

The Praying Life

Through Lent with Luke

By Peter Carrell and Lynda Patterson



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Contents

Introduction	page 4
How to run a study group using these studies	page 4
Introduction to Luke's Gospel	page 6
Week One: Prayer and authority (Luke 7:1-10) <i>Jesus heals a Centurion's servant</i>	page 8
Week Two: Listening is also prayer (Luke 10:38-42) <i>The story of Mary and Martha</i>	page 13
Week Three: How to pray/What to pray for (Luke 11:1-4) <i>The Lord's Prayer</i>	page 18
Week Four: Praying passionately (Luke 11:5-13) <i>Ask, seek, knock</i>	page 24
Week Five: Praying persistently (Luke 18:1-8) <i>The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge</i>	page 30
Holy Week: Praying in desolation (Luke 22:39-46) <i>Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane</i>	page 36

Introduction to the series

Inspired by Bishop Victoria Matthews' call to her Synod (September, 2012) for a year of prayer and study in the Diocese of Christchurch, this Lenten study series introduces Luke's teaching on prayer.

The guide is specifically designed for use in small groups in ministry units. Each session is based on a Bible study from Luke, which is the Lectionary Gospel for 2012/13 (Year C). The format offered is an introductory reflection, some study notes, questions and then suggestions about praying together in the light of the study.

Each group utilising these studies is encouraged to study and pray in a manner appropriate to the group's life. Some groups will have been meeting together for years, some may form especially for the six weeks of Lent.

How to run a prayer group using these studies

We recommend a 60 - 75 minute programme for the group plus time for refreshments served at the beginning, end or in the middle of the group's session.

Here is a guideline for the 60 - 75 minutes:

- Icebreaker (9 minutes) This could take any form

appropriate to the life of the group.

- Opening Prayer asking the Holy Spirit to illuminate Scripture (1 minute)
- Read the Introduction to the Study (5 minutes)
- Reading Luke's Gospel with time following for silent reflection (5 minutes)
- Reading the Notes ('Text in Context') and Questions (5 minutes)
- Discussion of Questions (15 minutes)
- Prayer (20 - 35 minutes)

For each study an illustration is supplied. This illustration could contribute, as appropriate, to times for reflection or for discussion.

Praying in your study group

Some groups are well-versed in different ways of praying together. The guidelines provided here after each study do not require such groups to pray differently to their established custom(s). They are offered for groups which are new to praying together and as possible new ways of praying for established groups.



Introduction to Luke's Gospel



Luke's Gospel is similar to Matthew and Mark but has distinctive themes which are expressed through material included by Luke which is not found in the other gospels.

Briefly, Luke's special interests are the poor (blessed), the rich (cursed unless letting go of their riches), women (prominent as agents of God's purposes, as disciples, as people helped through miracles), the Holy Spirit and joyful praise. All of this, in connection with Luke's 'sequel', the Acts of the Apostles, is told with an eye on the expansion of Christ's movement and mission beyond Israel to include the Gentiles as it spreads throughout the world.

Stylistically, Luke writes with a pastoral heart and artistic skill to paint pictures of characters in words we never forget: Elizabeth and Mary, Simon the host and the unnamed woman who crashes his dinner party, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, his waiting father and his resentful brother, the Crafty Steward, Zacchaeus and the two disciples who Walk to Emmaus and run back to Jerusalem.

If prayer is conversation with God, then Luke offers a series of stories and sayings which probe just what conversing

with God means. We have chosen six passages which directly or indirectly engage with the meaning of prayer for today.

Two of our stories are unique to Luke's Gospel (10:38-42; 18:1-18). In our six studies we take up themes of authority, listening, method and content of prayer, passionate persistence in prayer and praying in desolation. In every case Jesus, by word and deed, is our teacher.

Luke's Gospel in its oldest form does not actually say it was written by Luke, but we have no reason to doubt the very ancient tradition that it was. The author of the Gospel is also the author of the Acts of the Apostles. We do not think Luke knew Jesus personally, but we know Luke was a companion of the Apostle Paul (Colossians 4:14). He may even have accompanied Paul on some of his sea voyages, as told in Acts where, intriguingly, the narrative voice changes from 'he/they' to 'we' (Acts 16:11).

