

Article

Intimacy and intercession – personal faith and the heart-cry for justice

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?". "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28-31)

Intimacy is a strange word to cause division. But it sometimes feels as if two distinct camps have evolved in the church in response to its presence in our corporate and individual worship and prayer. At the more extreme ends of these schools we find one that is distrustful, and disparaging of the pastime of singing endless 'Jesus is my girlfriend' songs – and another that is suspicious of good deeds masking a lack of true connection to Christ.

One perspective characterises relationship with God as primarily being *intimate* (or *contemplative*) – it is vertical, personal and about praising God for who he is, and concentrating primarily on our relationship with him. The other characterises relationship with God as primarily being *intercessional* – it is still vertical, but it is more preoccupied with relating the horizontal to God – seeing action and prayer on behalf of others as being the dominant focus of faith and worship.

Running after extremes

It seems Christians are experts in chasing after the extremes of good theology – one person argues the need for awe and reverence while another protests the importance of friendship with God; one says we must spend our time getting right with God and ask him to purify our hearts of sin and shame yet one says it's no good being on our knees when we could be on our feet, offering hands of service to demonstrate our love for God through loving others.

Accessibility or awe? Personal relationship versus outward impact. Do these pairings always have to divide us into two schools of thought? Why are we so loath to hold the middle ground?

If only we could unify in the centre and learn from both perspectives. Why is it that churches are generally have a strong focus on intimacy or intercession? Are we missing something?

I have had the immense privilege of knowing Christians from many different churchmanships, backgrounds and theological persuasions. I have learnt from them all, and been humbled by them all. I have also noticed certain patterns in them all, which I see present in myself too, in how they balance their own personal walk of faith with their stance on Christians (and God) intervening in, and transforming, the world.

The extreme of intimacy

There are those whose faith is almost mystical – and very personal. They see God's hand at work in every circumstance in their lives; they bring their every need to Jesus' feet, and have no qualms in asking for what they want because they are assured they are beloved children – intimate friends – of God.

They generally prioritise very intimate worship and there is often a beautiful and tangible sense of God's presence at the kind of churches they gather in – time is made to connect with God and each person is encouraged to honestly examine their walk of faith in the light of his presence.

They are absolutely right.

But sometimes I struggle, because it seems as if our own faith walk can get so large in our viewfinder that we can't see beyond the zoom to the circumstances of our neighbours, the needs of the poor and marginalised, or the world-wide church.

Perhaps we can expend too much energy on seeking God's face just for ourselves, offering up our needs, and asking for guidance on every area of our lives? The Bible verses that come alive to us; the sermons that speak to us most; the songs we choose to worship with; and the endless Christian resources available to us, always give us a new area of our lives to work on, study or press into. But surely there is a wider focus to following Jesus?

I have good friends who love God and seek to follow him wholeheartedly. They are trusting God to provide for them to step into something new which is excellent, good and right - but for themselves. Their faith is astonishing, and challenging. They have seen God use others to bless them with much of what they need, so they are simply believing for – no more than that – expecting the rest to fall into place. And not just finances either – they are struggling with, and trusting for, health situations, work circumstances and conflict resolution in relationships. Every day what they read comes alive with God's promises and their conversations are full of giving thanks for what he is showering down on them; for how he gives the best to his children.

And yet, something is absent; an acknowledgement that this is not always the case and a heart-cry for those facing persecution, famine, or loss. It's not that they lack compassion or are selfish when they see a need, it's simply that their extreme focus on intimacy is crowding out any need that is not in their direct view.

I find I am frustrated, or offended (though it is obviously not my place to be!) that they should be so sure God will give them all these things which are, in reality, extras in life, when other Christians seem to be 'denied' the very basics needed for survival. I know that God is loving and generous, and that he promises good things – but he never promised that everything would be easy.

