

## Sermon 20<sup>th</sup> June 2021

Well, it's a pleasure to be back here with you all and to be preaching again on this, my last Sunday of this academic year. Today we carry on with the penultimate sermon in our sermon series on the Holy Spirit, and today is one of the most exciting topics for me: discerning what God is doing.

Now this sort of topic often seems to strike fear into people's hearts, and I think that's because sometimes we can get a bit caught up in our own anxieties. In the church as a whole, there is an underlying current of anxiety and even panic about declining attendance numbers and aging congregations.

Particularly after the incredibly difficult year that we have just had, you might also, as I know I have, have had times where things in the world have seemed particularly hopeless. All these things considered, I think we can sometimes feel like we need to make excuses for God or to try and justify to ourselves and others the reasons why God seems not to be as active in the world.

Sometimes we can even try to do God's job for Him, trying to take the whole weight of the world onto our own shoulders. It is little wonder then that we can get bogged down. But what we need to do is to let God be God, because God *is* active in the world, and God is still sovereign. So today I'm going to talk a little bit about discerning what God is doing in your own life, and about discerning what God is doing in the world.

Before I started training for the priesthood, I spent a few years working for Ely diocese on a pioneer scheme, and really fittingly, the motto of pioneering work is: finding out what God is doing, and joining in. What might surprise you however, is that about 6 years ago I would not have called myself a Christian. In fact, I was venomously anti-church.

I had come to faith in my teenage years, but unfortunately, I had some really awful experiences in several different churches over that time. It was pretty damaging, and it left me feeling as if I was and never would be good enough, I was sinful beyond repair and that even if God did love me, He was always ever so slightly disappointed in me. This, coupled with some separate traumatic experiences in my life, left me not in the best place. I was pretty self-destructive, I acted out and I self-harmed. I left the church, vowed never to return, and, for many years, I didn't.

When we look at a story like mine, we might be wishing that there was a scheme or programme that dealt with this type of story, not uncommon, or youth workers to

help young people in crisis, or something else. These are all noble and good desires that I absolutely advocate for.

But what I want to emphasise is that even without these things, God was in control, He never left me, and He worked constantly through different people and small things that eventually got me to be standing here, preaching a sermon. Do we trust God enough that He is at work, even when we can't see it?

I want to briefly talk about a Bible passage that we didn't read today. Mark chapter 4:26-29 says:

<sup>26</sup> He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, <sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. <sup>29</sup> But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

We usually think of ourselves as the one at work in this parable, because in another parable Jesus says 'the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few'. But what if it is God who is the 'someone' here. It is God who scatters the seeds, and as we go to sleep at night God is still at work, and as we wake, we see more growth that we cannot explain or understand.

God is the one who labours, God is the shepherd, the conductor. God uses us as labourers, as I will talk about a bit later, but God is at work, even without us. We do not need to hold the whole world or the church in our hands, that's God's job. Our job is to listen to God as, with all the big picture that He has, he directs us.

Now you might be thinking, well that's all well and good, but how do we hear what God is saying to us? How do we discern what He is doing? And the answer to that is prayer, but I think we need to re-think what we mean by prayer. Prayer is not simply a list of petitions to God to try and encourage Him to take action, as if God doesn't understand until we point things out to Him. But prayer is opening up the space to allow God to work in *us*, to allow God access to heal those hurting parts of us and to allow us to hear what God might want us to do for someone else or for our communities.

In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul says to 'pray without ceasing', and if we think of prayer as closing our eyes and speaking then we would find this pretty impossible. But if God is already at work all around us, then prayer is a state of *attentiveness* to God in the world around us.

So, on that note, I would like to introduce you to two friends of mine. Does anyone know who these guys are? I didn't think you would, so this is Link and Zelda. They are characters from a very popular gaming franchise on Nintendo called The Legend of Zelda. Now I am actually a really big nerd, and particularly over this pandemic year when we've often been stuck at home, I have found myself playing more to relax in my downtime. Now I seem to be going for the nerd of the year award at the moment, but bear with me and it will make sense why I have brought this up.

