

Friend At Midnight

Luke 11:5-11

In late 2022, you will recall that the Community Choir and parts of the school choir were asked to learn some songs from a Ukrainian opera singer living in Glasgow, as part of the BBC filming a special concert highlighting the way that Aberfeldy was welcoming others from Ukraine.

The Community Choir were singing, many of you were due to be attending, and because the original person who was asked to host said "no", I was asked to compere.

15 minutes before the start to the concert the Producer of the show took me aside, and said "I need to let you into a secret that absolutely nobody knows; this whole concert is a charade because the big purpose of tonight is to award the whole town of Aberfeldy a Scotland's people award, and none other than Jackie Bird is hiding backstage, and nobody knows this..."

And I thought to myself "You're wrong, absolutely everybody in Aberfeldy and beyond knows that Jackie Bird is here tonight".

There are two things going on in this story - the first is the determination of a small town to show hospitality to complete strangers, indeed to open their homes to people whose language or culture they did not share, but with whom they were united in being human.

And the second is that there are few secrets in this part of the world - not least because I had inadvertently blurted it out here from this very spot a few days before that Jackie Bird was coming to town; with Anna swiftly telling me to keep my mouth shut.

I want you to think about a middle Eastern village, even today a Middle Eastern Village, And I want you to think about the value of hospitality, ramped up by 1,000s. Even today, in Aberfeldy we hosted something like 150 Ukrainians, the country of Lebanon today is hosting 1.5 million Refugees. Hospitality to the stranger is huge.

And also I want you to think about gossip, and sharing of information, and pressure to do the right thing, because everyone will know what you are up to.

Now I want us to think about this Middle Eastern Village, because that is where Jesus is taking us when he teaches us about prayer.

When Jesus wants us to understand prayer, he wants us to think about the life of the village.

It is late at night, in fact it is midnight, and remember that in the Middle East, midnight really is midnight, because the sun goes down close to six. It's also a time when a lot of people travel because of the heat of the day.

And a stranger comes into the village, he has arrived from far away, he has been walking, say from Killin or perhaps Dunkeld, and he is tired, and he knows one house, so he goes to the house of his friend; and he knocks on the door, and when he has knocked on the door, the friend has to get up, he has the children around him in the same room, so he has to step around them, and the chances of not every hand being stood on, or even standing on the hens or the lamps, are slim, and he makes it to the door, and he recognises the face and he says one word "Friend!!!!";

And then he knows, the friend doesn't even ask, he must get some bread to set before his friend - in those days bread was like a dip, but this was a poor household, and they have run out of bread; there is no bread, so they are already getting ready for the fact that there is going to be no breakfast, and that is a great excuse - you have arrived unannounced, we have no food, but you will still be fed.

So this man knows who used the village oven that day, and he knows the house, he knows where the bread is, and he knocks on his door, and this is the point that Jesus asks us to imagine the scene.

Which one of you having a friend coming to you at midnight, when that friend knocks on the door, and asks for three loaves of bread for his other friend, would say "Do not set labour before me; for the door is already locked and the children are already in bed", and every peasant says this knows that this is would an absolutely appalling thing to say, because the code of hospitality is such that locked doors and sleeping children are feeble excuses with the expectation of hospitality, the sense of shame and gossip that would ensue if you did not get this friend something to eat; in fact even know, everyone in the village is also woken up and they can hear scene.

So the man gets up, not even because he is his friend, but because of his sense of shame.

The sense of same is this - that our village has standards, our village will keep to the code where the stranger is looked after, that is what happens in our village, and if this does not happen, if I am known to be the one who has broken the code, then I will be shamed, and the village will be shamed. So that sense of shame, of honour, of what must be done, drives this man out of his bed, knocks him into the kids, goes and gets the loaves of bread that were cooked that day when it was their turn to use the oven, and he gives the bread.

And this is what it is like for God.

In fact God does it out of love

God does it out of a sense that in God's house, this is how things will be done

God does it because God has bread

God does it, because God wants to the house that you go to when you need bread.

And no matter your own sense of friendship

No matter your own sense of honour

God has this abundantly more

And God wants you to come to him, because really really cares that in his village, the stranger gets looked after.

Ask and it shall be given to you

Knock on the door and it shall be opened

Seek and you shall find

This is what happens when you live in God's village.

So the question here, is, do you live in God's village?

And who else lives in God's village?

Are there poor people living in this village, God's village?

And this prayers spurs us on, because they have come to us, that we might go to God.

And are there refugees in our village, and they have come to us that we might go to God.

And are there people who are aching who live in God's village.

When that friend is fed at midnight, what happens on the surface is that he is fed.
But what really happens is that honour is kept
The honour of the first man who arrived a stranger
The honour of the second man whose house he arrived at first
The honour of the third man who opened the door.

What really happens here is a network...
What really happens when we pray, is we move into God's sense of connection
We move into God's love
Yes, the world may change, and the world may be changed through prayer
But what God's on even more is that our heart is enlarged.

In a chapter on prayer, the author Brian McLaren tells a story in West Maryland, by the Potomac river of him finding a wood turtle, which are his favourite kind of turtle, with their beautiful shell, and inquisitive and intelligent nature.

And one day he was going by the road, when he saw a turtle but the side of the road, it's shell cracked, liquid coming out of its body and it gasping for breath.

And he sense as he looked into the eyes of this creature - and I do not think I understood this story until we had a Spaniel - and he senses that not what he is to do is to try and heal this creature, nor even to inspect its wounds, nor to put it out of its misery, but to hold it, that in its last few moments on this earth, of being part of the community of the alive, it will have another creature with it.

And after a few more minutes of breathing, the turtle died, and McLaren buried it in a grave at the side of the road,

And if you think this story is a story about hippy new age nonsense, about turtles, from an author like McLaren who is a bit dodgy anyway, then remember Jesus said of the sparrows, not one of them falls from heaven without your heavenly father knowing, and consider the birds, God feeds them, and consider the lilies God clothes them, and how much more does God care for you.

In God's village, you want to know how much everything matters
Consider that the sparrow matters
And the lily matters
And the stranger matters, even when they arrive at an inconvenient time.

And God wants you to go to his house, to ask for help.

And then we ask the question... How big is the village?

Which sounds an awful like a question that Jesus was once asked - who is my neighbour?

How big is the village, it contains Dull and Weem and Coshieville and Donafuil and Kenmore and Grandtully, and Strathtay and Pitlochry and even Perth.

And it contains Perth

And it contains Gaza and it contains Kharkiv

And it contains Jerusalem and Tel Aviva

And it contains Tigrai and Irob People.

** Or these people here from the Central African Republic

*** Or these people here in St Ced's road

And this is the village and we are asked to pray.

And I think of my friend Alison, who I talk about quite often,

But she seems to have a heart for everyone - for Rima her adoptive daughter

And Hyab the Sudanese refugee who is now an academic

And the people of Gaza who are her academic friends

And I am sometimes thinking, I am exhausted by the number of people you care for

And she prays for things to change

She prays for policy to change in the home office

And for some some kind of peace in Gaza

And I am scared to pray with her, because I am afraid that God will say - sorry the kids are in bed and the door is bolted

Alison seems to live in a different kind of village from me

And her picture of God's house is a bit different from mine.

Prayer it seems is recognising what kind of village we are in

Recognising where God's house is

Being the kind of person that the stranger might come to first

And then asking and seeking and knocking

It's that simple

AMEN