One scenario for the writing of the Acts is that it was written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome, 62-64 AD. Since Acts is a sequel to Luke's Gospel, then either the Gospel was written in that period, or a little earlier, perhaps during the two years Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea before transferring to Rome. Caesarea on the coast of Palestine would have been a perfect place to write down the distinctively 'Palestinian' stories which are unique to Luke (e.g. the Good Samaritan, the

Prodigal Son). Nevertheless, most scholars, reading in both Gospel and Acts a deep reflection on the course of Christian history, think the two volumes were written much later, perhaps between 80 and 100 AD.

A final introductory note about Luke's Gospel. It is the only gospel with a preface (1:1-4). In it Luke tells us that he has set out to be as good an historian as possible, according to the historical methods of his day. But the fact is that when Luke tells us things the other gospel writers do not, and these things are according to themes special to Luke, we know we are also reading a history shaped to communicate vital theological knowledge.

Prayer and authority

Jesus heals a centurion's servant

Introduction

I remember the night we decided to have a party. We were students and our exams were finally over, and the summer stretched ahead of us, long and hot and full of promise.

Word of the party spread, and eventually there were about 70 of us crammed into a small terraced house. We had the music cranked up to maximum volume. People were dancing the conga in the back garden and in the living room and up the stairs; there were a lot of people arguing about the composition of the punch in the kitchen and some rugby players were trying to wrestle our much-loved fake leather sofa outside.

Then suddenly a couple of policemen appeared in the doorway.

“Who’s in charge here?” one of them asked.

We all looked at each other, or at the floor, or at the sofa wedged halfway through the door. Eventually someone said,

“Well, I live here, but I’m not really in charge as such.”

“No,” the policeman said. “But I am. And the music stops now.”

With that it all came to a sudden abrupt halt. The guests scrambled over the sofa and out into the night, the punch was abandoned and the party was well and truly over.

The policemen appeared with the full weight of the law behind them. They had the authority, whether we liked it or not. It didn’t take any special insight to recognize it or wisdom to respond to it.

This study passage from Luke 7 hinges on exactly that kind of authority. A gentile army commander asks some of his Jewish friends to talk to Jesus on his behalf, to plead with him to heal his servant. His friends present the centurion’s credentials, expecting that Jesus will heal the man’s slave when he hears his CV rolled out – he built the local synagogue; he’s a friend of the people, in short, he might be



Paolo Veronese and Workshop: *Christ and the Centurion*, c.1575

a gentile but he's not the really offensive sort of gentile. Go on, they seem to be saying. Heal the man's servant, Jesus – he deserves it.

So Jesus sets out to meet him. But the centurion is a man of remarkable humility, who is embarrassed to have Jesus come under his roof. He doesn't rely on all the good things he has done to earn himself a hearing. He simply has faith that Jesus is able to heal with a word. After all, he says, he knows the authority he possesses over soldiers and slaves – he tells them to go and they go, and to come and they come. He has faith that Jesus possesses exactly the same sort of authority.

Jesus exclaims at how remarkable this is. The man has faith of a sort that he hasn't even found among his own people. "Faith" as Jesus seems to mean it here isn't a sort of woolly general religious feeling, but a very specific recognition of Jesus' authority.

When it comes to prayer, we long for it but run away from it as well. We believe we should do it, and we may even want to do it, but there's something that always seems to get in the way. I suspect that a large part of that 'something' is the belief that we have to sort out our credentials before we approach God in prayer – we have to tie up the loose ends in our lives, and attend a course or two on how to pray, or

listen to a sermon series, or learn Greek and study theories about prayer.

We can be a bit like the friends of the centurion, presenting reasons why he deserves to be helped. We seem to have the impression that prayer is like a sort of interview with the bank manager. We have to put on our best clothes, and find acceptable things to say in the right sort of language, and generally get our act together and sort out our motives and try to make the best possible impression.

That puts the cart before the horse. We assume that prayer is something that you can master, the way you master complicated mathematical equations or baking a pavlova so it's exactly soft enough in the middle. That makes us feel competent and comfortable in control of the situation.

