

Morning Sermon - Wisdom on Sluggardliness

As you may have guessed, today I'm going to be talking about sluggardliness - which is one of those words which you only really come across in the bible. In essence, it means laziness - in the NRSV the 'sluggard' is translated as the 'lazybones' - and it is something that can effect us all, particularly in our affluent western society.

There are a few things I want to talk about this morning; I want to look at the picture painted of the sluggard in proverbs, to get a full view of this sorry individual; then I want to look closely at our own lives, and how - often without knowing it - we can be like the sluggard, particularly in our walk with God; then finally I want to turn our eyes to Jesus, and see how he can help us be less like the sluggard and more like Him.

So, the sluggard. He's an interesting chap certainly, and one of a few 'characters' who appear in the book of proverbs alongside Wisdom, Folly and the adulterous wife. We're told that the sluggard doesn't put in any work, he simply lays on his bed all day - turning back and forth like a door on its hinges, never going anywhere, never achieving anything. He has a vineyard - but it is overgrown. He has neglected it, let it fall into wrack and ruin, so much so that it has become a warning to others about the perils of laziness. Even the ant, we are told, knows to gather in food for the winter and to work for its future survival, but the sluggard doesn't. He prefers to rest a bit, sleep a bit, maybe put on a bit of TV to slump in front of, rather than doing the hard work he needs to sustain himself. He doesn't sound very sensible, does he? And yet he thinks himself clever - cleverer than seven other men in fact! He comes up with all sorts of excuses about why he can't do this or that, thinking himself terribly witty and smart, and often ends up believing his own lies. He is a serial procrastinator, always putting off to tomorrow what he needs to be doing today. He isn't careful about his flocks, he doesn't look after them or even know how they are doing - and he won't get anything from them because of it. He is so lazy he can't even be bothered to lift his hand to his mouth to feed himself, preferring to sit and let the world drift gently by. He is happier enjoying his sluggardliness rather than his food! What's more, even though he has put no effort in to try and plan for his future, to produce a crop from his vineyard, when the harvest comes he is crazy enough to still go out to see how his non-existent crop has done - he craves, but gets nothing, because he put nothing in in the first place. He didn't plough when the season for it came, so come harvest he seeks but finds nothing. And yet, he's content with this, making excuses to himself as much as to those around him about the situation he's found himself in yet again.

As you can see, the sluggard is a very sorry character - he is a bit caricatured and a bit exaggerated as Solomon often did in his Proverbs; he's using hyperbole to make a point. And yet, if we examine ourselves closely we can actually see a lot of ourselves in the sluggard. Now I want to point out at here that this sermon is very much "the pot calling the kettle black", as it were - laziness and procrastination are sins that I'm awful at, and by awful at I actually mean am very, very good at - I'm terrible at doing things in advance, instead leaving them to the last minute. In fact, quite a few months ago I resolved to start writing all my sermons earlier so I could finish them by the Wednesday before I was going to preach, giving me time to practice and learn what I was going to say - and yet this sermon I ended up finishing only yesterday. So, as Louise often says, this is a sermon as much to myself as it is to you this week.

Looking closely at the sluggard is hard, because we can see a lot of ourselves in him. Do you have things that you keep putting off and off, never actually getting around to them? Is your time filled with interesting, fun activities, rather than, say, the menial household jobs that actually need doing? When I was in secondary school I was a master at coming up with excuses for not doing my homework which my teachers would believe. Because I did well in school, they would believe every word out of my mouth sometimes. I lost count of how many times I wasn't able to hand my homework in simply because the printer was out of paper or ink - for weeks on end, sometimes and no-one seemed to mind, least of all me. It can become so easy to make excuses for ourselves, and to think that those excuses are reasonable and rational and don't simply arise out of our own laziness.

The cardinal sin of the sluggard, I think, is neglecting to put the effort in when it is needed - he doesn't plough in season, so has no crop come harvest. What would happen when we retire if we didn't go through the grind of going to work in our younger years? What pension would we have to sustain ourselves? This problem is just as prevalent in our spiritual lives, and in our affluent society it is often far more of a problem spiritually than physically. Putting in the effort, day after day, in our walk with God is really difficult. It can seem impossible to carve out time to spend in prayer, or reading the Bible, in our hectic lives - and yet it is so vitally important. If we simply coast in our journey with Jesus, what will happen when we suddenly need him the most? How can we hear his voice telling us the next path to take if we haven't put the effort in to really get to know him, so we recognise his voice? Or even, if you want to amount to something for God's kingdom and for his glory, how can we achieve anything if we neglect to spend time with him day in, day out? It can be hard to shake off these shackles of neglect, but we need to avoid becoming 'lukewarm' towards Jesus, as He says in Revelation. Many of us are comfortable tithing our money to church - we see what we have as a gift from God, and we give back to him out of it. Yet our time is also a gift from God. What would it look like for you if you 'tithed' your time and gave God ten percent, 2 hours 24 minutes, out of each and every day? How would that change your relationship with him?