I recognise myself so much in my friends' experiences though. Sometimes my head and heart are so full with trusting whilst I wait for God to make the next steps in my service to him clear; my amazement and thankfulness at what he's doing in my life; my anxieties about whether I will get enough work to support myself; the fear that I will always be single; my love of spending time in his presence, singing songs of worship to him, and everything I'm learning through studying his word... that I simply have no head space left for anything beyond myself and my immediate circle of family and friends.

I get to the nations too late in my prayer times to have much energy left, or I feel I simply can't take on the burden of carrying compassion for a situation of poverty when my arms are already stacked high with a pile of my own brokenness and breakthrough as I come to God in worship and prayer.

I, like so many others, have run too hard after the extreme of intimacy – forgetting that whilst I am a beloved child of God – I am one of many. When I sing a song of worship to God it is never the only one he is listening to. When I cry out for a miracle, I am never the only desperate one. When I passionately plead for change in my life, there is always someone else's urgent need for breakthrough to bring to his feet too.

The extreme of intercession

And then there are those whose faith is almost stoic – very universal, and outward focussed in its perspective. They see God's image in his children throughout society and grieve, hope and fight in equal measure for breakthrough in endemic suffering, systemic poverty, and the circling traps of corruption or violence that seem to plague particular nations. They bring the whole world to Jesus' feet, with urgency, expectancy and passionate perseverance.

They generally prioritise intercession in their worship and a service which did not consciously take in the wider context of communities in need and nations in crisis would seem incomplete. Time is taken to ensure that the world outside the four walls of the church is remembered and brought before God – and never seen as less relevant than the needs of the hearts gathered within it.

They are absolutely right.

But sometimes it breaks my heart, because it seems as if our compassion for the world's brokenness in all its panoramic and detailed injustice can dominate our outlook so much that we forget, or feel unworthy, to give credence to the pain, delights, or hunger for God in our own hearts.

Perhaps we can expend too much energy on seeking God's kingdom, standing in the gap for others and seeking to be salt and light - giving, campaigning, changing our lifestyles to better serve others, and even on our knees in passionate intercession for our global and local neighbours in need? The Bible verses that come alive to us; the sermons that speak to us most; the songs we choose to worship with; and the endless causes available to us, always give us a new area to pour ourselves out for. But surely there is a time for even the freedom-fighter to come to Jesus' feet and admit they are tired, wounded and troubled themselves?

I had a good friend and colleague who was passionate about justice – articulate, faith-filled and highly intelligent, she had been following Christ for many years. But there came a point in her life when she desperately needed a miracle very close to home. And yet, though she had faith (and stamina!) to fight for the end of worldwide poverty, she struggled to even pray – let alone believe – that God would watch over her and her family. Mindful of the desperate needs of so many other women and their children, this wonderful world-changer could not in all integrity face God and ask for what she wanted. I prayed with her, and for this miracle – and things did turn out as she longed for.

But I felt so sad that she did not really believe God cared for her enough to come through just for her.

I recognise myself in this woman's journey so much. Sure I could pray the prayer for her – after all my own heart for justice and compassion helped me to passionately intercede for someone else. But I have sometimes struggled to believe that God wants good things just for me. Or that he wants to spend time with me as much as he wants me to be out and about his work. I have my own personal longings that I struggle to ask for because I feel I have no right to do so in the midst of so many others (Christian or not) still waiting for the same miracle, or one much more basic or seemingly more important.

I, like so many others, have run too hard after the extreme of intercession. I have forgotten that in a world of need, a thousand generations, and a multitude of children, I am so known and loved that God knows how many hairs are on my head (Matthew 10:30); that he would have died for me alone.

He longs to hear my songs of worship as I pour out my heart to him. He cares about every detail of my day and every deep desire in my heart. His compassion for my pain goes deeper than that pain itself. When I desperately need something to change, he knows that, and is sovereign over that change, and its timing.

Coming back to the middle

Tension is a constant resonance in so many areas of Christianity. Because ‘balance’ and ‘both and’ are at the heart of the gospel. It’s a message of no compromise sure, but it’s also the paradox and symmetry of the now and not yet God-man changing the whole world in a series of very personal and intimate encounters.

