Session 4 Improving our prayer lives

Talk: Listening to the Spirit

So, this evening we move from ‘the theological’ to ‘the practical’. From an understanding of the scope of the work of the Holy Spirit, to exploring\* how do we do this? How do we recognise the work of the Holy Spirit in our daily, ordinary lives? And then, how do we join in? How do we say ‘yes’, cooperate – even be guided by the Holy Spirit – so that we may indeed become more like Jesus - which is, of course, why we have been given the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Jesus) in the first place?

Well, first let me show you a little video\*.

And the reason for the video, is that it illustrates the key point that I want to make tonight which is – ‘noticing’\*. This is how we ‘keeping in step with the Spirit’. It isn’t that you or I (once to we turn to Christ), that we need another experience of the Holy Spirit necessarily! (Or need to do ‘good things’ to earn or attract the Holy Spirit’s attention!)

If the Holy Spirit wants to encounter us in new and startling ways– that’s wonderful! **But it’s not the point** – for once we have turned to Christ, we have already received the gift of God the Holy Spirit within us! (End of story!) It’s simply now that, we need to become aware of, (and to become skilled in), noticing the Holy Spirit, who is already at work within us, once we have given our lives to Christ.

So, how do we notice? Well, this is the topic we’re going to explore this evening (and I have some practical stuff for you to have a go at).

So, how do we listen to the Holy Spirit? How do we seek to work with the Holy Spirit, who is already active in our lives? Well, the answer is alarmingly simple – we work with the Holy Spirit, as we simply seek to take time to notice the presence of the Spirit in our inner experiences.

Whether, (on the one hand) we are being led by the Holy Spirit, and thus we have the desire to love and serve God and others, (in which case our thoughts and actions tend to be loving and peaceful).

Or, as we take some time to stop and listen to our hearts (what is really going on within us), we sense that instead, we out of ‘sync with the Spirit’ - that is, we are moving away from love and service (which is then revealed our actions which tend to be anxious and selfish).

I’ve heard of these two experiences, [one of going with the flow of the Holy Spirit and the other as swimming against the tide of the Holy Spirit] described as ‘good moods’ and ‘bad moods’ – but that doesn’t quite ‘get’ what’s going on here. For, it isn’t so much that, in our bad moods, we’re just feeling a bit grumpy and we need to snap out of it! No, what we are talking about here is becoming more skilled in our awareness of the Holy Spirit at work within us – and of taking time to simply listen - so that we can discern where we (and the Holy Spirit) are up to and can actively respond - and therefore keep in tune with the Holy Spirit who is always at work within us!

So, let’s begin with - when we sense within ourselves that we’re moving away from God and the service of others. A sense that we are acting in opposition to the Holy Spirit. What can cause this? Well, although we may sometimes know ‘precisely why’(!) - if I’m honest, sometimes (often) we’ve no idea, how or why we got here! Cos we, and our lives, are really complex and our past and present are often such a muddle.

BUT, I believe (and this has been the experience of Christians down the centuries) that after a time of prayerful reflection (and that’s what’s important here) we can (and we will) get some insights, as the Holy Spirit reveals to our spirits; where we’re up to, how we’re doing, what we’re doing right – and what might be stopping us from keeping in step with the Holy Spirit now. Especially if we reflect, over time, we might even be able to spot a pattern – and that’s quite empowering, quite exciting!

So how? How do we do this?

Well, let me explain (in a little more detail) a prayer exercise that I have mentioned before, a tool called ‘the Examen’. And right from the start I need to underline that what I’m presenting to you now isn’t a magical formula! This is simply a way to be still, to give our attention wholly to God and ourselves, a time to ask specific questions – questions that will enable us to notice (and to review) what the Holy Spirit is up to within us.

And the joy of it all is that “it ain’t rocket science”! As you will see! But what makes ‘the examen’ radical is that, it isn’t so much a prayer that we say, instead it is an activity that the Holy Spirit and I do together - it’s a place where we meet!

