

Trinity Baptist Church Sunday 6 June 2021
Ron Jones: Why is Simple Prayer so Complicated?

Readings: Psalm 27: 4 - 8, 13 -14; John 15: 1 - 8

I want to explore with you today the subject of “Why is Simple Prayer so complicated?”. Prayer is a strange topic. It has been the subject of a great many books and articles, all with the aim of being helpful and encouraging. Jesus’ teaching on the subject several times encourages what we might call “simple prayer”; and still it seems to present problems - often with the nagging suspicion that the problems may in some way be of our own making. I hope this opening doesn’t worry or annoy you, but I want to explore it from the viewpoint of someone like myself who does not find prayer to be plain sailing. Most of you will remember Dave and Julia Beaumont, who moved away from Trinity a few years ago. Julia was notably active in prayer. I once said to her that I was not very good at prayer, and she looked at me in utter bafflement: “Prayer’s not an exam - you can’t possibly be bad at it” - or words to that effect. My association with the Prayer Ministry Team, by the way, is primarily a musical one, so I am not claiming any special skill at prayer itself - and neither would the Team, anyway. So can we somehow get inside the subject, and with God’s help emerge at the other end holding on to something we can live on?

Jesus encourages us to pray, tells us of a kind Heavenly Father who knows everything that we need, and even gives us a pattern for our praying. Paul urges us to unceasing prayer, and the letters he wrote show that he certainly practised it. But we know all this, and we still have questions:-

- If God knows what we need, and we ask him for it, why does he not always grant the request?
- Why does he make us wait, when he knows we need it?
- Why do prayers for good things often seem to go unanswered, and prayers to stop bad things happening don’t always “work”?
- I thought “asking in His name” was supposed to guarantee receiving what we asked for.. ?

And so on: I’m sure you could list more. And by the way: Don’t cover it up if this is how you feel! My sister had MS (she died in 1991). I always remember her telling me of a preacher who said “If you think God has given you a rough deal, you’d better tell him about it - because he knows you think it anyway!”! God’s big enough, and he can take it.

Let’s be clear at the outset: there are no tidy answers. I rather fear that writers who give you the impression that it’s all a matter of simple faith have not understood the problem. It would be good if a sermon on this topic produced a conclusion or two which we could grasp, take home and feel grateful for: “Oh, THAT’s what I was missing...”, or “THAT’s tidied it up”; so I need to be honest with you at the outset and say that this matter doesn’t quite tie up in that way. Lord, direct us into your truth and increase our faith...

C S Lewis, one of the greatest Christian writers of last century, wrote a couple of essays on the subject, one of which is entitled “Petitionary Prayer: a Problem without an Answer”. He read this to a society of clergymen in Oxford in 1953. Having sketched out the difficulties, he writes:- “I have no answer to my problem, though I have taken it to about every Christian I know But at present I have got no further. I come to you, reverend Fathers, for guidance. How am I to pray this very night?”

Firstly, if we are to look into this, we need to be very careful how we go about it. How you say something can make a huge difference to what people think you meant. Think of God’s twice-

asked question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?": we don't know the tone of voice God used. (*Give examples*) Something rather like this also applies to chewing over the matter of Prayer. If we feel that our prayers have not been answered it's possible to be quite aggrieved, isn't it? I hope (and pray) that we shall manage to come closer to the Lord through what we consider today - and we therefore need to remember in whose presence we are. Although we are encouraged by the Psalms to tell it to God like it is, a reverent submission to him must be our underlying attitude.

Remember, too, that in ordinary life there are problems for which you can never find a solution if you attack them from the wrong direction. I can think of a few mathematical problems of this kind, and it certainly applies to DIY jobs. So it is with prayer. C S Lewis lays out what we might call the conceptual problems of prayer very clearly - for example, he takes passages like Mark 11: "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours". It would be interesting to find out how many of us have prayed like that and NOT received what we asked for. One of my daughters once decided that she didn't believe in God: she had closed her eyes and prayed that Jesus would move her dolly from one side of the bedroom to the other, and when it didn't happen she was sure that she'd blown God's cover. (Her mother's reaction was to imagine the terror it would have caused had her prayer been granted: it's the stuff horror films are made of, isn't it?) But Lewis points out that the answer that is often given to serious questions along this line, that "God didn't give you what you asked for, but gave or will give you something better instead", just isn't good enough: that's not what the verse says! And Lewis also looks at Gethsemane, and notes that the most absolutely holy man on earth prayed a prayer for deliverance that was not answered. This ought to warn us to back off: Ecclesiastes says - "Go near to listen, rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools...Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God".

