

## **5. Prayer kept central** **from first to last**

People of prayer, both corporate & personal, follow the example of Jesus and the teaching of the apostles. Imagination in prayer includes adopting the appropriate style and having the faith to 'see' the outcome. Nothing is too small or too large to be prayed about and the effects celebrated.

### **Core Texts**

Matthew 6:5-15, Philippians 4:6-7, Mark 9:28-29, John 15:1-17, Ephesians 3:20, Romans 8:26-27, John 4:46-53

### **Core Teaching**

- ❖ Introduction
  - Good communication is at core of healthy relationships
  - Prayer is spiritual breathing – sharing the presence of God
  - To people around us we are those who can pray for them
- ❖ Prayer brings us 'into the zone' with God (Mk.9, Jn.15)
- ❖ Imagination in personal & shared prayer (Eph.3)
  - Stimulates ways of praying
  - Awareness of how much we can pray for
- ❖ Sensitivity in personal & shared prayer (Rom.8).
  - HS - takes our requests coherently into God
  - HS - opens the mind of God to us
- ❖ *Petitions shape worries into prayers* (Phil.4)
- ❖ Faith at the asking and built through the celebrating (Phil.4)
- ❖ Jesus prayed > we pray! (Matt.6)
- ❖ 6-fold pattern and model; The Father's character, kingdom, provision, forgiveness, guidance, protection

### **Some Initial Questions**

- How often do you clear space to listen to God?
- Who do you know (including yourself) who is gifted in leading intercessions / shared prayer? Why not tell them!
- How can you use your imagination better in prayer personally and for the needs of others?

## **Evening Hour – 18<sup>th</sup> September 2005**

**Primary Reading:** Matthew 6:5-15

**Objective:** Value 5 – *Prayer kept central from first to last*. Our passion to know the presence, celebrate the person and fulfil the purpose of God through Prayer

- When I'm preparing a couple for marriage a question on one of the sheets asks what they think is the main cause of marriage breakdown. It gives a list of alternatives including difficulties with money or sex, family pressures and the current moral climate. On the list is also 'poor communication' - this is the correct answer. And as we look at all the other possible answers we see that lack of communication is often a root cause in them, too. As part of the same preparation we look at levels of communication from level 1, the simple factual exchange – 'I'll be late back tonight' – through to 5 where deep issues are shared along with the feelings they elicit.
- You've had a variety of conversations during this last week. Conversations with people you knew well, through to those you had never met before. Conversations at different levels from simple facts to deep feelings. Try to recall a conversation with someone who matters to you – wife, husband, friend, close colleague... Think about where and when and why it happened. Reflect upon how it felt... How much did you talk and how much did you listen...? Perhaps as you were talking, a comment or a look touched off a memory and caused you to change what you were going to say or how you were going to say it... How much difference it makes when you know something about the other person! When you have a relationship, each conversation moves your relationship on however many or few words are spoken.
- Why then is it that when it comes to prayer, conversing with God, we are so often tongue-tied, guilty and unimaginative? Why do many label prayer as 'difficult'? Why do I, a Vicar, occasionally shy away from offering to pray at the end of a pastoral visit – and then have huge regrets later? I think part of the reason is that we still see prayer more as the RAC – a call out when our self-sufficiency breaks down – rather than the very act of spiritual breathing so that we constantly share in the presence of God. How often am I effectively holding my spiritual breath and turning blue in the face, instead of letting my new-born self breath naturally?

- Interestingly, we are seen by many of the people around us as those who can pray. I think they correctly see us as having a relationship with God; they often call a 'hot-line'! Of course, anybody can pray but those who know God through Jesus should find it most natural. For that reason prayer is actually a service we can offer to our community. We do so in humility not pride. Offering to pray for someone often meets with deep gratitude. I'm wondering what people will be putting in the prayer box at Brookwood Station. I'm sure this is only the start of ways we can act out our Royal Priesthood through prayer.
- When Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration he found the 9 disciples struggling to heal a possessed child. Jesus, in some frustration, brings God's healing to the boy. When asked by the disciples later why they couldn't do it, he says, 'This kind can only come out by prayer' (Mark 9:28-29). I've puzzled about this. There's no sign or record of Jesus praying at that moment. Indeed, in some sources Jesus is recorded as saying, 'This kind can only come out by prayer & fasting'.
- I think Jesus is saying that perceiving and doing God's purpose – which is what Jesus said he always did (John 5:19) – requires us to be in tune with God, and that is only possible by and through prayer. The prayer he was speaking of was not a prayer of the moment for that child but the outcome of a praying life. As a person of prayer, and fasting, Jesus kept himself 'in the zone' with God. John 15 reminds us that when we are 'in the zone' with Jesus, abiding in him, our prayers will harmonise with his purposes to great effect. What are God's purposes?
- Almost as an aside, Ephesians 3:20 tells us God can do more than we can imagine through his power at work in us. Implicit in this is the idea that we will have our imaginations engaged as we pray. Just as with any human conversation, I believe prayer needs to engage our imagination. As we seek the mind of Christ we seek also the imagination of Christ. Often it is imagination that brings life to how we pray. Hezekiah was put into turmoil by Sennacherib's threatening letter so he took it and simply laid it out before God in an act of physical prayer that led into words (2Kings 19:14-19).
- Often it is imagination that brings life to what we pray for. Unlike his servant, Elisha could already see by faith the armies of the Lord waiting to be the answer to his prayer for deliverance. We can be

imaginative in this way today. When Dee led us in prayer for our community recently we faced in different directions and imagined the people and organisations in each direction. As we did so we also imagined their needs and found prayers released from us as we saw possibilities by faith.