Now an examen can take all manner of forms, but at its most fundamental it contains five movements (and usually the whole examen takes just 10 and 15 minutes to complete) \*:

* **Give thanksgiving.** I begin by giving thanksgiving for all of the things I am grateful for today. I allow my mind to wander as I reflect on the ways God has blessed me on this particular day. I allow big things and small things to arise – everything to the gift of my faith, to the gift of my friends, to the easy commute to work today.
* **Ask the Holy Spirit.** Next, I want to look at the moments in my day, when thinks didn’t go so well. But rather than actions, we’re looking at attitude of heart here. So, before doing this, I ask God the Holy Spirit to lead me through this time of soul-searching. Otherwise I’m liable to be a bit oblivious, to hide in denial, to wallow in self-pity or seethe in self-loathing. So here, we’re looking at direction of travel, an overall mood, to our attitude of heart.
* **Review and recognise my failures.** As I look back on my day, I ask the Lord to point out to me the moments when I have actually failed God, in big ways or small. I take time to take a sobering look at the mistakes I have made this day, in the light of God’s merciful compassion I own them.
* **Ask for forgiveness and healing.** If I have sinned, I ask God for forgive me and set me straight again. I ask for wisdom about any work of restoration that I need to do to those I have hurt. I do this in order to move on, that I might discern how I might better handle such tricky moments in the future.
* **Pray about the next day.** I ask the Holy Spirit to show me how tomorrow might go. I imagine the things I’ll be doing, the people I’ll see, the decision I might have to make – and I ask for God’s help. And I especially ask for help in moments when I might be tempted to fall in the way that I did today.

Five simple movements in prayer – all to one aim to live in tune with the Holy Spirit, so that the Spirit can direct my life.

But, just a few tips to get you started\*:

1. Keep it short.

As I said, your daily examen should take about 10-15 minutes and no longer. This isn’t supposed to be ‘heart-surgery’ instead it’s designed to be a simple in-the-moment check - in that reminds me of the presence of the Holy Spirit within me – and re-orientates me towards him. Remember in our relationship with God - it is God who does almost all the work. God who always takes the initiative. Our job is simply to be ‘still enough’ to consistently say ‘yes’ and to try to stop ‘running away’ both from ourselves and from God. And ‘the examen’, as we do this daily and quickly, is specifically designed as a tool to help us to do this. Keep it short.

1. Dwell on the parts that really move you.

The aim of the examen is not to cover everything, everyday! Instead as we pray, maybe the Holy Spirit will reveal just one thing that you need to be grateful for, or one challenging attitude of heart that is that causing you to struggle with someone, now. For today, stick with that (that amazing, humbling, liberating insight) – it is the Holy Spirit guiding you!

1. Sometimes break the rules.

Remember the Examen is a tool. It’s not a way to get into God’s good books. God will never love you more than he does now. And he will certainly not love you less, if you miss your day’s examen. On a busy day maybe: thank you for… Forgive me for… and Help me with… will suffice. Doing the examen is not yet another rule you need to follow – but it will help!

1. Don’t get stuck on sin

The purpose of the examen isn’t for us to wallow in how dreadful we are. Instead, its purpose is to encourage. To remind us of the closeness and love of God. How God has invested ‘his all’ in us (literally). And yet, one of the marks of Christian maturity is a deeper appreciation of just how sinful and how much in need of God grace we really are, and of how we can never hope to deserve or earn this grace – but have to solely rely upon the unconditional love of God. But the amazing news is that - this is what we have (the unconditional love of God) – and the examen is designed not only to reveal this but to enable us to live-out this truth (this love) in our daily lives. So, as you complete your examen don’t get overwhelmed with how messed-up you are – God already knows and he has a plan.

1. Write it down.

I have found journaling to be a marvellous help in my experience of the examen. But here’s the catch: I never write more than a word, or a phrase or – at most- a tiny paragraph. And why would I encourage you do this too? Well, writing what I have discovered (briefly) helps me distil (helps me to chew over) what I believe God is saying to me, as I’m receiving it. Brevity stops this prayer becoming a ‘virtuoso performance’ - but I’m still recording what has been said, so I don’t loose or forget it (Cos in my experience God’s discernment is like gold-dust). Also writing it down, (actually putting it down in black and white) (especially when I realise that I’ve sinned against someone), I’ve found helps me stop living in denial and spurs me to action.

1. Do it so that you can review it.

This is where writing down the outcomes of you Examen really comes into its own – because then we get to review, to look back upon what the Holy Spirit has been saying to us, over the last days, weeks, months even years. Then we can take such encouragement when we see how God has walked with us through tricky situations (so next time maybe we don’t need to worry so much). How God has been working through some of my attitudes of heart – so that now I realise why that person, who just used to infuriate me, doesn’t now get under my skin so much. It’s all because the Holy Spirit is at work now, in both you and me.

So, \*now for the next 10/15 minutes – I want to give you the opportunity to give it a go, to do an examen for yourselves.