

Prayer – Part 1

Advent Sunday (A)

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During the season of Advent, I would like us as God's family to take time to look at the issue of Prayer. One of those books that has been influential on my life and ministry was Eugene Peterson's book - *The Contemplative Pastor*. In this book, he maintains that the main function of the pastor is to teach the flock to pray. If the pastor fails to do this, then all else is of little consequence. This got me thinking, and I realise that I had had little to do with the prayer life of others. Sure, I had prayed for them, but I had not spent time teaching them to pray.

But think about it -- When was the last time someone asked you this Question: "How is your prayer life?" and how would you answer it.

Think of someone whom you would consider to be devout. If I asked you to list what characterized them, prayer would be high on the list. Prayer is seen as an integral part of the religious life and a major part of our gathering together and yet it would be the most neglected area of the average Christian's life. This morning, I would like to take a closer look at prayer as a topic and as an activity, hoping to draw you into some of the mysteries of prayer, to encourage you in the practice of prayer and equip you with the tools of prayer.

Let me say from the beginning, that prayer is not a subject that can be learnt from books, or lectures or sermons, but it is a practical skill learnt and perfected through practice. Nor is it an option for the Christian. Jesus, in Matthew 6:5-6, said "When you pray..." not "If you pray...". Nor do I claim to be an expert, as I am only beginning to explore the heights and depths of prayer.

But do you believe in Prayer?

Can you think of an instance of answered prayer. A few years back, one of the Lecturers at the Uni in Launceston was lost with his two sons at the Walls of Jerusalem. They had been traveling around and, on the Sunday, had decided to take the day walk into the Bush. Totally unprepared for anything more than a stroll, they got themselves lost.

He was found at 2:30pm on Wednesday afternoon. At about 1:15pm on that day, 80 staff from the university gathered together for a prayer meeting and prayed for their safe return. To some I guess it was a coincidence, but as Archbishop William Temple observed, "coincidences occurred much more frequently when he prayed." Often it is easier for us to explain away the answer to prayer than to accept the miracle.

Perhaps it is useful to try and define prayer in the negative. Let us look for a minute at what prayer is not! Let us ask a couple or simple questions. How would you distinguish prayer from wishful thinking? Do you see prayer as a type of letter to Santa?

There is another common philosophy in the world today, which says that 'thinking positive or good thoughts will lead to positive or good consequences'. Many would say that this is what prayer is. How would you distinguish between prayer and positive thinking?

In simplest terms, any definition of prayer should contain the following elements:

- Acknowledgement of God
- Acknowledgement of Dependence
- Conversation/Communication
- Belief/Faith

Why pray?

It is easy to answer well why not? For if God exists, he will answer, and if not, well you lose nothing, but this is probably the worst reason for prayer. Prayer should not be motivated by gain, and yet if most of us were honest, it is our prime motivation for prayer. We use prayer as a type of emergency backup, to get us out the impossible situations. In bible college, it is interesting to note how more fervent prayer becomes the closer the exams get. It is true that God will answer these prayers on occasions, but this is not what he desires.

Our starting point for prayer must always be God. We should not pray for ourselves, or because of ourselves, but because of who God is and what has done. As the Westminster Confession declares that 'the chief end of man is to glorify God. Therefore, as we come to pray, we should focus on the one to whom we pray. And it is prayer itself that draws us into the real presence of God. This is the purpose of prayer, that we are able to discern the nature and mind of God.

So prayer is not so much asking God what we want, but listening to and through listening, understanding his will and purpose, and making it our own. This is the meaning of "Thy will be done" in the prayer the Jesus taught us.

One last comment on prayer for today. It is easy for those of us brought up in a liturgical tradition to see prayer as a spectator sport. Something that we might leave to the saints, or to the priest. In our services, the priest prays, and we watch, but that is not the purpose of the liturgy. Set prayers should not be seen as removing us from the praying process but as we join with the minister, we should take the themes of the prayers, make them our own, using the eloquent words of prayers to join with the thoughts of our hearts, expressing as a congregation one common thought and purpose. The liturgy is designed to draw us together into one voice sharing our common purpose of worship of God and is most effective as each of takes the responsibility to make the prayers our own.

Nor should we see it only the province of the saints who have gone before. It natural to ask our fellow Christians to pray for us, this is the whole of the church, and one of our great privileges. Prayer is the natural outworking of our faith and to hold others before God, is one of the great opportunities of fellowship not only with God but with each other.

In this Advent season, a season of reflection leading up to our celebrations of the Nativity of our Lord, let us take the opportunity to review and reflect on our prayer life.

AMEN