mind and encourage you to do something about their plight should an opportunity arise. Or it will engage you in conversation should the topic come up somewhere. Praying for an expensive new car will probably have you work harder, be more deliberate about your spending, etc. Focussing on it will probably get you closer to getting that wonderful car than not focussing would.

They are little tweaks, and we probably shouldn't, in general, expect too many miracles from it. However, focussing does tend to change not only the direction of our thoughts, it will also, inevitably, have some impact on our actions.

Another example. Not so long ago I read a book called '365 Thank Yous' by John Kralik (<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/9543092-365-thank-yous>). It is a book by a guy who was feeling depressed and low after he went through a divorce, and lost his good health, most of his friends and his job in the process. He had a brainwave and decided to write one thank you note a day to someone who had made life a little better for him. What it did was amazing. Focussing once a day on something to be thankful for moved him into a much more positive frame of mind in general, and after a year he was working again, running the marathon, and having a good time with lots of friends. All because, he reckons, he wrote 365 thank you notes.

Focus. Away from what depressed him and what made him feel low and lonely, towards the positive that was also part of his life. It changed not only him, but also how the world around him was treating him.

It doesn't always work. It isn't a solution for everything, but I think we probably all know that it is true that if we focus on something positive, it will more often than not make us feel better, while if we focus on the negative, it won't.

So is prayer a type of positive thinking then? Is it about turning our mind to what is good and helpful and healthy, and away from the dark, the gloomy and the difficult? Is it focussing ourselves, and charging ourselves up towards the right causes, proper action, positive, kingdom inducing behaviour? Is prayer some kind of mental support system undergirding our actions and helping to keep our mind and motives on the right track, in line with what we learn from scripture as worthy to be focussing on and directing ourselves towards? Yes, and no. Or rather, if we look at the scriptures, more no than yes.

Prayer in scripture is much richer than, much broader than, just focussing on our own behaviour, our own frame of mind and the impact it has on us, our actions and the world around us. Prayer in scripture is not a solo exercise, not a one-sided conversation, not a simple focussing of the mind on a desired state of mind or outcome, or even on gratitude and praise. It's more.

And I'd like to take you back to the Angelus to try and explain why and how.

Looking up at the Church spire, I was taught, for a moment, to look up and bring to mind God, Jesus and the Spirit. Depending on the day, on my state of mind, on the state of the world, on the weather, on the time of day or even what I had for breakfast that morning, a whole host of other connections would be part of that.

I'd like you to try it. Now. Look up, think of God, think of Jesus, think of the Holy Spirit and see what else comes to your mind. Unbidden, uninvited, but nevertheless there. Thoughts that will be different for each and every one of us. Unique contexts to those three simple words, three simple images, three simple names for God.

God for me, is always connected with nature, with the created world around me, but also with the overwhelming evil and pain that can be part of that world. And more often than not, looking up and thinking of God, some of that will flash past in my mind. War, disaster, but also birds singing in the clear blue sky or the loveliness of an old tree in the distance.

Jesus, for me, is always connected with friendship, intimacy, care, and support. With someone I can trust, a guide, an example to live by. But also with the suffering individual, betrayal and pain that people inflict on each other. Sickness and death, sin and broken relationships. The experience of lament, of a closed heaven where God doesn't hear and we are abandoned. And sometimes, depending on the context, some of that will float into my brain when I look up and pray that short Trinitarian prayer.

The Spirit, last but not least, for me is a feeling in my heart, or even in my gut at times. Energy, inspiration, clarity of mind, peace, direction, confidence, all the things that make me feel solid, capable, positive and optimistic. But it is also the whispering voice of doubt, the nagging hesitation that makes me check twice before I assume that something is "what God would want", the tugging at my heart strings that keeps telling me what I do is not enough, that there is work to be done, that something is expected of me before the Kingdom can come. And that I might not be doing spectacularly well in that department. It's the Spirit that Paul writes about in Romans, a groaning whose reproach I can hear when I am lacking in focus and commitment.

All of those things will connect, come together, relate and dissipate again in that one, short, simple Trinitarian prayer bringing together all the different ways of prayer we find in scripture. No lists, not even words, but fleeting images and emotions, images, metaphors, experiences, hopes, dreams, sadness and suffering all colliding into each other. Creating space and bringing together prayer from every direction into a tumbling muddle of a half-conscious turning to God in God's many guises.

There are many types of prayers in the scriptures. Praise is probably the most prevalent, closely followed by lament. There is intercession and quiet relating, there is awe and silence, lightning and thundering voices. There is the intimate connection, the heart burst, the quiet whisper and the fiery storm. There is protest, there is groaning, there are tears, and laughter and everything in between, every human emotion, every human action, every human understanding related in one way or another to the divine.

Not just a focus of the human mind, but a time where heaven and earth connect for a moment. Where reality and dream, hope and despair, good and bad, praise and lament, confidence and hesitation, joy and pain can collide before God. Seeking a connection, looking up in the hope that that focus, that collision of

what we are and what drives us, finds a connection beyond us, beyond what is, beyond our complex and contradictory inconsistent reality into something bigger around us.

While we stop and pray and everything around us stills, we become aware of God in the benevolent sky above and around us, of Christ in the person next to us, of the fruits of the Spirit at our feet and in our wheelbarrows, listening to the groaning of that Spirit, aware of the needs and suffering of our neighbour, and longing for a closer connection, a deeper walk with all that is still hidden of God. Amen.