

In conversation with Pete Greig



Interview by Jo Swinney

When **PETE GREIG** began praying in his garden shed with some friends as a teenager, he could not have foreseen the global movement that would grow from their passionate but ostensibly insignificant gatherings. Since then, 24-7 prayer has mobilised around-the-clock praying in every corner of the globe, igniting the church with renewed fervour for social justice and evangelism. Pete wrote about the early days of 24-7 prayer in his book *Red Moon Rising* (Kingsway, 2004); his latest book, *Dirty Glory* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2016) brings us up to date. I met Pete in a rooftop terrace café in central London to talk prayer and preaching.





JS You say in *Dirty Glory* that you don't think prayer is often thoughtfully taught on. Why do you think that is?

PG Considering prayer is probably on every page of the Bible in one way or another it's extraordinary how rarely we actually teach and preach about prayer. I think there are a number of reasons [for this]. The first is that so many people, preachers included, carry disappointments in prayer. I remember being invited to speak at a mega-church in Florida on prayer and nothing I was teaching was getting through to anyone. It was really weird. And then the worship pastor took me aside and said 'The pastor's wife had cancer. We called the whole church to pray and fast. They did and then she died.' When the pastor returned from compassionate leave, instead of addressing the disappointment, the wound in the heart of the church – understandably, because he was going through his own grief – he just moved on with a sermon series about Melchizedek or whatever.

And I realised unless we addressed the disappointment in the church, we could never ask them to have faith to ask for anything ever again. The Bible is generally more honest than the church. One of my great challenges to preachers and teachers is to be biblical and honest about the struggles of faith. The word Israel means 'to struggle'. So we are proclaimers of a gospel of struggle. Half the psalms are lament. Let's be honest about the journey of faith and not just provide neat solutions.

There are other reasons: since the reformation we have tended to remove the senses from spirituality; we've legitimised words and some types of music, but how can you limit prayer to mere words? Prayer is this extraordinary subversive activity that embraces all of the senses and sometimes that can be bewildering for preachers.

One of the important things about preaching the gospel is to tell

stories of answered prayer. We need to tell stories that will inspire people to trust God and believe for something different for their current circumstances. Bill Johnson from Redding, California says, 'If you have one story of answered prayer, keep telling it until you have two'. We have to tell those stories.

And then finally, I think we have to address the theology of prayer. I meet people all around the world who say 'I don't really need to pray. If God's really all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing, what difference does it really make?' We need to teach about the reality of prayer as partnership. Blaise Pascale said, 'God has instituted prayer to bestow upon humanity the dignity of causality.' So prayer is a way in which we truly partner in the purposes of God. To put it simply and bluntly, there are things that will only happen in your congregation's life if they pray. It is that important. Many people don't understand that reality.

JS Prayer is not just about asking for things though is it? Prayer is also about communion and friendship with God.

PG One of the prevailing themes of *Dirty Glory* is what I call the ‘presence paradigm’ – this notion that we were created to walk and talk with God, and to be in relationship and that everything flows from that place and back into that place. Ultimately we don’t just pray to get people saved, they get saved so they can pray. Before there was any sin or sickness or suffering Adam and Eve walked and talked with God. About what? Most of us only talk to God about problems and one day we will have no more problems on earth but we will still have a conversation with God. We have to teach people to have a conversation with God in normality and not just in the religious, semi-supernatural realm. One of the things I feel very strongly about is that prayer at its simplest is asking: Karl Barth says that. Prayer at its best is listening. And prayer at its deepest is communion. Somewhere beyond talking is simply being in the presence of God. The great mystics teach us about that and most of us have some of those timeless moments where no words are needed – we’re just with the Lord.

JS The disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. You say in *Dirty Glory* that it is more important to want to pray than to know how to. I guess the Lords’ Prayer was some of the only teaching he gave them other than being with them. What is the preacher’s role in stoking desire – the desire to pray? Can desire be provoked?

PG We must break the notion that preaching is this didactic, word-driven process. The great preacher Robert Murray McShane of Dundee said ‘My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness.’ If you preach with words in a way that is in any way disconnected from your life, you’re not preaching the gospel of Christ. We must preach prayer first by example. People will know if you are prayerful. It was a great honour to serve with Nicky Gumbel for seven years at Holy Trinity Brompton and one of the extraordinary things about him is that he could be anywhere in

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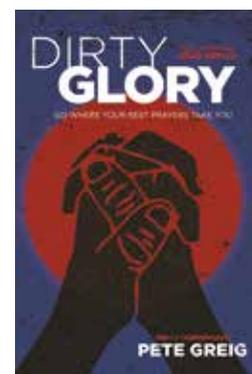
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the world at any given time – he has phenomenal demands upon him – but he’d attend the church prayer meeting and he’d regularly spend several hours in the prayer room with God. It is out of our own practice of prayer that we will preach. Prayer is contagious in that sense. You always know when you’ve spent time with someone who’s prayerful. You catch their hunger. St Augustine said that God rubs salt in our lips that we might thirst for him. So a preacher’s job isn’t just to pour water into people’s throats, but sometimes to rub salt on their lips, to make them frustrated, to leave them with more questions than answers. If you provide all the answers then you’ve swapped places with God. Your job is to provoke the questions for which God is the answer and it may well be that they have to go and receive those answers wrestling with him alone in prayer.

JS You write about a conversation you had with Brennan Manning and how he said that the one hour you spend thinking you are consciously praying is actually the hour that you’re not praying. In the contemplative understanding, conscious prayer focuses your mind on the presence of God and the real prayer is when you live the other 23 hours, mindful of God’s presence. I wondered what you thought about that – if you’d add anything to it? Do you agree with him?

PG I do and I don’t. The 24-7 movement’s theology of prayer is that we are all called to be temples of the Holy Spirit, to be arks of the covenant, to be carriers of the presence of God. We are called to incarnate the presence of God, in streets, in hospitals, in schools and so on. God’s objective is not that we pray in some kind of transactional way, and then get on with our days,

but that our very living and breathing is an in breaking of the kingdom, is an act of emancipation to those who are oppressed, is an act of sharing the gospel of Jesus with those who need good news. So then we have to ask ‘How on earth do we live like that?’ I think one of the keys to that is we re-centre on God’s presence. We receive the Spirit of God afresh on a regular basis so that we leak his presence everywhere we go. To put it this way, the aim of 24-7 prayer is not to get lots of people into 24-7 prayer rooms. The aim is to turn lots of people into 24-7 prayer rooms. You come to a 24-7 prayer room that you might leave as a 24-7 prayer room. Many people of course don’t believe in God, but they might encounter God in our lives. We might be the place of encounter. Where I disagree with Brennan, is the contemplative tradition is awesome but it is at times in danger of elevating the notion that we become the miracle. There isn’t any sense of God breaking in supernaturally externally. And in the words of the soul band Hot Chocolate, ‘I [still] believe in miracles’. And less helpfully, ‘you sexy thing’.



For more information about 24-7 Prayer, visit 24-7prayer.com.



Dirty Glory is available from all good book retailers.