

YOUR FLESH AND YOUR SPIRIT

Matthew 26v41.

A week ago I listened on Radio 4 to a fascinating half hour called "*Travels with Cap'n Bob*". It was about the late Robert Maxwell - publisher, newspaper tycoon and, as it turned out, fraudster. He lived a strange life flying around the world being courted by Heads of State. Peter Jay was his chief of staff on the Mirror Group; in the programme he talked of Maxwell's appetite for, not just food but, action. He couldn't bear an ordinary day. There had to be perpetual high drama. Jay's assessment of Maxwell was of a man with "*a huge inner vacuum*". That was why he needed to pack his life with so much activity.

Over these next weeks I will be looking with you at the theme of "*Your Inner World*". Last week we reflected, as a church, on 2007 and looked ahead into the New Year. But I made the point that life is not first and foremost about events and activities and full diaries. If there is no depth or substance to our life, then our busyness will come to very little and we might end up in a heap on the floor. Yes, how we live on the outside *is* important. But the Bible says that the key to a godly and fruitful life lies *on the inside*.

This morning I want to start the series with some words of Jesus in Matthew 26v40,41: The context is Gethsemane on the evening before His death on the cross. '*Then Jesus returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body (literally 'flesh') is weak."*

Flesh and spirit

Jesus distinguishes between flesh and spirit. When the Greeks talked in these terms they were usually scathing about "flesh" being corrupt and disgusting, and lyrical about "spirit". But this is not where Jesus is coming from. How could He? Jesus Himself was / is the perfect expression of flesh and spirit in a man. He is the Word who became flesh. (John 1v14)

Nor is Jesus issuing a carefully worded statement of dogmatic theology. He is not declaring the final word on whether Man is made up of three parts - body, soul and spirit, or two - body and spirit. It is a simple description of our outer and inner worlds. Our outer world is characterised by "flesh": physical humanity with its strengths and vulnerabilities; our inner world is described in terms of "spirit".

To some people all this talk of spirit is incomprehensible. Their lives are so utterly fixed on the material world that Jesus' words just don't translate. When in government office Sir Geoffrey Howe once quoted these words when speaking to a Russian audience. **The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.** I think it was at a reception with a lavish meal. The translation came out as, "*The vodka is OK but the meat is underdone.*"

To others talk of an inner world is more about loving poetry and books and art and theatre and classical music or thinking profound thoughts. Or it might be used of those who have demonstrated strength of character and great courage by battling against overwhelming odds. So what does Jesus mean when he talks of spirit? It is unlikely that He is talking about God's Holy Spirit.

He is saying that all men and women have the capacity for a spiritual relationship with God. You and I are more than intelligent apes. Instead we are the deliberate loving creation of a Sovereign God. We are made with the capacity to know Him and love Him. But God is Spirit. He is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth. Therefore men and women must be more than flesh and blood; they need a spiritual dimension.

So we are both flesh *and* spirit. We not only live in the material world; we also have an inner world. This is not some fresh revelation on Jesus' lips. We find it throughout the Bible with different words being used.

- 1 Samuel 16v7: The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."
- Psalm 103v1: Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praised His holy name."
- Proverbs 4v23: Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.
- Proverbs 20v27: The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being.
- 2 Corinthians 4v16: Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.
- Ephesians 3v16: I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

Yet Jesus' says: **The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.**

The flesh is weak

There is an everyday tension and conflict between your flesh and your spirit. We see this here in Gethsemane. *Jesus returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."*

The flesh is weak. In particular, prayer is not on its agenda - especially when bedtime calls. Sleeping is what our flesh needs and sleeping is what our flesh is naturally good at! But here Jesus is looking for something beyond the natural. He says "*Watch and pray*" – literally "*stay awake and pray*". Prayer is spirit work. When we are asked to pray our flesh doesn't offer much help. It is drawn to activity in our outer world. Most of us know this all too well. John Piper writes, "*Both our flesh and our culture scream against spending an hour on our knees beside a desk piled with papers.*" This is much more than a matter of temperament.