Jesus brought freedom from the law – but he also fulfilled it and expressed it perfectly. He saw it as equally part of his mission to preach to crowds (Matthew 5:1-2) and to beckon one woman into a life of worship (John 4:1-26); to give up his life for the whole world, but to offer most of his time and friendship to twelve personally chosen friends; to sit at the father’s feet in prayer, and to be about his business to the extent that the whole world’s books couldn’t cover everything he did in his three years of active incarnate ministry (John 21:25).

The vision of a place where world and worship meet

Back to us then... could the church give up its passion for running after extremes and come back to the middle? A place where world and worship meet and where intimacy and intercession are held as twin goals. Where worship means *both* passionate devotion *and* costly action. Not one or the other. A place where the church unites around supernatural power and practical service.

In the ultimate scene of worship described in Revelation 5-7, the lamb remains centre stage, yet John’s gaze also takes in people of every tribe and tongue, elders, creatures and angels – John experiences an incredible and personally vivid vision – but he is not worshipping in isolation.

I long for us to discover prayer that is at once confident, intimate communication with our Dad, and infused with a heart-cry to him for the fatherless – where we are drawn to his heart, but truly have caught his heart for others. Where extended times of intimate worship find us in the awe and glory of God’s presence, honouring him and falling to our knees on behalf of our neighbours and the nations, whilst his sweet presence motivates us deeper and deeper into lives of devotion and action for him – and his children.

Where in those moments when God feels so close, what we naturally choose to bring before him is more than just ourselves, and we feel as inspired and moved to worship during songs of intercession as we do in the ones that resonate with our own needs for love and fulfilment.

Where passion for Jesus and compassion for the broken truly work together. Where we honestly love God with all our hearts, minds and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Mark 12:29-31) – so much so that we desperately thirst after his presence (Psalm 42:1-2) And where we honestly love others with a mirror of God’s love for us – so much so that we can’t possibly forget about them for long enough to make church just about God and us personally.

Intimacy, intercession and unity

Sure it’s human nature to find intimate worship is more naturally how we relate to God. But it isn’t Christ-like nature – his intimate worship never forgot how mankind related to God.

I don’t want to choose one way or the other. And I don’t want our churches to either. Because it leads to greater division. And because both extremes, and many people on the scale in between, miss out on experiencing the fullness of following God.

We have to wrestle with the contradiction that both sides are right, and allow this to bring us to a place of greater maturity and balance where we love others out of God's strength not our own, but never act like we can love him without loving others (1 John 4:7-21).

Because if I experience a personal miracle of provision, and come to know God as the one who meets my needs, surely it is easier to pray for that provision for someone else – for a nation even – and to trust that if I give in a costly way out of this generous provision, my Father will see that and either provide again, or give me the grace to suffer the lack so many of my brothers and sisters face.

And if I see that God is first and foremost strength to the weary; father to the fatherless; hope for the widow; and refuge for the stranger enough to put my prayers, resources and energy behind supporting this work of his in the world and see this bear fruit – even tiny fruit – then surely it should be an incentive for me to come to him when I feel in need of strength, comfort, hope and safety.

In the place of intimacy we grow in confidence to intercede. And in the place of intercession we focus again on God's character and find ourselves drawn to love, know and serve him even more intimately.

Both testaments tell us not to compare or covet our neighbour's possessions, status or context. It is not up to us to disqualify ourselves from God's love because we judge another needs it more; nor is it for us to promote ourselves as more deserving of God's love because we are so conscious of our own righteousness or need.

We are called to be *both* intimate God-friends *and* interceding Freedom-fighters – equally honest, at home, and focussed on our own desire to follow God, and the needs of others. Just as attentive and passionate when we press into God's face or seek to be his hands and feet.

I long to see a new hymnody that still leads us into the intimate place of praise, but also reminds us to bring the broken with us.

Let's join together and sing this new song - a passionate, united heart-cry of worship to the God who is both the song of our hearts, and the hope of the nations.

Liz Baddaley