But when you pray, you start from a place of weakness. Like the centurion, you recognize that God has complete authority – that God holds all the cards. We have to quite calmly and deliberately give up control, recognize our own powerlessness and our strange muddled mass of motives – loving and selfish, altruistic and bitter all rolled into one.

We don't need to disentangle our motives, or be bright and sparkly and filled with faith before we start. In Luke 18:17 Jesus says that we must become like little children to enter

the Kingdom of God. Children don't ponder long and hard and question their motives before they approach adults with their requests – they just turn up and ask.

That's how it is with prayer. We just have to set aside our concerns that we're not good enough, or we don't know enough or our motives are a bit dodgy and just begin to spend time with God. And when we pray, we'll find that all these things are taken care of as we are shaped, painfully slowly, to be more like Christ.

Read the gospel text: Luke 7:1-10

Reflection

Text in context

Luke has a special interest in god-fearers (Gentiles disposed to follow the ways of the Jews even if they did not convert to become Jews), and centurion god-fearers feature here and in Acts 10. A centurion was a Roman military officer, used to obeying orders and to giving commands to his subordinates. His slave was clearly very important to him, perhaps even being treated as a 'son' (so John's Gospel version, 4:46b-54).

Matthew and Luke have a significant variation in the telling of the story: in the former the centurion speaks directly to Jesus, in the latter the centurion communicates with Jesus

through intermediaries.

In Luke's version the humility of the centurion in the presence of the 'Lord' is underscored by the use of intermediaries, 'I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you' (7:6). The centurion is commended for his faith, none greater has been found in Israel, but the faith is expressed in a unique manner compared to other stories in the gospels. The centurion perceives Jesus as one who has authority over illness and so merely needs to give a command and healing will take place. So it does.

The point here in relation to prayer is that in prayer we come to Jesus with requests. A humble attitude opens the possibility of recognising the immense authority Jesus has. A simple trust in that authority, that is, in the Lord Jesus who has authority over the situations provoking our requests, is commended.

Questions

- Can you recall a request you made in prayer?
- Was it answered?
- How do we feel when a request is not answered? (Or not

answered as decisively as in this gospel story?)

- What is humility? How do we express humility when we pray to Jesus?
- What are the things that most get in the way when we pray?

Praying together

The centurion made a request for Jesus to help another person.

What requests would we like to make to Jesus for others?

It could be useful if one member of the group briefly jotted down these requests so that none are left out when the group prays.

Three possible ways to pray – as appropriate to the group and its experience of group prayer

1. Each member of the group commits to pray a one sentence prayer for a request made by another member of the group.
2. The group prays, as people feel led, for each request in turn.

3. One or two members of the group commit to praying through the list of requests.

Notes from week one

Listening is also prayer

The story of Mary and Martha

Introduction

In the last years of her life, my grandmother lost most – if not all – of her inhibitions. In her early 70s, she took to searching op shops for clothing designed for people in their teens. Her favourite was a stretchy silver mini-skirt, which made quite a change from years of Harris tweeds and sensible shoes. She sang sea shanties from an upstairs window using a hairbrush for a microphone. She would torment the curate when he came to visit by making a plate of tinned salmon sandwiches and crowning them with her false teeth. (The curate didn't visit often.) She explained it once when I was too young to really understand. "For years I did what was expected of me. Now it's time to relax a little."

The story of Mary and Martha is always a difficult one. Jesus seems to tell Martha off when she was only doing what was expected of her. When I have asked groups of people

where their instinctive sympathy is in the story, almost all of them have answered indignantly, 'With Martha!'. After all, Martha takes the initiative, welcomes Jesus into her home, and begins preparing a meal for him. But while she is busily working away on the food, her sister Mary does something unusual. Normally in the ancient world, all of the adult women would have shared in the responsibility for preparing a meal, but Mary chooses not to help out. Instead she sits quietly at Jesus' feet, like a student or a disciple would, and listens intently to what Jesus is saying.

