Dear friends,

More about prayer...

A couple of pastoral letters ago, I wrote a little about prayer of intercession—essentially, praying on behalf of others. This week I would like to say something about what is called "praying the office"; this may be an unfamiliar phrase to some of you, so I will briefly explain what is meant by it. St. Paul tells us "we should pray without ceasing" (which saintly advice, if not properly understood, might be enough to cause the beginner in prayer to give up before he or she has started). Paul does not mean that you and I should for twenty-four hours a day have our minds utterly concentrated on saying our prayers, thus simultaneously wearing out our knees and our carpets—rather, the deep sense of what he means is that our essential disposition should be prayerful; in other words, our orientation should be upon God. He knows (as does anyone who has tried to pray) that the compass needle of one's soul, which should be pointing towards the Lord, will very easily swing crazily in other directions—there are myriad things which exert this magnetic pull upon us; with the best intentions, we sit or kneel to pray, close our eyes and instead of being filled with devout thoughts, find that we are wondering if we loaded the dishwasher, or whether to have lobster or baked beans for lunch, or whether we wouldn't be making better use of our time by answering those wretched emails...Those things which distract us from our prayers are, as I have said, many—so, what can we do? In a future letter I will look at how to meet distraction in personal prayer (there is no such thing, strictly speaking as "private" prayer as Christians we always pray in communion with the whole church, even when we are kneeling alone at our bedside), but, for the meantime, I will offer a few thoughts about the role of the Daily Office in keeping us constant in prayer.

The Church of which all baptised people are a part, has from the earliest times had a rhythm or rule of daily prayer—Christians regularly gathered to offer prayer, to enjoy fellowship, and to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. The pattern of prayer that Christians first offered was inherited from the Jewish tradition (the first followers of Jesus being, of course, Jews). Though they could no longer
worship in the synagogue or temple, the custom of prayer at regular times continued. In time, Christian communities formed on the foundation of a rule or life of prayer—by which, I mean, of course, the monasteries. The monks prayed at regular times throughout the day and night, and had especial “offices of prayer” based around the singing of the psalms, the canticles, the reading of scripture, and formal prayers. Unfortunately, the complexity of the monastic offices (often sevenfold), made the praying of them impracticable for most Christians, as did the low level of literacy among the people—although we are told that the amount of scripture and other types of prayer that our forebears could commit to memory would be to us prodigious and unachievable! It was perhaps inevitable that the praying of the offices of prayer became the work of the professedly religious (we may note that monks and nuns are often simply called “religious”) and Christians living in the world were not able to pray them, That is not to say that there was not a rich, beautiful and instructive Christian culture (think of the Mystery plays, or the glimpses of the marvellous wall paintings you have seen in our churches), but that the practise of gathering for daily prayers faded. Next time we will consider how the Reformation sought to restore and make inclusive the praying of the office.

Until then...

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Fr Keith
Vicar