

Sunday 10th June 2018
Prayer – putting it into practice.

If some-one important phoned us up, Mr. Trump, Mrs. May, Jeremy Corban, the Queen, and said that we were needed in an important matter of state, what would we say?

Probably we would choke a bit, or ask who was really on the phone trying to play a joke on us. If we were persuaded that the call was real, we would probably start to stutter and try to think of all the reasons why we could not do anything, or perhaps just panic!

We would probably think that a terrible mistake had been made and that they had called the wrong number and that we were not able for the job. However, if the caller persisted that no mistake had been made, but rather a careful search had been made, and we had been chosen to take up the matter on their behalf, what then?

If we were then told that everything that was required to fit us for this act of national service was available and would be supplied, training would be given, and that we would not be alone in this work, but there would be other chosen people engaged in similar work with us, what would we say?

Perhaps we would agree while still full of doubts and misgivings. If we were then given a date and time and place to go, how would we feel as we awaited the day to come? We would probably lose some sleep and toss and turn. Perhaps at times we would have notions of grandeur, day dream that the Queen was addressing the nation saying how it had been saved by you. Medals and biographies given and written. A new home, early retirement and invitations to Richard Branson's holiday Island, where we would be the guest of honour and everyone else would hang on our every word! Perhaps for a moment.

Probably most of the rest of the time, we would shrink and squirm inside at the prospect of being found out as being very unremarkable and being out of our depth from moment one!

That is how everyone feels when we begin to pray, especially out loud with others. I remember the first prayers of many people. The most remarkable was that of a young teenager who prayed as follows, I remember it so well,

'Dear God.....Ah, I don't know any more. Amen.'

That person was not downcast. They had broken the sound barrier and we all rejoiced.

You see, it is not what we say, it is where it comes from, our heart, and the love and desire for God in it. That prayer scored very highly in love and desire! Did you ever put fridge art from your kids up? In my study, I have two pieces of art work from my boys when they were in primary school. They are pinned up on the board. I've just looked at them again and smiled with pride, and a bit of a tear in my eye! Everything else will be

thrown out before these ever go. They will wear out, not be thrown out! Precious beyond price!

The book of Revelation says that God stores our prayers in a bowl. The prayer I just told you about is in that bowl – the perfect prayer of a childlike heart. That does not mean we remain childish, but it is still the heart and desire for God that matters, not the elaborate words or high minded concepts alone. That is why we Presbyterians don't use a prayer book, because prayer is something every believer can learn, but never master, to say from the heart, not just read unthinkingly from a book, as often happens.

God is an absolute Sovereign. Even if He had never created, He would not be any less or any more than He is. He would not be happier or sadder. He does not have any need, and He does not need us to fill any lack in Him. However, mystery of mystery, grace of grace, He does need and desire that we pray. God has in some mysterious way so ordered the creation that He unrolls His purposes not only in Sovereign Power, but with the prayers of the saints.

I can remember the first time I was ever taken fishing by Uncle Charlie. My tackle was quite unsuitable to fish a loch for wild Brown Trout. I hooked nothing other than a few bushes, and the bottom of the loch. Uncle Charlie caught two beautiful one pound Brown Trout. One on the fly, and one spinning. Spinning was not permitted, but he did it anyway. As we walked to my Dad's car at the end of the day, we sat to rest, and Uncle Charlie got my attention, and lobbed the two trout in a bag to me. I caught them, and he told me I had caught my first brace of trout, and I could go home and honestly tell Mum that I had caught them. I did that and was as proud as I could be. She did hear the whole story, but I had still caught them – even though I hadn't!

This is a parable of God and us at prayer – God does the big bit, but He includes us in the triumph!

To be invited, commanded, and drawn to pray is the highest privilege any human being can be given. If we were overwhelmed to be called upon by the Queen to do some service for the nation, how much more should we be astonished to be called to pray and so serve the eternal purposes of God?

In the aftermath of the recent Royal Wedding, I saw a worthy from Nairn who had been invited to the group of people who were admitted to the castle grounds. They were in their Sunday best, and they were absolutely thrilled to have been there! And rightly so.

How do we regard prayer? I really don't have to ask, because I know the way many people feel about prayer. It is the way that many I have known these last 50 years felt. Words like boring, hard, why bother, you can do it on your own, it doesn't make any difference, why all the bother! We have probably thought or said or felt this and more over our life time.