Finally Martha has had all of that she can stand. We might have expected her to hiss at Mary through clenched teeth, "Mary, dear, I could use a hand with this, you know." But instead she softly reprimands Jesus and tries to get him to tell Mary to get to work. "Lord, don't you care?" she protests. "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all



Jacopo Robusti Tintoretto, 1518-94): *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, 1570-75

the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”

So here’s Jesus in the middle of an argument between sisters. Mary is sitting at his feet listening to him while an irritated Martha, wet bread dough on her hands, is politely telling him off. At this point, I always hope that I’ve been reading the story wrong all these years and I’ve missed a crucial verse or two, where Jesus pulls off a Jesus-like surprise and gets up and prepares the meal himself. Instead he gently scolds Martha right back and, then, apparently, takes Mary’s side in the dispute. “Martha, Martha,” Jesus says, “you are worried and distracted by many things, but there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen it; Mary has chosen the better part.”

We are part of a society - and sometimes a church as well - which is obsessed with busyness. We live under the tyranny of doing what is expected of us, and being seen to do it as well. Our commitments are increasing; we don’t see an end to the things we have to get done, and there is always something else rising up to claim any spare minutes we have. Life today is not so much about living in the moment as desperately trying to live in the next moment. It’s as if we exist in a state of bewilderment, forever trying to figure out what we’re missing. When we are exhausted at the end of a long working day, we automatically switch on

the television or we surf the internet, or we look for some other distraction, some way to keep on constantly moving. Almost without recognising it, we squeeze out the time for reflection, or silence, or just standing still and watching.

Sometimes that sense of duty and busyness is the thing that most gets in the way of prayer. We can't simply take time to listen to God or to relax in God's presence. How preposterous! Who is going to go out to work and earn a living? Who will take the kids to school or to hockey practice? Who is going to make the dinner or sort out the tax returns? Who could possibly find the time to sit and listen to God?

One of the most appealing invitations of Jesus in the New Testament is his words in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Genesis tells us that after God created the world and everything in it, he rested. That first sabbath is the theological framework for our rest in God. And yet we so often approach God as if prayer was about screwing up our eyes and gritting our teeth and trying very, very hard to do what is expected of us.

In his book, *Beginning to Pray*, the Orthodox monk Anthony Bloom told the story of an elderly woman who had been working at prayer for years without sensing God's presence.

He encouraged her to go to her room each evening and "for fifteen minutes knit before the face of God, but I forbid you to say one word of prayer." The woman's first thought was "How lovely! Fifteen minutes without having to do a thing!" But slowly she began to enter the silence created by her knitting. Soon, she said, "I perceived that this silence was not simply the absence of noise...it was not the absence of something but the presence of something. At the heart of the silence there was He who is all stillness, all peace, all poise."¹

Three practices have encouraged Christians over the centuries into prayer as a sort of sabbath rest. The first is solitude. This isn't long term isolation, but voluntarily giving up our normal patterns of activity for a time to be reminded that our wellbeing and our strength comes from God alone – we don't somehow earn them by busyness. The second practice is silence, or the stilling of our desperate attempts to control every situation and fix everyone around us. We strip away all the excess baggage and let go of all the distractions until we can begin to hear the still, small voice of God. The third practice is an intentional focus on God, and a desire to do what God wills.

The story of Martha and Mary doesn't mean that God can't be found on the ordinary things of life, in preparing meals

and going to work and making sandwiches for the kids and fixing the car. But the story recommends that something completely unexpected – that we take time out from doing our duty, pause, concentrate on the presence of God and truly listen to what God is saying to us.

Read the gospel text: Luke 10:38-42

Reflection

Text in context

This story is unique to Luke, but we also meet these sisters in John's Gospel (11:1-44; 12:1-11). Mostly we read the story in respect of priorities in discipleship: Mary's devotion to Jesus and his words is better than Martha's busy good works. Since many of us cannot afford the time to be 'Mary' we console ourselves with the thought that we have a friend and prototype in 'Martha'!

The sisters as disciples have raised some keen issues in recent years. Is this story a superb example of the prominence of women among the disciples of Jesus? Or, does this story reinforce the inherent patriarchy of early (and subsequent) Christianity? Mary, after all, listens in silence to Jesus, and when Martha speaks up, she is rebuked by Jesus! Here we acknowledge but bypass these stimulating issues and read this story in terms of prayer.

