‘First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone’.

In nomine…

Nobody considers themselves an expert in prayer. There are people who rightly consider themselves expert liturgists, expert evangelists, expert catechists, theologians, pastors. But nobody, in my experience, considers him- or herself an expert in prayer. Clergy, canons and Regius professors; deans, bishops, and archbishops; monks, nuns and friars; even the most likely candidates – faithful lay people – however long they may have been part of the household of faith, none believe themselves to have their prayer life sorted.

Take the Sisters of the Love of God, an Anglican contemplative community off the Iffley Road. To those of us who visit it, their Convent of the Incarnation is a haven of peace where the prayer feels so intense it is almost tangible. What a refreshment it is to enter those walls and know oneself embraced by a community whose professed purpose is prayer. When I go to preside at the eucharist for the sisters, I always have to make a conscious effort to slow down. I don’t think of myself as a precipitate person, but on entering the Convent I feel hasty: a young whippersnapper in the life of faith, trespassing on holy ground. The funny thing, though, is that’s not what it feels like to the sisters: to them I’m a breath of fresh air. The sisters in their daily life suffer just the same fears as the rest of us: distractions, false priorities, petty resentments and squabbles. Entering the convent I know myself to be in a place where prayer not only has been valid, but is valid still; and yet it is very hard for those who sustain that life of prayer to recognise it for what it is. The grass on one’s own side of the fence always looks brown, full of moss and weeds; elsewhere, we are sure, it is verdant, lush and healthy.

‘I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone’, says the Apostle Paul in today’s second lesson. This is pretty much the mission statement of a place like the Convent of the Incarnation: supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings are made there for everyone; and especially for those of us who fail to make them for ourselves. As I always say to the sisters when I visit, their presence is a huge reassurance to me: when my own prayer life feels perfunctory, when I fail to pray as I should for those who have asked for my prayers, I know that the sisters are there holding my inadequacy. But they say the same thing to me: they need my prayers, your prayers, to hold theirs. Even communities devoted to intercessory prayer — especially communities devoted to intercessory prayer — need intercessory prayers to be offered for them. So as we hear St Paul’s words today, we should keep Fairacres, Wantage, Burnham, Freeland and the other monastic communities of our diocese especially in mind.

I guess this should be obvious really. All prayer is offered in the body of Christ as the body of Christ. Prayer is a collective enterprise, not a private one. And, just as importantly, it is not so much our prayer as Christ’s prayer in us: ‘God’s breath in man returning to his birth’. That phrase of George Herbert is marvellously rich. Prayer is the breath of God in us, it says; but more than that, the Holy Spirit breathed on us in Christ returns us to the peace in which we were made: the birth of humanity before the advent of sin. The prayers we offer are God’s breath in us and as we utter them we taste something of the sweetness of the union with God for which we were made.

Our prayers – our ‘supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings’ – then, are valid only as they share in the self-offering of Christ. Perhaps that seems to set the bar very high: our prayers will only be prayers if they are Christ-like. In fact it’s almost the opposite: it sets the bar low. Because Christ came to be one with us in our humanity Christ-like prayer is not something difficult or distant. Christ came to be us-like, that we might be Christ-like; and therefore Christ-like prayers will simply be natural to us if we can embrace the full, true humanity he invites us to share.
‘There is nothing in all creation so much like God as stillness’, said Meister Eckhart. Sometimes the last word is translated ‘silence’: ‘There is nothing in all creation so much like God as silence’. ‘Stillness’ is better, but either way what Eckhart is getting at here is neither stasis nor the absence of speech or noise. What he is getting at is the blessing of shalom, the divine peace and grace which at rare moments floods our being. It does not come on demand; it does not come often; but it must be looked for, attended.

In the second century document known as the Protogospel of James there are many to my mind rather unedifying stories amplifying aspects of the life and work of Christ. But among them is a wonderful meditation on the moment of Christ’s birth. ‘Joseph has gone off to find the midwife; Mary is still in the cave. And as Joseph is walking into the village, suddenly everything stops. Joseph himself relates how he sees a shepherd in the field dipping his bread into the pot, his hand arrested halfway to his mouth; a bird in mid-heaven halted as it flies. For a moment everything stands still, then movement begins again and Joseph knows that the birth has happened in that moment of absolute stillness’ (Silence and Honey Cakes, p.111).

That meditation – for that, I think, is what we must call it: not an account of an event but a meditation on an event – that meditation bears a striking resemblance to another stillness over nineteen centuries later: the stillness of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 1914. Alfred Anderson’s of the Black Watch described it thus:

I remember the silence, the eerie sound of silence. We all went outside the farm buildings and just stood listening… All I’d heard for two months in the trenches was the … whining of bullets in flight, machinegun fire and distant German voices. But there was a dead silence that morning, right across the land as far as you could see. We shouted ‘Merry Christmas’, even though nobody felt merry. The silence ended early in the afternoon and the killing started again. It was a short peace in a terrible war.

Both those stillnesses bring one face to face with reality: with what matters most in the scheme of things. They are still with the stillness of Christ.

Stillness, it seems to me, is the thread that runs throughout Jesus’s life and work, his death and resurrection. Not that Jesus never moved: both literally or figuratively clearly he moved a great deal: teaching, healing, acting with justice and compassion. But even in casting out the money changers, even in Gethsemane, even in his words from the Cross, the stillness, the shalom of God, is tangible. Crux stat dum volvitur orbis – ‘the cross [of Christ] stands still while the world turns’.

We are right not to consider ourselves experts in prayer. How could we when what prayer asks of us is identification, union, with Christ: sharing in the stillness that unites God and humanity? But we are not called to be experts in prayer. We are simply invited and called to put ourselves in the place of Jesus. To put aside our inhumanity – which very often takes the form of the desire to be expert and in control – and instead to share a little more fully in the abundant life that is Christ’s true humanity. In the words of Rowan Williams:

Prayer is God’s work in us. It is not trying to persuade God to be nice to us or to get God interested in us. It is opening our minds and hearts and saying to the Father, ‘Here is your Son, praying in me through the Holy Spirit. Please listen to him, because I want him to be working, acting and loving in me’ (BC, p.80).

‘First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity’.

In nomine…