

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity, 24 July 2022, Year C  
Genesis 18.20-32; Psalm 138; Colossians 2.6-15; Luke 11.1-13

Today is one of those Sundays when an essential activity of the Church in time and down the ages is our focus. It is a pillar of Christian life. It is not peculiar to Christians. It has been practiced since time immemorial. It takes different shapes and forms in other religions and cultures. I am speaking of prayer, that activity without which Christian life and the Church would not only be the poorer, but would look, feel and be different. Let me proceed with an invitation that you might like to think about during the week. Imagine a world without prayer. A tall order! What might that look like? How would you fare?

Today's gospel reading is introduced by a question asked by an anonymous disciple, a follower of Jesus. It is asked when Jesus returns to the disciples after praying in a certain place. The word certain indicating not any old place, but a particular place. At home I have a certain place, where I go to pray. It isn't a place exclusively for prayer, but it is a place I go to be alone in prayer. Prayer, private prayer is typically the expression of an ordered devotional life and unconsciously we thereby enter into the pattern that Jesus himself practiced. Jesus as we witnessed today was a person of private prayer; he, the wandering teacher went to a certain place to pray.

The most intimate picture of Jesus at prayer is when we see him praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. And what a struggle that communing with God was with its 'not my will, but thy will be done' for the sake of creation, for the world, for you and me. We return to the picture drawn by today's gospel. A disciple approaches Jesus and asks that Jesus teach them how to pray as John taught his disciples to pray. Jesus complies.

It is timely that we address prayer this morning, because a thread that can be traced in many of my conversations is a question circling around the efficacy of prayer. Efficacy means 'the ability to produce a desired or intended result'. We Christians are you might say outcome orientated. I come up against it again and again, this question about the efficacy of prayer. And despite the question we continue to pray, although we may often remain puzzled. Because the thread is strong and the questioning remains. We may need to reimagine how we think of petitionary prayer or the place of prayer, not so much as a means to an end, but as a lifting up of the world to God, as we become ever more aware of his abiding presence and the depths of his atoning grace. It may be good to dampen expectations at the start. I shan't resolve for us how effective prayer is or how effective your prayer life is, as if I could weigh the effectiveness of them. In a world where everything is weighed and measured and where statistics abound, this way of measuring does not fit well. In truth it does not fit.

But what we can do is to affirm that a person who prays will be shaped by their prayer life. We can affirm that prayer brings comfort to those who pray and those who are prayed for. We can affirm that when we pray with people who are estranged from a living faith, who are bereaved, who are going through a difficult time, these persons are comforted by the knowledge that prayers are being said for them and their loved ones. We can affirm that prayer in Christ and aligned with Christ overcomes an utter sense of powerlessness in the face 'of the elemental spirits of the world'. (Colossians 2:8)

May one example suffice, one personal to our family. Lucille's uncle, I may have spoken of him before. Uncle Keith, a lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Navy, whose cruiser was sunk by Germans during the Second World War, organised prayer meetings on his ship – there was no chaplain – before it was sunk by a Nazi U-boat torpedo and he died alongside many others. Was his prayer effective? Christian prayer always reminds us of our mortality and that our hope is grounded in God. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine... The many troubles that have come upon us these latter days include a war at our doorstep, a war that we are all caught up in and that reminds me of Christopher Clarke's book *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. We will continue like Lucille's uncle to pray and organise others to join us in prayer as we face what the future will bring.

Why? Prayer gives perspective. It gives us a godly perspective. It reminds us that our hope is in God and God alone. It reminds us of God's sovereignty. Thy kingdom come. It reminds us that this day God's kingdom can come to rule in our hearts and in our minds. It reminds us of our vocation to govern all aspects of our common life and our personal lives quietly and godly. It reminds us to be concerned for and about our daily bread, of which there is enough if only we could live in peace with one another. It reminds us not to hold a grudge, but to forgive. It reminds us that God is holy and therefore his name is holy. It reminds us that God is a God of relationship and that we may know him as Father. It reminds us not to be indebted to others. It reminds us of Paul's injunction to owe no one anything but to love one another. It reminds us not to keep others down by keeping them in debt. It keeps us close to God. It maintains and feeds our relationship with God.

