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In this post-Pentecost period, we are reading through the Book of Acts, identifying the building blocks of the Church. Luke is the author of two books of the New Testament: his Gospel narrative is an historical, biographical account about the birth and life of Jesus, and his record of the *Acts of the Apostles* is an historical account of the birth of the Church and its early growth, and how it spread rapidly across the most populated part of the world, at that time.

We started two weeks ago, with Jesus' parting message to the disciples, to return to Jerusalem and wait for God's promise of the Holy Spirit. If someone asked me to go home and wait for God's promise to be fulfilled, I would want some details: What exactly am I waiting for? How will I know it is going to happen? How long will I have to wait? Without these answers, I would, and I assure many of you would too, feel very uncomfortable doing what was asked, *Go home and wait for God's promise to you!*

The disciples had no idea what they were expecting to happen. All they knew was they had to be obedient to Jesus' explicit instruction.

Over the last two Sundays, we were first introduced to the Holy Spirit, and then learned how He works. Up until now, we have learned:

- God is the Author of all life; He speaks and His Word creates life.
- The Word of God is the foundation of the Church.
- Jesus Christ is the head of the church.
- and we have been learning, the Holy Spirit is the engine, the dynamo who runs the church and keeps it on track, motivating us to follow His lead, because He is entrusted by God to ensure, we the Body of Christ, are safely delivered into God's eternal Kingdom.

It is a difficult teaching to grasp for most of us, because we have been taught differently and as a result, have misunderstood Him. In reality, the

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Holy Spirit is our friend, sent to look after us, that we may act, speak, and think the way God does.

God has a plan, and the Bible before us, God has given us details of His plan. In Abraham, God chose a people to be channels of His blessing to the whole world. The Hebrew people have indeed been a blessing to the world, in the arts, in the sciences, in medicine, in philanthropy, and many other endeavours, but they have not been able to fulfil God's mandate, because they have been regularly distracted by the enemy, so distracted that despite all the signs God gave them throughout history, they could not recognise Jesus as the Saviour Christ when He came to love among us!

So God, whose love for all humankind surpasses anything we can ever imagine, opens up the channels of His blessings, multiplies the channels through which he blesses humankind and the whole world, that anyone who accepts and believes, God sent His Son, His only Son to die, for the purpose of defeating death through His resurrection, will enjoy the blessing of eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Anyone who believes Jesus is God's Son and our Saviour, Jesus gathers as His "body", called the Church. The Holy Spirit, the first building block of the Church, is entrusted to look after the Church and deliver it safely into the Kingdom of God, at God's appointed time.

The Church's second building block is, **PRAYER**. All through the Gospels we learn, Jesus was in constant prayer with His Father. Prayer was the centre of his life. When He chose to leave the heavenly realms of glory, to walk among us, His lifeline to His Father, was through **prayer**.

We have explored *prayer* on several occasions, at least three times in the past five years, but before we examine how the disciples applied the principles of prayer Jesus taught them, we should remind ourselves of Jesus' teaching on prayer.

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The first thing Jesus did before teaching His disciples anything about prayer, was to practice it Himself and set the example. So we read in Mark's biography of Jesus, as He started His ministry of healing and the demands on His time grew greater, *Rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus left and went out to a desolate place and there He prayed.*¹

After feeding the 5,000 Matthew writes, *Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds. After He had dismissed the crowds, **He went up on the mountain by Himself, to pray.***²

In Luke's biography of Jesus, he notes several occasions when Jesus went out alone to pray.

To heal someone of a disease is a big event, but to heal a leper from leprosy is unimaginable. Having cleansed a leper of his disease, the news of which spread like wild fire drawing greater crowds to Jesus, He avoids the crowds and withdraws to a desolate place to pray.