Martha speaks to Jesus (as we do in prayer), actually to complain about his lack of care (as we do), and to ask him to do something about a situation (as we do). Indeed, Martha does more than ask Jesus for help, she tells him to help. (We might want to compare this attitude to the centurion's humility in last week's story).

The 'prayer' here of Martha takes us directly to the question of listening to God in prayer: are we listening to God for God's answer to our complaints and requests? Are we open to God saying to us something we may not wish to hear?

Martha, we find here, is told that her complaint is unwarranted and her problem is not going to be solved by Jesus in the way she has told him to. Rather, she is implicitly invited to leave her busyness and join Mary in her peaceful, quiet devotion to Jesus – a devotion marked by her complete willingness to listen to Jesus.

Questions

- In this story, do we identify more with one sister than the other? Which one? And why?
- When we pray, what freedom do we have to tell God how we feel?

- If prayer is conversation with God, may we argue with God, even tell God what to do?
- If Mary exemplifies willingness to listen to Jesus in prayer, how do we 'listen to Jesus' when we pray?
- Is such listening something we do naturally, or is it a skill we can learn?

Praying together

Tonight the focus on praying together is on listening to God through a period of silent contemplation.

First, decide how many minutes will be spent in listening to God.

Then the leader of the group asks God to help group members to listen to God.

Silence (for the agreed time)

Then give opportunity for group members to share anything they believe God spoke to them during that time.

Opportunity should also be given to share with each other what the experience of silence-with-a-view-to-listening-to-God feels like.

If time, any reflections from the previous week's praying together should be shared

Notes from week two

How to pray/what to pray for

The Lord's Prayer

Introduction

When I was very young I owned a cat, unfortunately named Showaddywaddy. Possibly in revenge, she developed a series of bad habits. It started with bringing half-consumed baby mice into the house and laying them out as an offering before me. When – inexplicably - I wasn't delighted, she was obviously puzzled, so she moved on to small garden birds, all laid lovingly at my feet with a look of pride and deep joy. Then she took to stalking pigeons and even once wrestling a large half dead seagull into the house.

Eventually she was so desperate to please that she turned into a thief. She would wait until the neighbours had left for work, then scale their washing line like a tightrope artist and bring back a selection of underwear between her jaws with a glint of triumph in her eyes. She obviously believed that the half dead birds and mice and the stolen Y fronts were valuable because they were what she wanted herself.

She never really grasped that they were of no interest to me whatsoever.

The disciples have obviously realized that many of our offerings to God often resemble those mauled mice and half-eaten birds. They might be pleasing to us, but they miss the mark with God completely. So in this passage they ask Jesus quite specifically to teach them how to pray and what to pray for.

Jesus response isn't a long complicated discourse about the nature of prayer. It assumes a very simple fact: asking for things is the rule of the Kingdom of God. Why does God, the creator of the vast unknowable tracts of space and the shaper of the pattern of a single leaf choose to listen to our prayers? Because it delights God that we ask for things.

The prayer that Jesus teaches embraces everything from the coming of the kingdom to our daily bread. Adoration is present at the very beginning, but the core of the prayer



James Tissot, 1836-1902: *The Lord's Prayer* c.1886-1894

is built around three fundamental petitions, or things that we ask for ourselves.

The first is 'give'; "Give us each day our daily bread." In some ways it seems an incredibly trivial, almost unworthy thing to ask for. We might feel selfish and a bit embarrassed praying for such small things. It's like the old Peanuts cartoon when Charlie Brown is kneeling by his bedside. "Dear God", he prays, "Please bring me a new bike for Christmas." Then he pauses. "And world peace," he adds. Then he pauses again. "But mainly a new bike."

When you think about it, this kind of prayer is consistent with what we learn about Jesus in the Gospels. He concerned himself with the apparent trivialities of human life; producing wine for a wedding party (John 2:1-12) and food for the hungry and exhausted (Mark 6:31-44). He cared for the poor and the sick and the powerless – the "little ones". He doesn't forbid us for praying for the trifling things which make up the bulk of our days – for money to pay this month's bills; for a thorny problem with someone we work with; for a babysitter for Friday night. Much of our prayer will be about the very ordinary things we worry about. God cares deeply about all the concerns we wrestle with.

