

THE RULE OF LIFE – A PERSONAL VIEW

There is a big difference between being told about something and experiencing it oneself. With this in mind I signed up something I had reported on before – a Rule of Life workshop.

I was nervous. Rules sound scary, especially ones which are meant to govern your life. Like new year resolutions it is easy to fall at the first hurdle, to break the rules. Or maybe I had misunderstood...

We met at Wolvesey where, after drinks and snacks, we gathered in the chapel, a quiet, reflective and surprisingly warm place, ideally suited to thought. There were seven or eight of us, led by Sally Dakin, the Diocesan Spirituality Adviser, who created the workshops.

Sally outlined the three dimensions of a rule of life – loving, living and sharing: loving and being loved by God, loving ourselves and others and being loved; living as Christians together, growing together, worshipping together, offering healing and support; serving in our relationships with friends, work colleagues, families and others whom we meet.

Simple – and yet hard, unless of course you bear in mind a vital aspect of this: “It is not about trying to do things to please God. It is about relationship,” as Sally reminded us. That is the crux of the rule of life – it is about relationship with God.

Sally often uses visual aids to illustrate a point, and in this case she gave us twigs to look at and also wound pipe-cleaners around each other to show how we might be “like branches attached to the trunk of a big tree”, receiving nourishment and therefore able to bear fruit. She asked: “How well connected are we to God as the ‘trunk’ and what sustains our connectedness?”. A rule of life, she said “might strengthen that connectedness”, acting as a framework which supports us in the same way as wire might support grapes on a vine.

That framework is focused and flexible – it is for individuals and it may change over time. We are all different and will have a particular calling and specific ways of being fruitful. So we all need an individual rule of life. She added: “It’s not like a star chart on the fridge, it’s about a relationship and sustaining that relationship”.

The relationship with God involves us knowing who we are in God’s eyes, and at the very foundation of that is knowing that we are loved. From there we can build a personal rule of life, working out what is right for us. And it might not involve taking up more things – for some of us it could mean giving things up, pruning back the vine so we can grow. “Daring to say no might be appropriate. You may need to cut things out.” This seemed to resonate with several in the room.

We were then sent off to spend an hour alone, indoors or out, wherever we felt most able to find the peace to listen to what God was saying. There were drinks, books, snacks and props to help us and I spent a happy 10 minutes or so winding pieces of different coloured

ribbon around a black ribbon, with the black representing me and the others everything else in my life. I see in my notes that I asked 'Am I strangled?' and 'Am I taking care of myself?'. Others read, wrote, walked, prayed and in some cases – myself included – spent a few minutes talking through our thoughts with Sally. Speaking to someone can help clarify ideas, challenge or comfort us, give us new ways of thinking.

One thing that became clear is that a rule of life isn't about taking on a pile of new tasks and responsibilities. It is about finding out what is right for each person to deepen their relationship with God and so let this spill over to others. We were certainly challenged to look at different areas and see what we might commit to – but not to overdo it. It is very easy for Christians to run from one thing to another and, as Sally said to us: "If we are over-busy, the relationship with God suffers and the fruitfulness suffers". Perhaps I might keep over-busy as a way of keeping that relationship at bay.

Afterwards we reconvened in the chapel to reflect on the past hour or so, to pray and to repeat the Advent Antiphons – a collection of seven ancient prayers calling on Christ, each using one of his titles from Scripture such as Wisdom, Dayspring, Emmanuel. If you don't know the Antiphons, they are worth looking up.

We also spoke of our experiences and the overriding feeling was that it had been a joy to take time away from the busyness of our everyday lives to try to listen to what God was saying to us, and for many of us this was, as one person said: "I need to look at the list of things I do and see what is fruitful because what we think is fruitful is not necessarily so in God's eyes".

"Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." John 15, 4.

Though it is not necessary to attend a workshop in order to follow a rule of life, it is a useful way of clarifying it and a, for me at least, a chance to breathe. There will be more Rule of Life workshops coming soon and the Lent course – *Sharing God's Life* – is designed for Christian groups to encourage members to create their own rule of life. For further details, contact Sally Dakin: sally.dakin@winchester.anglican.org