Then let's remind ourselves that asking God for things is only part of coming before him, part of the prayer relationship, if you like. Think of the other matters covered briefly in The Lord's Prayer: concern for the acknowledgement of his holiness and the coming of his kingdom, the request for daily needs, the need for being forgiven, with its vital link to forgiving those who hurt us, a request for leading and deliverance from evil, and a final acknowledgement that the glory, power and kingdom belong to God.

But this still leaves us with the fact that both Jesus and Paul encourage us to regular, simple, trusting prayer about absolutely everything! All right - but there's a little more undergrowth we could do with trying to clear.

When I was a child we used to sing a chorus: "Prayer changes things" - if you don't mind admitting your age you may remember it! Now go steady here: what is it that actually makes the change in the things? If I write you a cheque for £500.00 (remember cheques, anyone?!?), the ink on the cheque is part of the process - but what makes the difference is the actual money-value when it hits your bank account - not my pen. So although we know what we mean, it's God who changes things.

But the chorus also said that "They who pray shall mount up as on eagles' wings" - and although it's a nice thing to sing it's actually a misquote. Isaiah 40 tells us that it is "Those who hope in the Lord" who "shall renew their strength, soar on wings like eagles" and so on - in other words, it isn't the **act** of praying that brings the strength and soaring, it's the **attitude** of the person praying, who hopes in God - or as our Psalm put it, "waits for the Lord". If you took the chorus seriously you would have to explain why it's possible to say your prayers and still feel as flat as a pancake

afterwards. It does matter, you see, what we sing! If you want a Victorian hymn for children that hits this particular nail accurately on the head, I found this, some of which I can remember my mother reciting to me:-

I often say my prayers, But do I ever pray?
And do the wishes of my heart Go with the words I say?

I may as well kneel down And worship gods of stone
As offer to the living God A prayer of words alone.

For words without the heart The Lord will never hear;
Nor will he to those lips attend Whose prayers are not sincere.

Lord, teach me what I need, And teach me how to pray;
And do not let me seek Thy grace, Not meaning what I say.

On another tack: we need to examine the passage in Mark 6, where the people of Nazareth dismissed Jesus on the grounds that they knew his family and his trade - specifically, the statement that he could do no miracles there because of their lack of faith. Does this mean that God can't move unless I let him? That our attitude can tie God's hands? In some ways it can - but never by limiting his power.

Jesus' startling question to the man at the pool, "Do you want to be healed", brings us up short. I think it would be true to say that if I persist in holding back personally from Jesus, I am unlikely to know very much of his activity in my life.

But what was it about the attitude of the Nazareth people that meant Jesus could not work miracles there apart from healing a few people? Look at the aftermath of the feeding of the 5,000 in John 6. The people started saying among themselves that surely this must be the Prophet who was to come into the world: which sounds promising! But Jesus wouldn't have it, because he could see that they were thinking of starting a revolution with him at its head. I believe that the point we must take here is that unbelief will always get the wrong idea about the miraculous, sometimes catastrophically so, and so Jesus on such instances withheld his power.

Now, I think this instance of Jesus withholding his power gives us an important clue. Just for a moment, can you try to imagine life if you received absolutely everything you prayed for? This feels a bit silly, but come with me for a moment. Let's call this desirable state (after an old chorus) "Living on the Mountain". What might it look and feel like? You would be free from all trouble or sickness of any kind: but I want you to ask yourself what your attitude to God would be like. On the day I wrote this bit the sun was shining, from my window I could see the North Downs in the distance, I was feeling perfectly well, and I had no particular worries. If I were "living on the mountain" I could pray for others, and of course they would all be healed and rescued; but on a day like the day I have described I would have absolutely no need to pray for my own needs - because I couldn't think of any. Can you see the "elephant in the room" here? I would effectively be treating God like a slot machine. Jesus said to the crowds in John 6: "Listen to me: you have followed me here only because you all got a miraculous take-away yesterday. You need to focus on the 'food' which I can give you". And after a long argument the crowd went away grumbling because it was too hard for them.