The second petition in the passage is 'forgive.' "Forgive us

our sins, as we forgive everyone indebted to us.” It always fascinates me that this petition comes where it does. It seems that once we’ve asked God for the things that really weigh on our minds, we realize the sheer amount that we owe God ourselves.

Asking for forgiveness seems at first sight to come with a condition attached. We are forgiven as we forgive. I don’t think this means that you’ve really got to grit your teeth and screw up your eyes and try very, very hard to persuade God to forgive you. There’s nothing begrudging about the grace of God. But once we open our hands and learn to give up our carefully cultivated resentments, there’s space to receive God’s forgiveness. As St Augustine says, “God gives where he finds empty hands.”²

God’s forgiveness does not mean we will stop hurting. It doesn’t mean that we will suddenly be able to forget, just that we won’t use the memory of the offense as a club to beat anyone else with anymore. Forgiveness doesn’t mean pretending that what we did doesn’t really matter. The offense is still real, but it no longer controls our behavior like a TV remote. Forgiveness is all about grace; so that what we’ve done no longer poisons the association between us and other people or us and God. It’s about restoring a relationship, and starting over again.

The final petition is “deliver”. “Do not bring us to the time of trial.” There are times in our lives when it feels like we are standing on the very edge of a precipice; the future is uncertain and what lies ahead terrifies us. This is a prayer for those times when our lives seem about to be derailed. Save us, God, from the things that are simply too hard for us to endure.

Petitionary prayer is simple; so simple that it might make us feel guilty. Aren’t we just asking God for stuff? Is that really OK? Shouldn’t we be spending time in adoration or contemplation or some form of prayer which is less self-absorbed? Yet this is the type of prayer that Jesus teaches when his disciples ask him how to pray. It should be our staple diet.

Read the gospel text: Luke 11:1-4

Reflection

Text in context

Interestingly, this passage, in which Jesus’ disciples explicitly request that he teach them to pray, is preceded directly by the story of Martha and Mary.

Note that the disciples approach Jesus when he himself was praying; his example inspires them to be taught how to pray. Jesus’ response was instructive: ‘When you pray,

say'. In a different context, the Sermon on the Mount, with a similar prayer, the Lord's Prayer, Matthew's Jesus says, 'Pray then like this' (Matthew 6:9). We need not argue which is correct but follow both instructions: from Luke, to pray the Lord's Prayer (as Christians have done through the centuries), and from Matthew, to pray according to the model of the Lord's Prayer.

Either way, these four verses teach us both 'how to pray' and 'what to pray for'. How to pray involves addressing God (as 'Father' we are approaching God as the source of life and provider of resources), with humility (holding God in awe as the One whose name is hallowed), yet with directness (our God does not require repetitive formula or gradual drawing near before making our requests known, see Matthew 6:7-8).

So we find the Lord's Prayer quickly makes our requests known. What to pray for is summed up in the shortest prayer of all, 'Your kingdom come.' In this kingdom, disciples rightly expect the Father to provide daily bread, to forgive sins, to expect disciples will be forgiving themselves, and to lead them away from temptation.

Some subtle issues are at work here when we probe the Greek behind our English translations and even press down to the likely Aramaic words spoken by Jesus. Here

we select just two matters to give a little more detail on.

One word in the sentence, "Give us each day our daily [*epiousion*] bread" is a real puzzle (i.e. scholars are not agreed on its meaning). Does *epiousion* mean "daily" or "tomorrow's" or "necessary"? Even though the word is difficult, the sense is well translated by "daily": bread for tomorrow is the bread for that day; necessary bread is the bread needed each day to sustain life.

In the background here we probably should think of the provision of manna in the wilderness for Israel: just enough was provided each day. In the foreground we should think of Jesus' challenging his disciples to trust God for the provision of their needs, storing up treasure in heaven rather than on earth.

We might profitably reflect in Luke 12:16-21, 12:22-34 and 21:1-4 as elaborations on this request. True disciples have just enough to live on, provided by God, and from that they are generous in giving to God and others.

"Lead us not into temptation [*peirasmon*]". This might be understood as an odd request given that God "tempts no one" (James 1:13). But, in fact, we can think of two ways in which this request is appropriately made.

