

Trinity 21 2013 – Prayer

Genesis 32 vv 22-31 p36, Psalm 121, II Timothy 3 v14 – 4 v5 p1197, Luke 18 vv 1-8 p1052

The extract from Paul's second letter to Timothy today is about Timothy remaining firm, firm in his own personal faith and firm in his commitment to God's work. In Timothy's case this is to be a minister of the Gospel, maintaining Christians in the faith by teaching the Word of God, exercising discipline in accordance with his position in the Church and preaching the Good News to the whole world – to all those who do not yet know the joyful truth in Jesus Christ or who have not yet accepted Him into their lives. Timothy will be able to play his part in fulfilling these tremendous responsibilities because God has given him the Holy Spirit personally and because he is familiar with the Holy Scriptures, which, as S Paul says, *are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ*, and as Paul also says, *All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*. What is true for Timothy is also, of course, true for us. God has called each one of us, you and me and all Christian people. He has anointed every one of us with the Holy Spirit, whereby we cry to God, *Abba, Father*. The Holy Scriptures are His gift to the whole Church, able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ, profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

Psalm 121 is about our dependence on God, our dependence on Him Who is absolutely dependable and the other two readings are about persistence in prayer. Read the Bible and pray continually. Reading the Bible and praying you open yourself to the grace of God, to the Holy Spirit, Who will sustain you in your own personal relationship with God and enable you to play your part in the Church and in the world, doing all the good works God has prepared for you to walk in. In practical terms, as I say again and again, it is basic to the Christian life to pray and to read the Bible every day, to have a quiet time, to meditate, whatever you want to call it, and to meet at least every Sunday with other Christians in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit to experience the love of God and to receive the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion and in all the many ways He graciously makes known to us Himself, Whom to know is eternal life.

Prayer is a funny thing. On the one hand, everybody does it. Or at least most people pray – if only *in extremis*. Prayer is as natural as breathing. *God bless you. God help me. Thank God. May God forgive me!* Prayer is easy. Yet prayer can also seem very hard. Jacob wrestled with God in prayer all night. Jesus presumably told that parable about the unjust judge who eventually heard the poor widow because so many people have the experience of praying and feeling that God is not listening. Jesus told them to persevere. Even that lazy judge eventually got round to granting the widow justice. You can be sure that God won't let you down – but it doesn't always feel like that. St John of the Cross spoke of the dark night of the soul. Sometimes it seems that the most spiritually profound people have the greatest difficulty with prayer. Maybe it is the fact that they sometimes have the sweetest experiences of the presence of God that makes it seem so awful when they cannot feel His presence at all. It happens to us all. For us ordinary Christians, we may find prayer hard because we find it boring. We make out that we are too busy. We may even make the excuse that we are not spiritual enough, though that is hardly the point! Or we feel that we do pray but God isn't answering. We're not getting what we ask for even though we think we are asking in faith. We are not asking selfishly for something for ourselves but for other

people. And it is a good thing that we are asking for - like someone getting to be cured of a terrible disease or an unemployed person to find a job or for peace in some long-standing conflict. God doesn't seem to be listening or, if He's listening, He doesn't seem to be answering, or, if He is answering, He is saying *No*, but why would He say *No* when we are praying for something which is surely His Will – like healing, reconciliation, freedom from want – all the things we work for as Christians, believing that we are acting in accordance with God's Will, obeying His commandments even? Jesus tells us that we *ought always to pray and not to faint*. He is not contradicting here what He says in Matthew 6⁷ *But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking*. The heathen confuse prayer with magic. Magic is an attempt to use spiritual authority to get what you want, to make the world function in accordance with your will. Magic is about the ability of the magician to control nature. Prayer is entirely different. Prayer is submission to God. Prayer is accepting God's control of our lives. Prayer is something we can only do if we have faith in God, both *that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him* (Hebrews 11⁶).