Presently a debate is raging in the UK about fiscal policy. It is about... Yes, taxes. Before proceeding let me first affirm that taxation is to be a good thing for the ordering of our common lives quietly and godly under God. In the UK the debate is summed up as follows. Should they be increased? Never **popular**. Should they may be maintained at the present level, but better managed? Sensible maybe, but not so **popular**. Should they be cut? Always **popular**. What politicians who take the last position fail to mention is that this will mean that the state will need to borrow. And that further generations will need to pay the debt. I am now going to change gears.

The service of Holy Communion is shot through with prayer: the Prayer of Preparation, the Collect of the Day, the Prayer of Penitence, the Intercessions (also called the Prayers of the People), the Eucharistic Prayer, the Lord's Prayer, the post-Communion prayers. In most of the hymns you will find lines with petitionary prayers. Many of Paul's letters which we hear passages our shot through with prayer.

Let's stop for moment. Often we speak of Word and Sacrament and that ideally Word and Sacrament are balanced. A reason for some to become Anglicans, but this way of understanding Holy Communion is masking a central component of Holy Communion. It fails to draw sufficient attention to the centrality of prayer in the service. Given the list above, what weaves and binds Word and Sacrament in the service of Holy Communion are the prayers. As some of you already know, my favourite spiritual is *There is a Balm in Gilead*. One of the lines in the song helped me to appreciate Paul the Apostle as a person of prayer.

If you cannot preach like Peter,  
if you cannot pray like Paul,  
you can tell the love of Jesus,  
who died to save us all.

This was recently deepened when in preparation for this year's pilgrimage to Greece 'in the Footsteps of Saint Paul' I listened to David Sutchet (yes, the British actor who plays Hercule Poirot) read Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, which is held together by prayer and calls for prayer throughout. Our familiarity with Paul the Theologian and tireless Missionary seems to me to have blinded many to Paul as a person of prayer and how fundamental an aspect of his life and ministry it was.

Before drawing to a close I want to touch on the two stories Jesus tells about prayer after providing the disciples in Luke's account with the Lord's Prayer. They are the tail end that should wag the dog. The dog being our prayer. One is about persisting in prayer not looking for outcomes as these will come as he later says. The first story is about persisting in prayer to such an extent that in worldly terms we become a nuisance and rather annoying. The other story is about God's nature. In no uncertain terms Jesus makes it clear that God's nature, God in Himself, is other, saying although humans are evil ('regard for others overruled by excessive self-regard') they know how to give good things. How much more does God want to give us the good things of life, as he does in abundance. God wants to give us good things. He does not want to give us a snake or scorpion, but rather an egg and a fish. But a closer reading directs us to what he really wants to give us. He wants to give us Himself. He wants to give us his Holy Spirit. Ask for these.

"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11.13)

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah we heard is about Abraham persisting in prayer in the nature of bargaining. It too is about God's nature. Abraham starts with 50 righteous persons so that Sodom and Gomorrah might be saved. None as the story goes are found and so the city is destroyed. This story stands in stark contrast to the Christian story, which does not put its confidence in human righteousness, but rather in Christ who has become our righteousness, as Paul the person of prayer puts it succinctly. (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Romans 1:17) This notion that Christ is our righteousness and that God's righteousness is intended for the whole of creation, the world and you and me is central to our understanding of God's atoning grace. We might ask? How effective is God's saving work? How effective is our prayer?

I know of people who live with the questions we have been looking at and who are deeply puzzled by what we termed this morning the efficacy of prayer, but they turn up regularly wanting to stay close to Jesus and his companions finding much strength, encouragement, solace and purpose for their lives. Like the disciples then we are a motley crew. Any encounter with Jesus or walking with those who are being Christ-shaped leads to questions.

Prayer, our prayer, has a central place in the heart of the Church and in each and every Christian. It informs. It affirms. It reminds. It shapes. It maintains. It gives us eyes to see with and ears to listen with. Prayer is conversation and listening is as much a part of it as much as the constant speaking. Speak Lord, your servants are listening! (Based on 1 Samuel 3:10b)  
**Amen.**