

## ***St George's Church***

1 Kings 8:22 – 30    Heed our cry that your eyes may be on this house night and day  
Romans 12: 9 – 16    Ardent in spirit, serve the Lord, persevere in prayer  
Luke 18: 1 – 8        Parable about need to pray always and not to lose heart

I thought I'd start by very briefly reminding you all of what's brought us to this point today.

Our starting point was a church that was physically cold and unwelcoming and remained cold even when the heating system was working flat out.

We as a church community were pretty fed up with that, and had a yearning for a church that held the heat better, and was a warmer and more welcoming space.

We wanted a warmer church to be, not only a gift for future generations of St George's worshippers, but also for the church itself to be a place that was valued and used by the community.

We also thought that we should try to make improvements that were caring to the environment.

But as good as these ideas felt, we as Christians knew that it was all pointless effort if it were not God's will.

So we set aside time to pray about it, we set aside a whole day of prayer to ask God, is this just our desires, or have you put this yearning into our hearts. Our prayer was like King Solomon's that Kim read out just now, *O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today;*

*<sup>30</sup>Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place;*

Discernment, working out God's will, is a tricky business and can be exasperating.

Why God don't you just make it obvious?

But as Elijah had to learn, God speaks in the stillness, in the quiet of our hearts rather than in the big, brash and obvious. Each of us on our spiritual journey needs to learn to listen with our spiritual senses.

The conclusion of our discussions and prayers was, we believed, a green light, so we went for it.

We set up a project management group and began grappling with the technical detail.

We launched the project in November 2009 and started fundraising in earnest.

This congregation did a superb job and immediately put their money where their faith was.

But beyond ourselves, I think the summary of the story for almost the next 12 months was headache and struggle.

Tom received no after no after no from big potential funders.

Technically, it got more and more complex, and financially it got more and more costly.

I want to give particular thanks and praise to our project management group who kept going through 12 rounds of punishment and more!

Despite all our best efforts,

by last autumn we were near to the point of defeat.

The ceiling was too fragile to do anything with.

The plan to scaffold and cover the entire outside of the church and insulate under the tiles

was going to cost way more than we could afford.

The scaffolding alone was a six figure sum.

And the windup was that Tom's greatest fundraising success was that he'd raised all the money for the solar panels.

But we couldn't afford to put them up as it was believed that the roof structure couldn't take the extra weight,

English Nature told us that bats were probably hibernating in the roof space and we couldn't touch it,

and the list of negatives could go on.

By early October I was feeling pretty down and the weight of responsibility of having led this journey lay very heavy on me.

I was waking up in the night regularly with my mind spinning with project stuff.

Then came a usual Wednesday morning service in the church, and the gospel reading was the one you just heard.

It begins,

*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.*

It's a story that simply tells us to pester God,

to not give up and to keep banging on the door.

I felt that morning like it was being said to me,

the still small voice was saying that I should turn my worrying and sleeplessness into pestering prayer.

I have to tell you though that I didn't feel enthused.

Part of the problem was that I came to this with personal baggage.

What's the point?

What about all the other times when I've pleaded with God and got no answers?

What about the other times when I felt I was doing what God had called me to and nothing happened.

What about all the times when we pray for family and friends that suffer and they just continue to suffer?

Prayer did stop my Mother dying prematurely!

The struggles of life and that exasperating mystery about God can take its toll on faith.

The more I know of God, the less I feel I know of God.

He, she, that being that we call God is such a great mystery.

R S Thomas said this about God,

*He is such a fast God,*

*always before us,*

*and leaving as we arrive.*

Problem is that God still keeps calling us on.

Throughout the Bible we are given the message to not give up, to be people of courage & faith in amongst all that life throws at us, even when God seems to have abandoned us.

So anyway, nonetheless,

I decided to secretly commit myself to pestering God.

During the day and when I woke up in the night worrying,

I turned it into pestering prayer.

And of course, this isn't just about me,

many others were praying too.

A week or two later a thought came to me,  
one we had rejected early on.  
Why don't we think again about working from the inside and  
replacing the ceiling whilst strengthening the roof?  
I tentatively shared the idea with Bruce.  
He told me he'd been thinking the same.  
Now, although Bruce will disagree,  
I'd like you all to know that I reckon I thought of it first!  
We ran it by the PMG, architect and then structural engineer,  
and before we knew it, we were back on track.  
The option was viable and it was a lot cheaper.

