

Pentecost 2, Proper 7, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's good to be back with you all this morning. I missed you,  
and our life together here at St James.

And in my absence, summer has arrived. The sun is shining, the mosquitos are biting,  
and many of us  
are looking forward  
to time away.

While I was in England,  
I had the privilege  
of visiting a number of different churches.  
One week, it was a tiny church on an island, where Christians have worshipped  
the last fourteen hundred years,  
and I was just one of many pilgrims.  
For a couple of weeks,  
I worshipped at my brother's church,  
an old building, but a parish not so different to this one,  
and then at the church in the next village over, a tiny building  
which has, mounted on one wall,  
a rapier that originally belonged to Sir William Harris, who was high sheriff of Essex in 1598.  
Then it was another parish church where the people from the retreat house where I was staying  
outnumbered the regular parishioners,  
but where their mid week messy church service  
draws twice as many children  
as adult show up for Sunday worship.  
And finally last Sunday  
I was at the early service in the chapel  
at Windsor Castle,  
soaring perpendicular architecture  
and a scattering of castle staff and a few locals.  
I have to say, given the Queen was in residence at the castle, I was a little disappointed that she  
didn't show up!  
Maybe she went to  
the later service.

And as you'll know  
if you've visited other churches when you're on vacation,  
is that while the service may be more or less familiar,

there are always a couple of things  
that catch you out.  
So you can never really relax  
into worship.

Which may be a good thing - sometimes our services are so familiar that we can pretty much say  
the words without paying attention.  
Or it may be a distraction: we find it hard to concentrate on praying  
when we keep stumbling over those slightly different words and music.

And sometimes  
that throws us on our own resources to pray.

And that's where  
today's psalm  
comes in.

Because this psalm  
is in many ways  
a model for prayer.

When we are children  
the way we are taught to pray  
is often very simple.  
Dear God,  
please bless Mommy and Daddy and my puppy and my friends  
and thank you for Spiderman.  
Amen.

And when we grow up  
our words might be more sophisticated  
but the content is pretty much the same.  
Dear God,  
please help with this and this and this,  
and - if we remember -  
thank you for that.  
Amen.

There's nothing wrong with that  
but if that's all our prayer is about  
then we are missing something.

Imagine

if as a child  
the only time you spoke to your parents  
was to ask them for something - hopefully with the word please attached -  
and to say thank you.  
That would make  
for a very stilted  
formal,  
distant  
relationship.

And imagine as a parent  
if that were the only way  
you spoke with your children.

No "How was school today?"  
No long convoluted stories  
about which friend is in  
and which is out.  
Not even, as my nephew Lockett sometimes says,  
"Daddy, I'm feeling a bit worried."

All of those ordinary  
everyday conversations  
are what make up  
our relationships.

And it's the ordinary everyday conversations  
that are at the heart of prayer.

Prayer is not just  
"Please God,  
can you do this and this and this,  
and thank you for that,"  
prayer is a conversation.

It's more like sitting on the back deck  
on a lazy summer's afternoon,  
enjoying cool drinks  
and conversation.

It's more like the rambling chat  
you have over a meal.

It's more like  
saying to someone,  
"I love you."

And that's what our psalm is today.  
A conversation  
between the speaker  
and God.  
Of course,  
we only see  
one side  
of the conversation.  
We only see  
the human side.  
We have to guess at  
the other side, we have to guess  
what God is saying.

But perhaps that's  
exactly what we need.  
Because for us to learn to pray,  
for us to grow in our conversations with God  
we don't so much need God's side of the conversation  
as we need an example to follow  
of our side.

And it's interesting  
that this prayer  
begins just  
as we might expect it to.

Bow down your ear, O LORD, and answer me,  
for I am poor and in misery.

Dear God,  
I'm in trouble.  
Please  
can you answer me.

And what we would expect,  
what I would probably be most likely to do next  
and I suspect you might too,

then we would expect  
 a litany of the ways the pray-er  
 is in trouble,  
 and a plea to God  
 to fix it.

But that's not where  
 the psalmist goes.  
 Instead  
 what we hear  
 is what the psalmist most deeply  
 wants to say to God.

Keep watch over my life, for I am faithful;  
 save your servant who puts his trust in you.

Not, I am poor and in trouble  
 and can you fix it,  
 but simply,  
 keep watch over me.

And it reminds me  
 of those words of Christ that we heard today,  
 “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from  
 your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more  
 value than many sparrows.”

Or earlier in the gospel of Matthew,  
 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or  
 about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than  
 clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet  
 your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by  
 worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider  
 the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in  
 all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which  
 is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of  
 little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or  
 “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your  
 heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and  
 his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Of course God  
 will keep watch.

The psalmist doesn't have to ask.  
 All he has to do  
 is trust in God,  
 and that's exactly  
 what he is doing in this psalm, this prayer.

As we see in the next couple of verses.  
     Be merciful to me, O LORD, for you are my God;  
     I call upon you all the day long.  
     Gladden the soul of your servant,  
     for to you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

These are  
 the psalmist, the pray-er's  
 words of trust.  
 You are my God.  
 I belong to you.  
 Words that we too  
 can speak.

And then the psalm shifts,  
 and it seems as though  
 God has entered  
 the conversation.  
 We don't know  
 what God has said,  
 but we can see  
 the prayer change.

Because where the first part was all about the psalmist's choice to trust God  
 almost as if  
 he was trying to convince himself,  
 the second part  
 the psalmist is sure. God will watch,  
 God will act.  
 Because God loves him.  
 God loves all those  
 who trust in him.  
 It's not so much  
 that God has done something directly  
 to fix his situation  
 as that this conversation with God  
 has resulted in the psalmist having new confidence,

new certainty, new hope.

For you, O LORD, are good and forgiving,  
 and great is your love toward all who call upon you.  
 ...for you will answer me.  
 Among the gods there is none like you, O LORD,  
 nor anything like your works.  
 All nations you have made will come and worship you, O  
 LORD,  
 and glorify your Name.  
 For you are great; you do wondrous things;  
 and you alone are God.

And that continues through the psalm,  
 on through the verses  
 that our lectionary had us skip over.  
 The psalmist  
 has met with God.  
 They have had a conversation.  
 And the result is  
 new confidence,  
 new certainty, new hope.

So that when we get to the final two verses,  
 when the psalmist  
 goes back to those original please for help  
 they sound different.  
 Have mercy on me, gave me strength, show me your favor -  
 because you already have.

It's a conversation with God,  
 a conversation  
 that we have the privilege  
 of overhearing,  
 overhearing  
 not only the pleas for help  
 but the trust,  
 the faith,  
 and the new confidence and certainty and hope  
 that comes  
 from that conversation with God.  
 And a conversation  
 that we are invited to join.

Dear God. This is me.  
This is what's going on in my life.  
This is how I'm feeling.  
Thanks for being part of it.  
Amen.