At Soul Survivor this year we were fortunate enough to be joined by Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, for a day. One thing that struck me about him is how much of his time he gave to God each day, in private prayer and Bible study. When interviewed in the main meeting about how he stays close to God, he started to tell us about what he prayed for each morning, and as we listened the list just got longer and longer. Another very famous, missional Christian is Brother Andrew who started the charity Open Doors, supporting the persecuted church across the world. In his first autobiography, *God's Smuggler*, he writes about how when he became a Christian he started the habit of spending two hours in the morning praying with God and reading the Bible. If we seriously want to be used by God for his glory, this is where it starts - by spending time with him. Like all relationships, you get out what you put in - and if you put in the time to pray to God and listen to him, learning from his word, then he will do great things in you and through you. But this requires us to see the sluggard in ourselves, and make the effort to cast him out and put God in his place.

Someone else who was not at all sluggardly about his prayer life is, of course, Jesus. In the Gospels we are told about how Jesus would go to solitary places for hours on end to pray to his Father. After the feeding of the five thousand, he goes up onto the mountain to pray from evening until the fourth watch of the night, which was between 3am and 6am. That means he was praying for at least 6 hours straight, probably more. Again, in Mark 1:35-36 we're told about how Jesus gets up early in the morning and leaves the house to pray on his own. He prays from when it was still dark until when Peter had to go out looking for him because everyone was wondering where he was - again, that must have been a long time! And in Luke 6:12 Jesus goes out onto the mountain and spends the whole night praying to God. Jesus, who is perfect and in constant, eternal communion with the Father, prayed all the time. How much more do we then, who are not perfect and who also need to confess and repent of our sins in prayer - how much more do we need to pray to God? In the Gospels Jesus models a perfect prayer life to us - now it's our turn to try and follow that model.

But this can be so hard! I bet you're all really gloomy now, as I've just put a nearly insurmountable task in front of you. Praying all night? You must be mad! And yes, this is really hard to do. We can't gloss over laziness or sluggardliness, because it is a sin, but being fallen humans we are prone to sin - it is in our very nature. Paul writes in Romans 'I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing!' Please don't kid yourself that you can 'get over' your sluggardliness on your own - your sluggardness about your walk with God or any other aspect of your life. No, for us to banish the sluggard from our lives we need to look to Jesus, who takes away our sins.

In Hebrews we are told that Jesus has become our great high priest. By offering the ultimate sacrifice for us to make us right before God, God made him our ultimate priest - and what is a priest's role? It is to encourage, to minister to, and to pray for their flock. And the new testament says that he is doing just that right now. 1 John 2:1-2 says that 'if anybody sins, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the righteous one'. Hebrews 7:25 says Jesus is able to save us completely because he always lives to intercede for us. And Romans 8:34 says that right now Jesus is sitting at the right hand of the father, interceding for us. You see, he isn't suffering anymore, he's in heaven now, but he isn't just loafing around either. Jesus, ever the antipathy of the sluggard, is still constantly praying for us. We can be inspired by Jesus' example of a full and righteous prayer life in the Gospels, but we can ALSO be encouraged & uplifted by his current and constant prayers for us in the present.

So where do we go from here? We've acknowledged the sluggard in all of us - myself in particular - and we have the example and encouragement of Jesus' prayers to pull us out of our lethargy - but how do we actually do that? Well, here are a few suggestions to start you off - you can thank Jesus for his constant prayers and intercessions for you; if finding time to spend with God is hard, you can examine your week to find space to give back to Him out of the gift of time He's given you; if getting into the Bible is hard, you could pick a short book, maybe one of the epistles, to start to read through; or like many people in this church you could sign up to a daily devotional, to help you with and give structure to your time with God.

However, I know that there are lots of people here who are very good at spending time with God - and for one I'm very glad that you're in our fellowship! If that's you, maybe have a look at what other aspects of your lives you can see the shadow of the sluggard in. Do you put enough effort into your day-to-day work, working as if you are working for God and not human masters as Paul writes? Do you spend enough time with your family, do you honour your parents or your children with your time and your energy? Or are you retired, and maybe in danger of slowing down your pace when you've not quite finished running the good race? Have a think.

In his prayers for all believers - that means us - in the Garden of Gethsemane in John's gospel, Jesus says "I pray for those who believe in me through their [the apostles'] message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you sent me." And that's the crux of it. When Jesus is in us, when we put him front and centre of our lives by spending time in prayer and in his word, giving him the time that he deserves, then the world will believe in him by seeing us - the people of West Kirby will believe in him by seeing us - and will be saved. As a fellowship we have had a new beginning in our newly reordered building, and we'll be having a week to celebrate this with the community and to connect with them in a way we haven't in a long time. Why don't you make this a new beginning in your relationship with God? We want to see this worship space filled, this town transformed through Jesus love, but it all starts with us - by giving the sluggard in our lives the boot and putting Jesus in his place.