



SESSION 3

Expecting Christ in prayer

Hopeless at prayer

'Things ain't what they used to be!' We're all prone to wallow in nostalgia. I heard of a priest who thought himself young but then found himself coming out with phrases such as: 'Well, in my day ...', or 'Well, when I was trained, and trained properly, mind you', or, 'Well, when I was a curate ...' I suppose I've reached that certain age, both in my life and in my ministry, when I too am tempted to pronounce on the past golden age which was my day. But all I can say with any certainty is this:

After 30 years' ministry, I am absolutely appalled ... how hopeless I am at prayer!

There's really no excuse. If I were newly ordained, I could hope that I would improve, find more time for prayer once I got the hang of things, read edifying spiritual books, prioritise my life and pray. But after three decades of good intentions I realise that unless a sea change comes along things are not going to get much better. There's really no excuse, no excuse at all. 'Will you be diligent at prayer?' I was asked at my ordination. Tut, tut!

'Well, don't worry, you must be good at other things,' I hear people say. That doesn't comfort me at all, since just as a teacher's chief work is to teach, and a doctor's to heal, the chief work of a priest, minister, pastor is to pray, and I should be sacked because I am so bad at it.

'You're not that bad,' I hear others say. 'Hearing you pray is a spiritual

experience.' People tend to say things like that to bishops! But even if it's true it's nothing to do with me, more to do with God taking my impoverished words and thoughts and breathing life into them, a divine lone ranger riding in to sort out the mess that Wilbourne has made.

'Oh come on,' someone else will say, 'There must have been high points of prayer in three decades of ministry. Don't be so hard on yourself, focus on them.'

First of all, I would want to go far further back than my ordination, since prayer is not just for clergy but for everyone. In theory 'religious professionals' are released from other things to concentrate on prayer, but it is not a solo activity. Their praying should be contagious, drawing others into prayer.

And if I'm honest there have been odd moments, glorious moments. When I was just eleven I watched the mass funeral of those poor Welsh children, 116 of them, suffocated when a huge pile of mining debris slid down the mountainside above the village of Aberfan, virtually demolishing the Pantglas Junior School. My little boy's heart went out to them. The mourners sang the hymn *Jesu, lover of my soul*, then unfamiliar to me, but I was so taken with the haunting tune that I tracked it down in my father's *English Hymnal* and played and played and played it on my recorder – I must have driven my parents mad! But I guess through the hymn I felt in some inchoate, unspoken way that God was there in that pain, and that in some mysterious