

The Potential of Prayer

John 17: 6-19

I wonder how you feel about prayer. Do you prefer silent prayer or spoken? On your own or together with others? Said or sung? From a book or make up your own? Sitting, kneeling or standing? With or without actions? Is your 'holy place' inside or outside? Which most inspires you spiritually: beautiful worship or beautiful scenery? Prayers for those in need or out there with them? In short, there are many ways to pray and many types of prayer. We all have personal preferences in this as in many other aspects of life.

Today's gospel reading is part of a prayer of Jesus for his friends, not long before his death. He knows that his disciples will face difficult and uncertain times. His prayer – his conversation with his Father – can help us to understand the breadth and potential of prayer – whatever our preferences – as something that informs and shapes everything that we are and everything that we do.

At this time of great need, Jesus prayed for his disciples. Last week, we considered Jesus' commandment to his disciples to 'love one another as I have loved you.' In loving one another, I think that we can safely assume that Jesus also intended that they should pray for one another also. Indeed, the Apostle Paul is absolutely certain of this and, in his letters, suggests that the biggest reason we pray for one another is that we are commanded to bear one another's burdens. In Galatians 6:2 he says: *'Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.'* We all reach a point where we stagger and fall – and we all need one another. This is one of the purposes of the church – we are there for one another when one of us is struggling. We help carry the weight of each other's' troubles and, I don't know about you, but I always feel better when someone asks if they can pray for me. If nothing else, there's something very special about knowing that someone is keeping you in mind, that they're thinking of you. That you matter.

In the summer of 2019 I preached a sermon series on prayer. Don't worry if you don't remember too much about it! I recommended some prayer resources on prayer, particularly from the author Pete Greig, the founder of the 24/7 prayer movement. I used his book 'God on Mute: Engaging the Silence of Unanswered Prayer' as material for one of the sermons, and also his book 'How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People.' They're both great

resources. In the latter book, in the chapter on ‘intercessions’ – how to pray for other people – Greig tells a funny story. In a small Texas town, a bar owner applied for permission to extend his premises, but members of the local Baptist Church were staunchly opposed to his plans and launched a vociferous campaign, with protests, petitions and prayer meetings. Planning permission was granted, however, and building work duly began. The Christians felt bitterly disappointed until the week before the grand opening, when a lightning bolt struck the bar and burned it to the ground.

The church folk were beside themselves with joy. Their prayers had been answered! And so, the furious bar-owner decided to sue the church on the grounds that it was ‘ultimately responsible for the material demise of his livelihood, whether through direct or indirect actions or means’. Suddenly, everyone changed their tune. All those who had been trumpeting a miracle days before now rose up as one to deny all culpability. The case made it to court where a judge surveyed the brief. *‘I don’t know how I’m going to decide this,’* he sighed. *‘We appear to have a publican who believes passionately in the power of prayer, and an entire congregation that has lost its faith entirely.’*

I’m pretty sure this isn’t a true story but it probably highlights how confusing intercessory prayer can be. Secretly we wonder if our little prayers can make any actual difference in the face of vast intractable problems, like a relative who is entirely resistant to hearing about any matters of faith, or a terminal diagnosis, long-standing mental illness, a government that is oppressing its people, or the tragedy of a natural disaster. Our whispered prayers, however we say them, can seem feeble, foolish and futile against the sheer scale of life’s problems, particularly against this week’s news of the global pandemic, escalating violence in Israel and Gaza and lightning strikes causing death in Lancashire.

And yet, the Bible teaches us that our prayers are vastly powerful. That’s why, in the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus doesn’t just instruct us to pray personally for daily bread, but also for regime change: the coming of God’s kingdom here in earth. And, in the Old Testament, one of the most dramatic illustrations of the power of such prayer comes in the life of that great intercessor Moses. When the people sinned by worshipping the golden calf, Moses’ intercession saved them from being completely annihilated by God’s anger. We read in Exodus 32 that *‘Moses implored the Lord ... And the Lord changed his mind.’* But perhaps the story from Moses’ life that most fully captures the significance of intercessory

prayer is the battle with Amalek in Exodus 17. It's a picture worth a thousand words. Moses was no coward, and he was usually the front-line person when it came to the challenges that faced the Israelites on the journey, but in this case, somehow he had a sense that his most important role in the battle was to stand on the top of a hill and intercede – pray – for the Israelite army. You may well know the story – whenever Moses held up his hands, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hands, Amalek prevailed. This work of interceding – seeking the presence of God on behalf of others – was so real and so taxing that Moses' hands grew weary. But he'd brought with him Aaron and Hur, two of his most trusted colleagues. They took a stone and put it under Moses to support him physically. They then stood on each side of Moses and supported him with their presence, holding up his hands to keep them steady until the sun set. This battle was literally won on the basis of Moses' ability to remain in a stance of intercessory prayer on behalf of those God had given him to lead.

To intercede is to 'mind the gap' between heaven and earth. But how should we pray for others? I'm sure that many of us here have said that we'll pray for someone, or may have actually been asked by someone if we'd pray for them. You may be someone to whom another has said, '*Send one up for me, will you?*' if they know you're a Christian and are off to church. But, often, it can be hard to know what to say, and our prayers can sometimes feel like a bit of a shopping list.

Last summer, I came across a book by Ruth Haley Barton, an American author, called '*Strengthening the Soul*' that really helped with this problem. What she says is that 'intercessory prayer isn't primarily about thinking that I know what someone else needs and trying to wrestle it from God. Rather, it is being present to God on another's behalf, listening for the prayer of the Holy Spirit that is already being prayed for that person before the throne of grace, and being willing to join God for that prayer'. Ruth Haley Barton argues that prayer for others is more about *not* knowing than it is about knowing. It is about growing more and more comfortable with Romans 8. Here, Paul says, '*The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*' I love this! I love that when I'm really stuck for words – because something I want to pray for just seems too big – that the Holy Spirit knows how to pray, and is already praying for that person and situation. All I need to do is join in.

And, if you're wondering how, don't worry. I'm about to tell you what Ruth Haley Barton does and it's so straightforward that any one of us could pray in this way too.

She says, 'As I sit quietly in God's presence' - and that's the first clue. If you're going to intercede for others, you will need to find some quiet. 'As I sit quietly in God's presence, I see who God brings to mind and heart. As they come into my awareness, I invite them into that place where God's Spirit and my spirit are communing, and we sit together with that person. If I have a list or if there are people and concerns weighing on me, I bring those too, and we sit together with them. I don't feel burdened by the need to figure anything out or to say words that indicate that I somehow have a handle on the situation.

If words do come or if there's something that I want to ask for, I certainly feel free to say this to God, but there is no pressure to do so. Most times there is nothing for me to do or say except to hold the people and situations that are of concern to me in God's presence and listen. Sometimes there will be some word of wisdom, some guidance, some action that God invites me to, relative to that person or situation, but this is always something that is given - not something I've had to grasp for or work really hard to get. If nothing comes, I don't do or say anything - no matter how tempted I feel to assuage my anxiety by trying to make something happen. If the words are there - perhaps God has brought me a Scripture, a word, an action or a next step - then I seek to be faithful to what I've heard'.

During this period in-between Ascension and Pentecost - Thy Kingdom Come - a time of global prayer for those who don't yet know the love of Jesus, I commend this particular method of intercessory prayer to you. If you have five people in mind that you want to pray for, then maybe try just bringing those names to God as you quietly sit. And then, in the quiet, being *attentive*, listening to what God might then place on your heart or mind, be that a word of wisdom, or an action. And if we do this, then we are praying as Jesus did. Those words from verse 9:

'I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours.'

Amen.