

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 1 March 2020 10am

Rev Peter Cornick

Prayer and belief: the temptation to separate the two

My Lent book is a series of writings from the twentieth century theologian and mystic, Evelyn Underhill. I picked it up at a retreat house in Chelmsford, where she had stayed and taught. Her context was England, just before the second world war.

On this, the first Sunday of Lent, we hear the familiar passage of the temptations. Jesus – led into the wilderness before he embarks on his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. In the wilderness to prepare himself; to pray; to face temptation.

Evelyn Underhill writes this on prayer.

Our prayer and belief should fit like hand and glove ... Christian prayer to God must harmonize with Christian belief about God.

What she is saying is, we can't believe something about God, but pray something entirely different. We will soon become disillusioned with either the answer or lack of answer. Our prayer and belief should fit like hand and glove. It is no use, when summer comes, me praying for a sunny day for my outdoor bar-b-q, if I don't believe that God intervenes in the daily weather patterns. The farmer up the road might well be praying for rain. More seriously, others might be praying that there are no more floods. I would be more honest to God praying that my lifestyle had less impact on global warming. What we believe about God, will inform our prayers. Otherwise, we delude ourselves.

Jesus is praying in the wilderness. He prays to his Father in heaven. But he has a choice. The choice is presented to him as a temptation. Whether this temptation is from some personal force of evil or whether from the effects of hunger and heat in the desert, you decide. But the choice, the temptation is to pray for those things, in which he, Jesus, does not believe.

The temptation for Jesus is to seek after those things which will bring him personal power, glory and gain. If he is the Son of God, if he is indeed influential and in some ways, if he is filled with the kinds of properties which will attract people to him, the temptation is to believe, 'I'm worth it', to borrow a modern slogan.

Evelyn Underhill writes:

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So, Jesus is, in this famous encounter, trying to harmonize his belief – what he believes God's purpose is for him – with his prayer.

Evelyn Underhill, in my Lent book, goes onto write about, the three 'evangelical counsels' – I didn't know what these were – until she explained them. But you will have heard about the three evangelical counsels. They are the monastic vows. Poverty, chastity and obedience. I'm not suggesting we all take them on for Lent – but Underhill does suggest poverty, chastity and obedience, might have relevance to us in our daily life.

Poverty, she writes, is not just about giving away all your possessions to enter a monastery. Poverty can have an internal quality – it can be an attitude of mind. Poverty:

frees us from possessions and possessiveness ... [it] does away with the clutch of 'the I, the Me and the Mine' upon our souls.

And perhaps Jesus is trying to do away with the clutch of the I, the Me and the Mine on his soul in his first temptation.

'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' ⁴ But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

Underhill writes this about chastity. It is not about removing yourself from marriage, she says, but about 'single-mindedness, purity of heart.' She talks about wasting time and energy on unhelpful relationships. I guess

she means, how do we choose to spend our time and resources? She even questions unnecessary meetings – note to self! In other words, how do we choose to use our time; what is of God; what is not wasteful? What is purity of heart?

I was reminded when I read this of the marriage and relationships report. It refers to chastity as having a root in purity. Are our relationships, whether friendships, business, romantic, or church, filled with the chastity of self-giving love which characterised Jesus? If they are, they are full of chastity. So, we could all do with some more chastity in Lent.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down ...

But Jesus is not to be tempted into wasting time or energy on such stunts which do not build relationships of chastity.

And obedience. Underhill writes, obedience is:

The total surrender of our wills, which are the greatest obstacles to our real self-giving to God.

Perhaps this is the toughest of the three evangelical counsels. Tough to imagine, as Underhill writes, that 'Obedience means more freedom not less, for it lifts the burden of perpetual choice.'

As I said, Jesus was being tempted. Two choices. To follow God's will or his own. Obedience deals with the temptation head on and asserts the choice for God. Freedom from me first, selfish love. But let's not pretend that for us, it's an easy choice which isn't subject to temptation each day, or each hour. For Jesus – obedience.

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'

His prayer and belief have fitted together like a hand and a glove.

The quotations from Evelyn Underhill are taken from 'Lent with Evelyn Underhill', Ed. G.P. Mellick Belshaw, New York, 1990.