Let's link this with Jesus' words in John 15 about the True Vine. There is a deep stillness in his words: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you". Jesus links this primarily with "bearing fruit" - but he also includes this: **"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you."** This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." So there's a link: receiving whatever we ask for goes with remaining in Jesus, and is closely connected with "bearing much fruit". How can we approach this?

Firstly, notice the stillness. We live in an over-active world, but this passage describes something that is not focused on "doing things". In a recent newsletter Andy pointed out one of the features of "remaining in Christ" is regular Bible-reading, quiet times, and so on: is that right? Well, it depends on how we go about it. "Remaining in Christ" does of course include these activities; but the intent behind doing these things, the dominant purpose, has to be spending time, open-ended time if possible, with God, not ticking tasks off my schedule.

Think about producing fruit: ordinary fruit, not the Bible kind for a minute. We've two apple trees in our garden, and we do get a few apples each autumn. But look: the tree doesn't DO apples, or take regular exercise activities that produce apples - they grow on it, because of the nature of the tree and the nourishment it draws up from its roots - which don't move. I believe that the core of "remaining in Christ" is not in the Christian activities we do. Of course it will include Christian activities: they are vital, but they are not where it starts. If they were, we would be tempted to think of these as Brownie Points exercises. We need a living sense of needing the close companionship of our Saviour: there's the core.

What then is the meaning of Jesus' words about the Father cutting-off branches that do not bear fruit, and of a Christian who does NOT "remain in Him" being "cast forth as a branch". Does this mean that we could somehow detach ourselves from our connection with Jesus? In other words, are we getting into "unforgivable sin" territory?

The answer to that has to be a resounding NO: it would contradict so many other scriptures. I remember a Bible teacher in my last church saying that Biblical images and metaphors must not be pushed too far or made to fit too literally. He gave the example of "I will make you fishers of men", and asked, "What do men do with fish when they've caught them?" So it is with this metaphor of the Vine: we get the general idea of this vast, spreading plant, that has multiple branches but is one entity, one plant; and we understand the need to prune roses, sometimes quite severely, to remove those shoots that would not produce roses and would waste the plant's energy; also, that there's no point in leaving dead branches on the plant.

Now come to the reality we know, and see how the Vine picture describes what we already recognise. Consider these points:-

- The Christian life draws its strength from a life-link to Jesus
- From our own experience of our brothers and sisters, the most Christ-like characters are those who keep close to Jesus
- People who are only nominal Christians do most of the things Christians do, but there's little if any meaningful fellowship with them - like a cut-off branch: the same shape, similar to living branches, but starting to shrivel
- Those who actively follow Jesus do experience "pruning" or "cleansing" as the Lord puts his finger on things that need to change - like attitudes, unforgiveness; even sometimes making us wait, or halting our Christian activities for a while.

One other aspect of keeping close to Jesus: think how much his friends meant to him. "I have so wanted to eat this Passover with you before I suffer," he told them - them, with all their misunderstandings and despite the fact that they would all forsake him when the crunch came. So it's not just a duty to make the effort to come close to some stern, remote figure - Jesus longs for us to be in his company, loves it when we are next to him, longs for the relationship to deepen. And any branch properly connected to the Vine will most definitely bear fruit.

And, more to our point today, of course our characters and desires will mature and develop as we remain in him - and therefore the things we want will change too. Getting anything you want just because you have tagged "In Jesus' name" on the end of the prayer doesn't actually make sense. If you need assistance when in a shop, or if you need some advice from a dealer about a car, the person dealing with you is not answering you as an individual, she is answering literally in the name of her employer - and therefore what you hear is what the company says. I believe that's the vital clue to "asking in His name": asking for something to which Jesus can put his name.

No, we haven't found all the answers, or resolved all the difficulties. But we have no choice but to stay near Jesus and seek Him out: we dare not walk away. And in closeness to Jesus lies a vital clue to "asking in His name". May God develop our sense of need for him, give us the grace and maturity to submit to him in our prayers, and grant us a vision for His glory that trumps everything else.