C. S. Lewis was also painfully honest about this: *“Well, let’s at any rate come clean. Prayer is irksome. An excuse to omit it is never unwelcome. When it’s over, this casts a feeling of relief and holiday over the rest of the day. We are reluctant to begin. We are delighted to finish. While we are at prayer, but not while reading a novel or solving a crossword puzzle, any trifle is enough to distract us.”*

The flesh is weak when it comes to giving attention to your inner world. This is why everyone finds prayer difficult. Even our spiritual heroes! Martin Luther, when asked what plans he had for the day’s work, replied famously, *“Work, work from early till late. In fact I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.”* But even Luther could hit times of dryness. Those close to him knew the agony he went through over prayer. He wrote to a friend from Wartburg Castle on July 13th 1521 while he was supposed to be working on the translation of the New Testament. *“I sit here at ease, hardened and unfeeling – alas! Praying little, grieving little for the Church of God, burning rather in the fierce fires of my untamed flesh. It comes to this: I should be afire in the spirit; in reality I am afire in the flesh, with lust, laziness, idleness, sleepiness.”*

The flesh is weak. As Luther demonstrates we have our own areas of vulnerability. Some we know well, they have been our companions for years. Others pop up from nowhere and catch us by surprise. We need to be aware of the ways in which our flesh is weak. There are even times when we are especially vulnerable – like the disciples in Gethsemane after dark.

This week *Radio Five Live* carried a report about the number of men trapped by sexual addiction. The accessibility of pornography on the internet means that when they should be working, or at night while their wives are sleeping, men are pouring over images of other people’s sexual activity on their PC’s. This is enslaving many men, making them depressed and destroying their marriages. This may not be your area of vulnerability. I pray that it is not. But if we are not to be easy prey to our weaknesses we will need to give more attention to our inner world. *“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. **The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.**”*

In his anguish in Gethsemane even Jesus felt the weakness of his flesh. That is why He prayed. Before He faced the physical, emotional and spiritual agonies of the cross He knew He needed to be strengthened inwardly.

The flesh is weak. Sometimes we exhaust ourselves in our outer world and have no energy left for our inner world. Many of you have such busy lives. You have demanding jobs, difficult people to cope with, studies and exams, financial pressures, health challenges, lively children, complicated relationships, elderly parents and offspring who have left home but who still sap your energy! So many people say: *“I can just about hold all this together. Please don’t load anything else on me! Don’t challenge me about my devotional life!”* The trouble with this is – it is faulty logic. God has made it so that a strong inner world supports your outer world. Without giving time and attention to your inward life, you are more likely to crash.

William Wilberforce wrote: *“This perpetual hurry of business and company ruins me in soul if not in body. More solitude and earlier hours! I suspect I have been allotting habitually too little time to private devotion and religious meditation, Scripture reading etc. I had better allot two hours or an hour and a half daily. I have been keeping too late hours, and hence have had but a hurried half-hour in the morning to myself. Surely the experience of all good men confirms the proposition that without a due measure of private devotions the soul will grow lean!”*

The spirit is willing

Even though the flesh is weak, **the spirit is willing**. It is ready and eager; it is predisposed to pray! As hard as most of us find prayer, we *do* have the desire. The longing to pray and to have a rich inner world is clear evidence of spiritual life.

God’s Spirit is also eager to help your spirit. This is evident as soon as you believe in Christ. Romans 8v16: *“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children”*. And one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, tongues, is specifically designed to help us. Paul writes: *“If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays... I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.* (1 Corinthians 14v14f)

Scripture also connects at the deepest level with our spirit. We can stir our desire for God by memorizing, meditating on and praying back to God Scriptures which explode with desire!

- Psalm 42v1, 2: As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
- Psalm 63v1: O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

We will be exploring this theme further. But today, let’s pray for God’s Spirit to work on our spirits to arouse fresh desire and passion for God. But even when you have made some progress you will still not be satisfied. You always know there is so much more - greater depths and richer experience of Christ.

Even a spiritual giant like Billy Graham writes in his autobiography about his regrets as he looks back over the years. After saying he would speak less & study more and spend more time with his family, he goes on. *“I would also spend more time in spiritual nurture, seeking to grow closer to God so I could become more like Christ. I would spend more time in prayer, not just for myself but for others. I would spend more time studying the Bible and meditating on its truth, not only for sermon preparation but to apply its message to my life.”*

This is the mark of a man whose spirit is still willing. His body may bear the marks of age and sickness – **the flesh is weak, but the spirit is willing**.

John Wilthew. January 2008