(1) Jesus uses the same word for temptation in the Garden

of Gethsemane warning to his disciples, ‘Pray that you may not enter into temptation [*peirasmon*].’ In that context, the ‘temptation’ includes temptation to fall away, to deny Jesus under pressure of persecution or threat of it. Thus, an apt translation is found in current versions of the Lord’s Prayer: instead of “temptation” we have “time of trial.”

(2) Noting the immediate context preceding this request is the theme of forgiveness, the request is that we might not fall into the situation where we need forgiveness. The precise wording, “Lead us not ...,” is not a presumption that God does lead us to the place where we are overwhelmed by sin unless we ask otherwise. No! We are asking God’s help so that we are not powerless to take our responsibility to live rightly. (Such responsibility is a theme in James 1:12-16). In this broader understanding of the meaning of the request, (1) is also included.

Further observations: Bock makes the point that Jesus’ response to the disciple’s request “is important for the life of today’s church, since some reject the use of liturgical prayer. In saying “when you pray say ...” Jesus endorses the communal and liturgical function of prayer”.³ A Greek word, *hotan* = whatever, implies the prayer will be often prayed.

Questions

- When did you first learn the Lord’s Prayer? How do you use this prayer now?
- Can we pray the Lord’s Prayer too often? How often should we pray this prayer?
- How good a model or template is the Lord’s Prayer for our daily prayer?
- How comfortable do you feel about asking for things for yourself in prayer?
- What does “Your kingdom come” mean? Why does Jesus ask us to pray for the coming of his kingdom?

Praying together

At least two ways of using the Lord’s Prayer are suggested here. (You may be able to think of others!)

(1) One of the group undertakes to read one phrase of the Lord’s Prayer (from Luke’s Gospel). Following that, group members pray short prayers which accord with the theme of that phrase. At the conclusion, the whole of the Lord’s Prayer is prayed by the group.

(2) One of the group undertakes to read one phrase of the Lord's Prayer (from Luke's Gospel). After each phrase there is 1 – 2 minutes silence in which people either meditate on the phrase or pray silently in response to the phrase.

Notes from week three

Praying passionately

Ask, seek, knock

Introduction

The most embarrassing job I ever had as a shy teenager involved wearing a sandwich board. I had to parade up and down the streets of Belfast trying to catch the attention of Christmas shoppers, to hand out leaflets and be terribly enthusiastic and try to encourage them to buy. I wasn't very good at it. "Er, excuse me, umm, I wonder if...ahh" I'd mutter, as people pushed past to get on with their business. It was obviously a fairly popular profession, because there were three of us milling about within a few hundred yards of each other on the same pedestrian precinct. After a few weeks, we developed a ritual. At four in the afternoon all three of us would gather, still wearing our boards, at a little stall selling tea. I often wonder what those Christmas shoppers made of our little group. Because one man had a board proclaiming "The Harvest is nigh and we are not saved. Repent and believe the Gospel." The other board read in letters 6 inches tall, "Where will you spend

eternity?" Mine said, "Bargain golf supplies. 30% off. This week only."

The only thing I hate more than trying to sell people things is asking them for things, so this story stands as a continual rebuke. Does Jesus really mean that God is going to answer every request we make if we just pester him like one of those persistent telemarketers who always calls at dinner time?

There are two main elements in this puzzling little story. The first is something you could almost miss in the parable itself. The man knocks on his neighbour's door not to ask for bread for himself, but for a traveller who has turned up unexpectedly. This passage follows on directly from last week, when Jesus taught about petitionary prayer, but here we seem to be considering prayer on behalf of another, or intercessory prayer.

Intercessory prayer has a long and faithful history in the



Christian community. It involves shifting the centre of gravity from our own needs to the concerns of other people. Many people are much more comfortable praying on behalf of others than they are for themselves, and it is always an act of self-giving love. I once knew a woman in her 90s who was confined to her wheelchair and rarely left her house. When I visited her, she showed me a scrapbook. In it she had pictures of her children and grandchildren, letters from friends, photographs of missionaries cut from the church magazine and rough sketches and drawings of yet more people. Each week she would flip the pages and pray for each of the people in the sketchbook -well over 100 in all -faithfully, quietly and persistently.