When you come to think about it, intercessory prayer (asking God for things) is pretty odd. Jesus reminds us, *your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him* (Matthew 6⁹). God hasn't forgotten about Auntie Alice or the people in Syria or Madeline McCann or Bishop James or the people next door or anyone else we might pray for. Neither does He need us to tell Him to guide the surgeon's hand during Bob's operation or what the United Nations ought to do about the Somali pirates. God is omniscient. He is all knowing. God is omnipotent. He is all powerful. God is omnipresent. He is everywhere. God is love. He doesn't need us to tell Him what to do. In fact, of course, He knows Auntie Alice, the people in Syria, Madeline McCann, Bishop James, Bob and his surgeon and the General Assembly of the Nations infinitely better than we do. And He loves them infinitely more than we do. So why pray at all? One reason is that prayer is an expression of our love for people and that is why I pray for my family every day and for other people and causes, missions, charities and churches, rather less frequently, but nevertheless I hope faithfully. Also prayer changes the person praying. As an expression of love, prayer makes us more loving people. It is good for us to pray. Praying makes us better people. What a power of good it does us to pray *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us!* Yet prayer is more than benevolence, of greater value than meditation. St James assures us *The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much* (James 5¹⁶). How can that be when God doesn't need us to pray in order for Him to act? What difference do our prayers make to a God Who is infinitely wiser, more loving and better informed than we are? Understandably, Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His terrible Death on the Cross, *Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me* (Mark 14³⁶). No man could be more righteous than Jesus, no prayer more fervent. Was it effectual? The cup wasn't taken away. He had to die on the cross. Jesus completed His prayer with the words, *Nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt*. When we pray, we align our wills with the Will of God. We may not know what to say. Our prayers may be weak and feeble. The best we can manage might be the prayer of the father of the epileptic boy in Mark 9²⁴, *Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief*. But when we pray, even if our faith is as small as a grain of mustard seed, we ally ourselves with the One Who made heaven and earth, the One Who redeemed Creation by His death on the Cross, the One Who

moved on the face of the waters and was poured out from the belly of the crucified Christ in rivers of living water, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When we pray our souls and bodies, our hearts and minds, our lives, our hopes and aspirations, our wills and purposes, are taken up into the mystery of the triune God. As Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one in love, so we are one in love with them and God's purposes become our purposes as our wills become His Will.

It doesn't matter that our prayers are so feeble. What does matter is that our prayers are answered by Almighty God. Faith entrusts everything we care about to Him, not so that God will give us what we want, but so that we may come to want what God wants.

And because we matter to God, because He loves us, He graciously uses our prayers to bring about His purposes in the world. He uses our prayers to bless us, to bless our families and friends, to bless the Church and the world. *The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.* Our prayers are used by God to bring about the salvation of the cosmos.

So just two remaining questions which might trouble us. Why does it sometimes appear in the Bible that prayer changes God's mind? For example in Exodus 32, when, while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments and the pattern of the Tabernacle, the Israelites got fed up with waiting and persuaded his brother Aaron to make a golden calf which they then set about worshipping as a god. God is so angry in the story that He says He will destroy all the people except Moses and Moses intercedes and apparently gets God to change His mind. How could a mere mortal change God's mind?

The second question is closely allied to this. How can the feeble prayers of ignorant people like us have any place in the providence of God? How can our weak and feeble efforts be allowed to make any difference to anything of importance? But then we are of infinite importance to God. Christ died for you and me.

I think the answer must be in the eternity of God. God not only knows what we need before we ask Him. He also knows all our prayers before we pray them. God knows eternally. He really does know everything even before it happens. So our prayers are factored into God's plans. Our prayers are an aspect of His providence. God knew Moses would talk him out of destroying the Israelites, but it was part of Moses' spiritual development and part of Israel's spiritual development that the conversation between God and Moses took place. Moses needed to wrestle with God on behalf of the Israelites for the Israelites' sake and for Moses' sake. We need to pray and so God incorporates our prayers into His plans.

I don't want to end on a concept which is hard to grasp. The truth I am trying to bear witness to is that prayer isn't hard at all. Just trust God. All these troubling questions we might have are answered in God's providence. We don't have to worry about them, just to pray always and not to faint, to pray continually in faith and hope and love. As the psalmist says (Psalm 131) : *Lord, I am not high-minded: I have no proud looks. I do not exercise myself in great matters: which are too high for me. But I refrain my soul, and keep it low, like as a child that is weaned from his mother: yea, my soul is even as a weaned child. O Israel, trust in the Lord: from this time forth for evermore.*