

A couple of weeks ago, we concluded Paul's first letter to Timothy, in which Paul responded to Timothy's concern about false teachers in the church at Ephesus. Some false teachers are blatant in peddling their falsehood, and others gently and craftily **distort** and **deflect** our core beliefs. Popular culture plays a significant role of distorting core Christian beliefs and values, and we explored one example of the role played by the Beatles through songs and interviews.

Paul wrote or dictated several letters to church leaders, but he wrote three "pastoral" letters, one to Titus, his **dear brother** in the work, and these two to Timothy, his **beloved son** in faith. This second letter is most likely his last letter written. Paul was in prison in Rome, and was aware, the end of his journey of life was fast approaching. The persecution of Christians under Emperor Nero, was at its worst; Christians were burnt alive to provide light at night. Paul, however, was beheaded within two years of writing this letter.

Paul open with his signature, "*Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ*", a title Paul gave himself, because he, like the other eleven, had a personal encounter with Jesus. Paul is an very intense person, who does not suffer fools. He confronts falsehood with truth, often losing friends, but over the years, has learned to be less argumentative, less combative, less adversarial. His second letter to Timothy which is his last ever, Paul's mood is very reflective, as he looks back over his life and past experiences.

As we grow older, the demands of life leaves some of us rather exhausted, the circumstances of life leaves some feeling defeated, and struggles through life leaves some of is rather weary; each of us is on a journey of life which makes its demands and takes its toll on us. How we respond to these demands, determines our state of mind in later years.

In his first letter, Paul addressed Timothy as his **true child in the faith**; in this last letter, Paul addresses Timothy as, **my beloved child**. His mood has changed. He endears to Timothy in fatherly love. No more, **Now listen to this ...** Instead, **My beloved child ... I thank God ... for you ... I remember your tears ... I long to see you ...** a much softer and more emotional and endearing language.

In this letter, Paul reflects on his life, he counsels Timothy, and he leaves a spiritual inheritance for generations to come, motivating the church to focus on

the important, alerting them to dangers, and inspiring them to stay the course, neither give up, nor be distracted.

Paul's opening lines of this letter, offers us a model for intercessory prayer.

The first thing Paul teaches us is that intercessory prayer is the natural result of a person's relationship with God. How we view God, who God is to us, determines how we relate with Him. Is God to us, a Super Santa Claus dishing out presents to the naughty and nice? Is God to us, a strict disciplinarian who walks the earth with a stick, punishing the bad and rewarding the good? Is God to us, a detached unconcerned creator who having created this world and the people who dwell on it, has moved onto bigger and better things, leaving us to fight it out for survival?, or is God to us, a loving Father who knows and understands our struggles, forgives our mistakes and stays the course with us, to see us through to the restoration of His kingdom, the head of which is Jesus, our Christ?

Paul **worships and serves God with a clear conscience, the way my forefathers did.** Paul's forefathers did not know Christ, so what is he talking about? Paul's spiritual heritage is a deep-rooted Jewish faith, which held God in awe; Almighty, Supreme, all-powerful, Creator God was honoured, respected, admired and revered. Paul brings into his "new" life in Christ, the passion, intimacy, discipline and personal relationship with which his ancestors and he, worshipped and served God as a Jew.

Intercessory prayer, which is about intervening and mediating on behalf of someone else in prayer, starts with thanking God for the person, and the person's life. **I thank God for you, Timothy** Paul says. When thanking God for a person we are committed to pray for, we recognise the other person as precious in God's sight; it is to stand together as equals before God, seeking His love and His mercy. When we pray for individual needs in our fellowship, each name we mention is as deserving of God's love as we are.

It works both ways: if we don't think we are deserving of God's love, then we don't consider others deserving of God's love; when we are convinced of God's unconditional love for us, we will pray for others as deserving of the same unconditional love of God.

I thank God for you constantly in my prayers, day and night, says Paul.

Intercessory prayer is a commitment, a loyal dedication, a serious pledge to pray for the individual.

As we pray for the person, thanking God for their lives, we are led to remember the person's troubles and struggles. ***I remember your tears***, Paul says. He does not say, *I remember you with my tears*; Paul remembers Timothy's tears!

Timothy may have gone through difficult times, and shared the struggles deep in his soul, with the outpouring of tears, and Paul remembers these as he prays for Timothy ***constantly, day and night***.

Looking back on our lives, it has not been one long struggle of difficult times, or times of adversity. We have enjoyed good times too! When praying for others, it helps to remember how they came into the position in which they find themselves.

Intercessory prayer, praying for someone else is not just about thinking of them when time permits, it is a commitment to also remember their spiritual heritage. Many people do not have the spiritual heritage of Timothy, whose grandmother and mother taught him the faith they knew and lived by; but ***everyone*** has a spiritual heritage. To remember this in prayer, helps us value the person's life.

Intercessory prayer also involves interacting with the individual, reminding them of their duties and responsibilities in life, and suggesting ways forward. We must draw caution not to advise people what ***WE*** think is right and wrong, instead carefully and lovingly suggest how they might use God's gift. ***Fan into flame the gift of God which is in you***, says Paul. In case Timothy had forgotten what this might be, Paul leaves a clue, ***Fan into flame the gift of God which is in you, through the laying of my hands*** (a reference to Timothy's ordination)

It is quite natural, through times of stress, difficulty and trouble, we use God's gifts less and less, and over time, without encouragement, these ***gifts*** are reduced to smouldering embers (to continue Paul's metaphor) and need to be fanned into flame.

Finally, the whole purpose of intercessory prayer is not ***only*** to plead for the person's relief from difficulty or adversity, it is to reconnect the person into a renewed relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Paul reminds Timothy something he knows well, ***for God gave us a spirit, not of fear, but of power and love and self-control!***

Remember Timothy, God has placed **His Spirit** in you, which has no room for fear. The word "fear" refers to one who flees from battle, and has a strong pejorative sense, referring to cowardice.

The Spirit of God embedded in us, is the opposite of fear, it is a Spirit of boldness, by which we have at our disposal, God's power to act, God's love to share, and self-control not to be deceived by false teachers.

A Pharisee once asked Jesus, ***Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?*** Jesus responded, ***To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is as significant as the first: Love you neighbour as yourself.***

Intercessory prayer is an important expression of *loving your neighbour as yourself*. To those who say, *Surely God has better things to do than listen to and answer my prayer*, please be reminded that in all of God's creation, nothing is more important to Him than you and me, we the human race. In all of His creation, God has not breathed His Spirit into any *thing*, or *being* other than you and me. That's how special we are to God.

Imagine a world in which we do not, each pray for **our** needs, but when each of us prays intercessory prayers, one for another, our needs are also met!

Following on from Ted's most excellent reflection on prayer last Sunday (true, I was absent, but word gets around!), Paul's counsel to Timothy and to us all is to make intercessory prayer, praying for people individually, part of your lives.

Start by thanking God for the other person and their life. Remember their struggle and difficulty and how they have come into it. Remind yourself of their spiritual heritage. Suggest an action plan, to fan into life, the gift God has given them. And finally, reconnect them with the author of life, whose love for them is so great, He will see them through their difficulties, their problems.

AMEN.