- Just as using our imaginations can bring life to a human relationship, re-awakening imagination in our personal prayers, and in the way we pray together, is also invigorating. Leading Sunday intercessions well or leading a prayer meeting well are particular gifts – if you've got them, we need them! When the noticesheet says we're praying this week for those who are *self-employed and at home*, imagination must come into the planning. When I was taking a wedding a couple of years ago, the people asked to do the prayers just stood up and said whatever came into their heads [give example of the babble]. Their prayers, however sincere, did not lead us because they lacked imagination both for the occasion and for the couple.
- And that leads on to sensitivity in prayer, sensitivity to God and, if we're praying in a group, sensitivity to one another. Romans 8:26-27 reminds us of the place of the Holy Spirit as the one who connects us to the mind of God so that our struggles for expression get taken with perfect understanding into the mind of God. But the Spirit also connects our minds with the will of God to guide the direction of our praying. The gift of Tongues used personally is a tangible evidence of that process at work.
- And when we pray together in a group, the Spirit is also at work. We need to sense the agenda of God as we pray. So beware of becoming so fixed on planning your prayer that you leap in when there's a gap rather than listening to see what else the Spirit may be encouraging us to pray to do with the subject we're on. But God is gracious and our agenda is never discounted.
- Philippians 4:6 & 7 encourages us take all anxieties to God in prayer. I love The Message translation, which says, *Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers*. Prayer undoubtedly does shape our attitudes and lives, but those verses also emphasise celebrating the outcomes of prayer. Faith is not just in the praying but also in the claiming and celebrating. The man who came to Jesus seeking healing for his son (John 4:46-53) was on his way home when servants met him & said his son was better.

That father could have put it all down to coincidence, but he checks the timing and believes it was God's power through Jesus. Part of how prayer becomes 2-way and faith-building is when we recognise God's hand and celebrate with thanksgiving.

- Let me give you an example from this last week.

E-mail from LICC Course...

Dear Hugh, Dear Nick

You prayed with me on the recent LICC course in London when I told you about the litigation that had followed on from the erosion of around 8000 tons of my garden into an adjoining sand quarry. It is my view that your prayers and that of other friends have been answered. I remember being very moved with your kindness at immediately moving off the topic we were supposed to have been discussing to address this really pressing issue in prayer.

The litigation terminated and the matter was settled out of court last Friday. I have been involved in projects and project finance for 25 years and this has been the most difficult one but I believe the power of prayer resolved this one.

A very sincere thank you

- Of course, the most compelling 'why' behind our praying is simply that Jesus prayed – he wasn't showy about it but the disciples noticed and they knew it was the key to his close and effective relationship with His Father. That must be true also for all human beings especially those of us who are Jesus' followers. Like the disciples we seek to learn from Jesus' example and teaching. Andrew Murray comments that "Jesus never taught his disciples how to preach, only how to pray".
- (Matthew 6:5-15) Jesus does not preface his reply to the Disciples with the phrase, *if you pray...* Just as we might say, *when you eat*, or *when you sleep*, or *when you breathe*, Jesus said **when** you pray, *pray like this*. Full study of the Lord's prayer is for another time, but Jesus gives us a model prayer and if we take good regard of all 6 elements, our praying will become healthy & effective:-
  - The Father's Character: *Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be your name*
  - The Father's Kingdom: *Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*
  - The Father's Provision: *Give us today our daily bread*

- The Father's Forgiveness: *Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*
- The Father's Guidance: *Lead us not into temptation*
- The Father's Protection: *And deliver us from the evil one*

- One imaginative way of using Jesus' teaching is to use each phrase as a lens through which to pray. I think this is especially useful when we're facing a big issue or event. For example when I first read about this method it was the day of the bombs in London and I found it really helped me to pray something like this;

*Heavenly father I know you're weeping for the pain of these events for you care deeply about your world. May those with your heart for peace, justice and compassion be strong in helping people and making decisions. So many people need your strength; the bereaved, the injured and those in the emergency services. In time help us to reflect upon what might have provoked this anger and to discover the right grace to forgive. Guard us from knee-jerk reactions and give the security forces success in bringing to justice those who are guilty.*

- I've said enough in words. I hope you've gathered I'm passionate that we make prayer – communicating with God – a huge priority personally and as a church! But prayer is very much about listening so I'm going to give the last word to someone on a DVD and to a question that challenges all of us about our passion to know the presence, celebrate the person and fulfil the purpose of God through Prayer... [Nooma DVD]