Luke also notes a significant moment when, in the early days of Jesus' ministry, we read, *"He went out to the mountain to pray, and all night He continued in prayer to God."*³ Jesus depended on His lifeline to the Father, talking, discussing, enjoying fellowship with His father, while being affirmed in His mission, and commended in His work by His Father. So it would seem natural for Jesus to consult with His Father, **who** among the disciples, should be vested with the trust of being an Apostle. Luke writes, *When day [broke after the long night of prayer], Jesus called His disciples and chose from [among] them, twelve whom He named Apostles...*⁴

¹ Mark 1:35

² Matthew 14:23

³ Luke 6:12

⁴ Luke 6:12-13

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Now fast-forward to the end of Jesus life and ministry on earth. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus connected with His Father for the last time, before submitting Himself to death by crucifixion, Jesus prays, *I have told these men all about you. They were in the world, but then you gave them to me (reminding us of Jesus' all-night prayer in Luke 6). Actually, they were always yours, and you gave them to me; and they have obeyed you. ... I have passed on to them the commands you gave me; and they accepted them and know with assured certainty that I came down to earth from you [in Heaven], and they believe you sent me. My plea is not for the world, but for those you have given me because they belong to you.*⁵

Prayer is a very intimate language, used only in a special relationship with God. John tells us of the time when Jesus came to the home Mary and Martha after their brother Lazarus had died. Jesus asks for the stone covering the cave where Lazarus was buried, to be rolled away, and Martha objected because, after three days since his death, the foul odour of decomposing human flesh would fill the air. Jesus tells her, *didn't I tell you that you will see a wonderful miracle from God if you believe?* Jesus then looked up to heaven and prayed, *"Father, thank you for hearing me."* Some translations open up this sentence into its fuller meaning: *You always hear me, of course, but I said it because of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me.*⁶

Mark offers us a peek into another intimate moment of conversation between Father and Son, when in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asks, *"Father! Father everything is possible for you. Take away this cup from me. Yet I want your will, not mine."*⁷

⁵ John 17:6-9

⁶ John 11:1-42

⁷ Mark 14:36

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We would be naive to believe prayer is simply talking to God. It is and it is so much more. It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus prayed, but we should be left in awe of the special relationship Jesus had with the Father, a relationship into which each one of us is invited.

Let me leave you with a few lessons on prayer, from Jesus' life.

First, prayer is absolutely necessary; make time for it. We should never think we are so busy, we don't have time to pray. Jesus had the weight of the world on his shoulders, and yet he made time to pray. How much more should we?

Second, prayer demands solitude; make space for it. Prayer is intimate time with God, and so it should be that we would want to be alone with Him, without any distraction. Susanna Wesley⁸, the 25th child of her parents' 25 children, never preached a sermon, or published a book, or founded a church. She married Samuel Wesley and had 19 children, nine of whom died as infants. Four of the children who died were twins, and a maid accidentally smothered one child. She had no place of escape from her numerous children and the endless list of household chores, but in a corner of the kitchen, she made space for solitude, sitting on a stool with her apron pulled over her head, to allow her just a few moments to think and pray, and focus on Creator God for strength and wisdom. A Godly, praying woman, was mother of John and Charles Wesley, who credited her life of prayer for their calling to be founders of the Methodist Church.

Third, prayer will often be strenuous; make the resolve to go through it. On that fateful night the Jesus was betrayed, He rebuked his disciples for failing to stay awake and praying with Him as He asked them to: *Could you not seat up with me for one hour?* The phrase **Persistence in Prayer** reminds us of this challenge, that prayer will often be strenuous, but we are called to make the resolve to go through it.

⁸ 20 January 1669 – 23 July 1742

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Fourth, prayer has a purpose; make up your mind to yield to it.

Jesus had real work to do and at every stage, He committed His thoughts, plans, decisions, conversations, everything to the Father and sought His counsel and advice. So, when we pray, we ought to know with absolute certainty, *what God wants accomplished, will be done*, and the Holy Spirit is about doing this. We pray with this sense of purpose, and yield to it.

Fifth and finally, prayer is effective; resolve to rejoice in prayer.

Ask anyone who has prayed with purpose, prayed strenuously, taken time to do so in solitude, knowing that prayer is an intimate conversation with God our Father, they will tell you, prayer is effective.

I am looking at people here and now, and know of some who are not here today, who pray as Jesus taught by example, and have seen mountains moved, obstacles removed, answers given.

Jesus prayed because he knew no decision is outside the will of God. But having prayed, Jesus acted in keeping with God's will. He stepped out and selected men He believed would learn to be faithful to, do the work needed.

And so it is with us. We pray, because we know that God is sovereign. And then we act, trusting that God will guide our steps, and we will see God answering prayer, for our benefit and to His glory.

AMEN