In the story to this game, Zelda here is supposed to have a gift, a power, that enables her to seal evil away. But she just can't do it. She tries and tries, she prays and prays to the gods, she goes on pilgrimages, but all to no avail. The evil villain is set to return and yet still the power won't come. Instead, what Zelda really wants to be doing is science, researching technology, but she needs to do this in secret because this is considered a waste of time by everyone because she should be focusing on this power.

Well, the villain comes and, despite trying so hard, the power is not there, and the kingdom is decimated. Link, Zelda's knight and only friend in all this, tries to get her to safety but they are attacked and eventually overwhelmed. Zelda tells Link to run, save himself and leave her behind, she can't unlock her gift and is consequently useless, but that maybe he, the hero, can at least do something.

But, Link refuses, he gives his life that Zelda might live, and it is this sacrifice of her beloved knight, the loss of this most important person that awakens something inside Zelda, and her power is released. Even more importantly, all that research that Zelda did was not in vain, as the advances in medical technology that she made enables Link to be brought back from death and enable the two of them to take back the kingdom.

You may already be seeing some interesting theological comparisons that we could make here. But, through this story, God reminded me just how much he loves me in that he too was willing to sacrifice everything for me, his very life, even while I was a sinner, even back then when I was self-destructive. It was not the logical thing to do, but God did it anyway. During the times this year when I have doubted my own abilities to live up to this calling God has placed upon me, God spoke to me here and reminded me that I am not doing this in my own strength, but through the power of the Holy Spirit.

God is always speaking to us, even through something as random as a computer game, if we are just attentive to Him. Our reading from Corinthians says no one

speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.' There is no secular and religious because the Spirit of God can be in His whole creation. Sometimes it can feel frightening to let God into our vulnerability, but God wants to speak to us, and God wants to sooth those anxieties and heal our hurts. Pray without ceasing.

So how then do we come in to what God is doing in the world? In our reading from John today it is worth noting that even Jesus says 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.' It is tempting to think of Jesus as always knowing exactly what needed to be done, never needing to discern. But Jesus was also fully human, divesting himself of this divine power and instead needs to take his reference from God, just like us, listening to discern God's plans for Him and for those He meets. He too relies on the power of the Holy Spirit to do these works that are asked of Him.

So too do Jesus' disciples. Throughout the book of Acts, we have countless tales of the disciples being asked to go somewhere, or to do something that they didn't fully understand. Philip is simply told to go south to a particular road. He had no idea what to expect when he got there, but God then used him to speak to the Ethiopian eunuch about the Bible. Peter receives a vision from God that he doesn't understand, and then some random men turn up and ask Peter to come with them. He follows, and in turn baptises a Roman, Cornelius, and Peter suddenly realises that Jesus is for the Gentiles and not just the Jews.

Attentiveness to God at work in all things is how we discern what God is doing, just as the disciples and even Jesus did. Our reading from Corinthians today tells us that each of us is given spiritual gifts. Now, maybe you feel like Zelda and think 'I don't have any gifts', or that what you have is not terribly useful or important, but you do, and they are God-given, and God knows how to use them in you. Wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues and interpretation. Just like Zelda too, nothing is ever wasted. Those gifts that feel unimportant can later become more important than you could know.

This reading goes onto talk about the body of God, all the parts working together, and all these individual gifts that we have, when directed by God, can do amazing things. In my journey from hatred of the church to the priesthood, it was not miraculous signs or grand gestures that got me there, but a series of small things working together – a cup of tea offered, a single word that probably felt really insignificant to the one speaking to me, an invitation, an act of kindness, listening to

me. God used the gifts of the people around me who were attentive to the God who knew my story and the bigger picture to lead me to where he wanted me to go. He used Christians and non-Christians, spoke to me in strange ways and kept speaking until I heard Him.

Because God is active in all the world around us. He cares deeply for each and every one of you and he is at work in your life, and in the lives of all in the world. We don't need to have all the answers for how to save the church or the world, that is God's job. But if we are attentive to Him by praying without ceasing, we might let God into those scary places, those skeletons in our own closets, into those hurts and anxieties, and let Him bring us out of them.

In the world, we can listen for the call of God to interrupt our carefully thought-out plans with a strange request, not knowing the ending, but just trusting and following, allowing God to use our gifts to play our part in the stories of need around us. So may we discern what God is doing in us and in our communities, and join in. Amen.