

TEACHING NOTES: A Summary of Key Points

'God is in Our Bubble'

Message by Rev. Hamish Galloway

Scriptures: 1 Samuel 9-13, John 20:19-21

This passage from John is a lockdown story and the Bible has many such stories: e.g. Noah, his family and animals in the ark to protect themselves against the flood, the Israelite slaves in Egypt locked down so the angel of death would pass over; the exiles in Babylon, and Jesus locked down in the tomb (to name a few). In each situation there were new beginnings to follow. And God did not desert them; he penetrated their lockdown bubbles!

John highlights five dimensions very relevant to our circumstances:

1. the disciples were in troubling times
2. they locked themselves away to self-protect
3. they were fearful
4. Jesus penetrated their bubble, and,
5. *as they embraced his presence, Jesus brought a longed-for peace.*

The first four things are a given: we are in troubling times and have locked down for self-protection. We are fearful what Covid-19 means now and especially for the future. Yet, God is with us. It's the 5th dimension I want to discuss – how to embrace God's presence in a way allowing us to experience his peace at a deep heart level; the peace Paul says that passes all human understanding (**Philippians 4:7**).

Saul was chosen the first King of Israel due to his outward appearance (**1 Samuel 9**). He was, among other things, a foot taller than anyone else. But it became clear he did not allow God access to his heart. The outside looked good but not so the inside. He became a tortured soul and there is a telling episode in **1 Samuel 13** where God's blessing is no longer able to rest on him, and he seeks another who will have an open heart. Samuel rebuked him (**vv.13-14**). This man was David who was far from perfect but a person after God's own heart! What does that mean? He had an ongoing, honest and transparent conversation with God, warts and all. This demonstrates that prayer must not be superficial but allow God access to our hearts and protective bubbles.

A recent experience on holiday in Australia made me think about this. We were staying at Bondi Beach (which is a very superficial place focused on body and image), and while body surfing one day I almost drowned but was too proud to seek help. I struggled but eventually made it to higher ground, exhausted. How precious we protect our outward image – and how slow we can be to acknowledge we're out of our depth and need help!

I recently listened to a podcast of a highly effective woman CEO who talked about the pressure she felt to be upbeat despite experiencing inner pain. She grew only when the layers of false positivity were peeled back and she began to deal with the pain. Similarly, when we let God into our bubbles of self-sufficiency, everything changes. God is interested in all of us, not just the superficial things. And he wants to engage with us in depth at every point in our journey.

Drawing on the kind of openhearted relationship David had with God, author Richard Foster has a book on prayer; *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. He contends (rightly) we need to be done with superficial living and superficial religion and develop an authentic prayer relationship. His basic message is: God wants access to our hearts (see Michael's 'devices of the heart message'). Foster discusses the kind of prayer that helps us attend to the thoughts, pain, attitudes and feelings in the deep recesses of the mind and heart. These draw us near and bring transformation in us.

Here's a summary of Foster's points:

1. SIMPLE PRAYER - 'Give us today our daily bread' (**Matthew 6:11**). This is the daily ongoing conversation with God which brings him into every moment of our lives unfiltered (I really learned about this in 1987 when I went on a 7-day silent retreat).

2. PRAYERS OF ANQUIISH. This is when circumstances are against us; when we mess-up big time or feel abandoned. We are in good company. Jesus prayed, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (**Matthew 27:6**). George Buttrick sometimes felt he was 'beating on heaven's doors with bruised knuckles in the dark'. And he's not alone; the pages of the psalms are wet with the tears of the writer, and many great Christians from Martin Luther, to St. John of the Cross, to Mother Teresa talk of this kind of prayer. It is tempting to give up but the best response is to honestly cry out to God.

3. THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN (i.e. introspective prompts, as in **Psalm 139**). This has two aspects (two sides of a door). The first is the Examen of consciousness; we discover how God has been present throughout the day. The second aspect is an Examen of conscience in which we uncover areas in need cleansing, purifying, and healing. This forms a habit of bringing good and bad things of each day before the Lord.

4. THE PRAYER OF RELINQUISHMENT. This is Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (**Matthew 26:39**), which, Foster says, is, "a grace-filled releasing of our will and a flowing into the will of the Father. It... moves us from the struggling to the releasing" (p. 47). It can be like falling into the comfort of bed at night after a tough day.

5. FORMATION PRAYER. 'Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel' (**Jeremiah 18:6**). I love the song, 'Spirit of the living God / Fall afresh on me / Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me / Spirit of the living God / Fall afresh on me.' This is about vulnerability and change through an ongoing conversion with the Holy Spirit.

6. COVENANT PRAYER. 'Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.' (**Daniel 6:10**). There are several patterns of prayer (e.g. Daniel) seen in Scripture and in the lives of Christians. The key is commitment to a pattern, a rhythm, and quality time set aside to talk and listen.

Questions to ponder

1. Why is it sometimes difficult to be open and honest in our prayer life?
2. How are you doing in each of the above areas? Which ones need most attention? Bring these before the Lord.