I wonder how many people you have met, who like the lady from Nairn considered every prayer invitation a thrill and privilege. None of us feel that all the time, but many never ever feel that! It is almost as if we are a race of Church people who say 'Ba! Humbug' not only to Christmas, but to prayer!

That is not how people who pray, and are seeking to learn to pray think and feel. Inadequate, yes, Ba humbug, hardly ever.

1. Prayer is a privilege, and the highest work a Christian can engage in. Wesley has this line in one of the sections of his hymn, 'Soldiers of Christ arise,' he says –

'Extend the arms of mighty prayer,
In grasping all mankind.'

We may not be able to go to Syria to help refugee children, but we can pray. We may not know how to speak to followers of Islam, or be able to speak to them in their own language, but we can learn to love and pray for them. We may not know how to resolve the dilemma over Brexit and a Republic of Ireland and UK border crossing, but we can pray. We may not know what is best for Scotland, independence, a Republic, adopting the Scottish Euro, but we can pray! I would suggest that if we don't pray, we have no right to complain if we it all goes wrong!

Prayer can reach places, people and situations we cannot get to, or resolve. If you doubt this, I would refer you to the Bible. By prayer, God invites the able and the disabled, the fit and the housebound, young and old, rich and poor, degreed or having left school at 14, fat and thin, and every other contrast we can imagine, to engage in His purposes for nations and peoples, the present days and days to come.

God has not left us without help. He has given us the model prayer of The Lord's Prayer. He has given us Jesus High Priestly prayer in John. He has left us the example of Jesus, who went to pray, 'very early in the morning,' and on other occasions through the night. When the Bible says that Jesus, 'lifted His eyes to heaven,' it means that He prayed, and this He did during the day and when with people.

That is the training God has given, but there is much more, He has provided His precious promises. God tells us what He plans to do, we then ask Him to do that He tells us He wants to do! It's not rocket science, it is divine wisdom!

He has given us His priorities – Hallowed be thy Name, Thy Kingdom come, and so on. He has given us other people to pray with to help us, encourage us, this is why the prayer gathering is so important.

God has promised and sent the Holy Spirit to be in us and with us. The Holy Spirit is given to illuminate the Scriptures and burden our hearts in prayer for the immediate agenda God would have us pray for.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness when we don't know what to pray for. He prays in us with sighs and groans when we don't even know how to pray for ourselves.

The Holy Spirit even gives us unknown languages so that we pray according to God's will. This is known as 'Tongues.' These are not the sole possession of Pentecostals or Charismatics, nor does every Pentecostal or Charismatic speak in tongues – though Paul expressed the desire that all Christians would do so.

So far so good?

Prayer is a high calling, but that does not make it an easy calling. If we think prayer is easy, well, you must be the only person alive that thinks so. Is an artist ever fully satisfied with what they accomplish? I don't really know, but how can an artist ever be satisfied with a landscape but not be able to have the grass moving in the wind, or the scent of pine trees when depicting a wood, or the song of running water? How can a poet be satisfied with words when love is bursting in their hearts? There is always a sweet sorrow in our best art or poetry, as there is in our praying. We always want to grow, become more skilled, better, richer, more expressive, so it is as we grow in prayer. Not easy, and we never 'arrive.'

Turn to James 5 verses 8 to 11.

To me, this is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible to accept. It tells us that Elijah was a man of nature just like the rest of us! Sorry, I feel as if I am as unlike Elijah as it is possible to be. I have prayed for dry weather and I have prayed for rain. I have not kept count, but about 50% of the time I prayed for a dry day, it rained. And 50% of the time I prayed for rain, it remained dry. So did prayer make any difference? I am definitely not like Elijah.

But turn to 1 Kings 17 and read the story of Elijah. Look at chapter 19 and verses 3 and 10. What do you see? I see me. Scared, running away, and feeling that I am different, alone, out of step, even wrong. I find myself in the wrong place at the wrong time, discouraged, depressed, wondering what to do, and thinking that my enemies will get me before much longer.

Now that makes me of like nature with Elijah. However he had those glistening moments of triumph where it was almost as if God were telling Him to tell Him what to do.