Alongside that we were advised to employ our own bat ecologist.  
He came to the conclusion that it was very unlikely that there were  
bats hibernating in the roof space and that we could go ahead.  
Another barrier fell.  
Also in the autumn John Gardner came on the scene from nowhere  
and immediately jumped into action, joined the PMG and threw  
time, energy and technical expertise into the project.  
The change of circumstances was dramatic to say the least.

But I still didn't tell anyone about the call to pestering prayer.  
Because I still feared that it wouldn't work and that I'd look an idiot.  
By December I was glad I hadn't told anyone because it was all  
hitting the fan again.  
We had a seemingly impossible deadline for getting the solar panels  
up and receiving the government grant.  
The structural work to the roof was proving a nightmare and  
escalating to proposals of over eight tonnes of steelwork.  
Camilla, from Acanthus Clewes Architects, who is here today,  
will confirm what a demanding and stroppy client I became.  
I had her working on the tender package on Christmas Eve,  
and I certainly wasn't preparing for Midnight Mass and Christmas  
Day; I'd just have to wing-it.

Tender package quotes came in at the end of January;  
all of them way above what we could afford.  
The cheapest was £50k above what we could afford.  
At the same time I really got quite ill and lost half a stone in 6 days.

Hannah rang George Carey on the Saturday night and he jumped into action and took the Sunday services.

I was due to tell the congregation the bad news after the Sunday services.

I had continued to pester God, but was at the same time, thinking what a waste of time that had been, and thank goodness I hadn't told everyone about it in some sanctimonious sermon about prayer.

Although I didn't feel well enough to be out of bed,

I dragged myself over to the church to tell the bad news myself.

I feared that some of you might think that I was hiding under my duvet because I didn't have the courage to face the music.

I told the congregation the whole story much like now.

At that point I was pretty much convinced that it was all over.

We'd run out of time and didn't have the funds.

The grant money would be lost and we might now never get this work done.

I finished my spiel and opened the meeting up to questions and comments.

I made no requests for any money;

it was unreasonable and too much to ask.

But to my utter amazement a number of people said that they wanted us to try and raise the money.

I told them that we were out of time and they'd have to raise £50k in 24 hours.

The meeting ended and I went back to bed.

By the Monday morning we had promises of money from about 25 people that added up to about £40k after gift aid.

Stepnell's also kindly agreed to drop their price.

All of a sudden it was a goer.

We signed contracts and we were off!

The rest as they say is history.

The solar panels were put up and working with two days to spare.

And the rest of the works have happened on time and on budget.

I thought I was going to feel ecstatic,

but I just felt relieved for a long time into the work happening.

So finally, what's the moral of this story?

What's my conclusion and my message to you about prayer?

I'm still not entirely sure and I'm still learning.

God remains a fast God who is always ahead of us and seems to be leaving as we arrive.

I do have some conclusions and I'll finish by listing them very briefly.

- All our endeavours are a waste of time if not blessed and guided by God.
- As our verse and project motto goes,  
*Unless the Lord builds the house, the builder builds in vain.*
- We are called throughout the Bible to be brave, to continue in faith through all that life throws at us and amongst it all to keep praying.
- As Bruce read from Romans,  
*Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.*
- Pestering in prayer is no magic formula  
I have no answers to why God occasionally answers prayers dramatically and yet much of the time our prayers seem to fall on deaf ears
- Even when we are doing God's will, we often have a big part to play and there is personal cost and sacrifices to be made for the greater good.
- St Augustine said that we should pray like it is all down to God and work as though it is all down to us.
- Like the story of Adam and Eve, we'd like to eat from the tree that gives us all the answers, but we need to remain humble to accept the great mystery of God and to remain faithful in love, prayer and praise through all that life throws at us.

I would like to ask that we end this sermon with a round of applause,

as praise to God,

and as a thank you, to all our funders and funding bodies,

to our architects, structural engineers, technical advisors,

to Solaris for getting those panels up at such short notice,

to Sam the man, Stepnell's and all the subcontractors,

to those who slept in a tent for a couple of weeks,

to the many who've worked long hours with a generous spirit and in a way that has honoured this place of worship.

To God and to all of you, we say Thank you!

8<sup>th</sup> May 2011