How do we now see Elijah? He was definitely very human, like us. How then did those golden events come about? They came about, because like David who became King David, he had had a private, secret life of prayer with God. It was not a sudden or an instantaneous event to pray as Elijah prayed, but he had been trained over his former life in the school of prayer. Think of little Joseph who became the prime minister of Egypt, and the defender of his race. He learned his art in the pit, the house of slavery, the jail, and then was fitted for his high calling. So it is with us. We learn to be fitted for

prayer by learning that we are unfit for such a work. This sounds a bit Irish, but think of what Paul said. He said that when he was weak, that was when he was strongest.

It is no different with us. It is in the spending of time, daily waiting on God, meditating on Scripture, praying and having our prayer life expanded and enriched, that we rise to such praying as we find in the lives of the New Testament believers, and the Fathers and Mothers who have followed after and across the ages. John Knox's cry for Scotland, 'Give me Scotland, or I die,' was the fruit of life spent growing in prayer by doing it. I believe that prayer of John Knox is still reverberating in the courts of heaven and that we have not yet seen its full answer.

Perhaps then, Elijah is not unlike any of us. He was far from perfect. He was not nearly as strong as he appeared when flowing in the Spirit on the mountain confronting the prophets of Baal. He called down fire from heaven – that would have been a sight to see, and when called upon by the King of Kings, he played his part. This is what we are called to do. To play our part, to carry the relay baton for a yard or a whole 100 meters, in the 4 by 100 meter relay. We are not asked to do it all, and so in prayer, we will never become invincible, we will always need others to stand with us and guard our soft flanks. There is armour available from God, but we do not always have it firmly on, and we are still in process of learning and growing.

All this is known by God. He knows our every weakness. He calls us to action now, not when we reach an elevated state. In wrestling, children can participate meaningfully in the leagues of under 12, 14, 16 year olds, or however it works. For one competing in an under 16 contest, the training is as demanding to them as it is for 20 year olds. The fight is as real at their age and level, and victory is as sweet! This is how God deploys us in prayer. Today's prayer battle prepares us for the next and greater challenge.

Seek to practice, to train, and to grow in prayer, after all, Jesus has given the command to do so, and the help and the mode to do so.

At the present, there are times for prayer before Church every Sunday, at the Tuesday Bible studies, on Wednesday evenings at 7pm, every second Friday for ladies, and the Thursday evening house group. I hope that even over the summer to have other times set up for folk to gather to pray.

Coming to such gatherings does not mean that anyone will be forced to pray out loud. Though there will be a very positive and supportive response to any attempts to do so. We do not disparage the first steps of our children, neither do we despise the 'Dear God, I don't know any more,' prayer. It is your presence there, even if quiet, even if you don't say 'Amen' at the end of someone's prayer. Being there is a start.

By the way, our difficulty in personal and joint prayer is often a simple set of practical matters. I have said this before, but it is still true. Prayer requires that we plan it into our lives, keeping the diary. Things that are in the diary are more likely to happen. If it is in

the diary we will not double book, or forget, or let weeks pass without prayer. There is an old quip that comes to mind. Seven days without prayer makes one weak – true.

The second difficulty we have is that we run out of words very quickly when we begin to try and pray on a daily basis. This is where a hymn book comes in. Get hold of a Redemption Hymnal, or a Church Hymnal, that would be CH3. Get one with a wide selection of old hymns and if you want newer ones, they are on line, or in Mission Praise.

If we read the hymns, we will find that the author of these hymns struggled with all the same things that we struggle with. We are all in the same boat! Don't be content with that alone, but read and share their experiences, longings and prayers.

An old author, A W Tozer, said that in the 'old days' all that people had was their Bible and a hymn book, and there were regular visitations of the Holy Spirit and revivals. Perhaps today we have so many tools and schemes and strategies, that we rely on them and not on God. If we really did know our weakness and the power of God, if we really cared about the salvation of family, neighbour's and friends, if we really cared about the future of our nation and other nations, then the rooms of prayer and the houses of prayer would be crowded. They have been so in my life time, and they will be so again.

None of this is easy. But whatever did we get that was easy? Gold comes from mines, diamonds from great heat and pressure, and deep in the rock. These are not acquired easily, but what joy when they come. Just so with prayer, hard work, but the reward is priceless, eternally priceless.

One last thought, I don't remember what I said yesterday. God remembers every true prayed, and treasures them up. Imagine that, God remembering something we said, Wow

'When you pray, pray like this.'