She had a particular calling to pray almost unceasingly for the needs of others.

The second puzzling feature of the story is much more obvious. Does Jesus really

mean “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened?” Is he suggesting that God always gives us what we ask for when we pray?

The last verses of this passage compare God to a generous parent, who doesn’t deliberately trick his children by fobbing them off with snakes or scorpions when they ask for eggs or fish. So we ought to approach God like a parent, not a CEO or a headmaster who won’t want to be bothered with our trivial, irrelevant little concerns. After all, there are natural disasters and wars and famines and plagues and lingering grief at every point on the surface of the world. Why would God want to hear from us? In this passage, Jesus assures us that God has got time and space and love to spare for us, we needn’t be squeamish about asking for those things that concern us most.

“Ask, and it will be given.” It sounds simple, but God’s responses are often not. When I was at Sunday school, I was taught that God always answers prayer – but the answer may be yes, no, or wait. I didn’t think to ask then, why, if God loves us, we sometimes hear the answer ‘no.’ Every sickbed, every bereavement, every grief for a lost relationship or a missed opportunity is a monument to the fact that God sometimes answers our requests, for other

people or for ourselves, with a simple “no”.

I grew up with my grandparents, and when I was nine, my grandfather sat me down on the sofa one Sunday night and told me that he was going to die. And it turned out that he was right. He didn’t get any better, and some time later, he died. And when I look back on it now, from the moment he told me to the moment he died, I never once prayed for him to be healed. I wonder now why I didn’t. I was young, of course, and I come from a stoical sort of family where there was virtue in simply facing facts. But I think I let reality get in the way. What if I prayed hard and nothing happened? How could I bear the disappointment? And how would God handle my terror and anger and helplessness?

There are no easy answers. But I believe that Jesus taught us to address to God the things that matter most to us and trust that we will always be heard by God who loves us. God can take whatever honest emotion we throw, however frightened or confused or bitter we are. When we let reality get in the way, we’ve given in, and we’re treating God as a bureaucrat or a dictator, not as a loving parent who wants what’s best for us.

In the church we talk about salvation a lot, and we don’t always say very clearly what we mean. But when you boil it down, salvation means that God touches our lives, our

past and our future, and changes us. For some of us our past is like a box room filled with shabby furniture and broken toys and we can hardly bear to open the door and look at it. Salvation means that God touches the past and changes it from a burden to a gift. When we talk about this salvation of the past, we call it the forgiveness of sins. And God also touches our future, and changes it from a blind corner full of fear and anxiety to place full of hope. When we talk about the salvation of the future, we call it eternal life. God touches the present too, and sometimes that means healing in a way, which we can see and touch and taste, and sometimes it doesn't. And I can't tell you why some people are healed and some prayers are answered and some aren't, but I believe that when God touches us, we are changed, and the changes are real.

Read the gospel text: Luke 11:5-13

Reflection

Text in context

Jesus tells a parable unique to this Gospel, about an annoying friend's impudent (or persistent) request. The parable flows into familiar and memorable words from Matthew's Gospel (but there in a slightly different context). 'Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you.'

The sense of the Greek present tense of the verbs is a continuing action. What is the difference between this sense, which implies repetition of our asking, and Jesus' warning in Matthew 6:7-8 about the pointlessness of using many words in prayer 'for your Father knows what need before you ask him'?

Perhaps the difference is this: in Matthew, Jesus deters us from trying to get God to change his mind through repetitive prayer, especially deterring us from thinking that God is impressed by the quantity of our words. In Luke, two differences are emphasized.

First, Jesus challenges us to commit ourselves wholly to securing the coming of God's kingdom. To pray and keep on praying for the kingdom to come is to pray passionately – to commit with intensity to the will of God being done.

Secondly, Jesus draws us to God as Father, the God who loves us with infinite grace. This God, Jesus is saying, "is approachable and should be approached often and with confidence".⁴

Why 'ask, seek, knock'? Is this the same thing repeated in slightly different ways, or similar things, related to each other but different? Bock suggests that asking is about praying, seeking about pursuing God and God's will, and knocking is about coming into God's presence [p. 1060-61].

Jesus encourages us (we could say) to pray according to God's will – the will of God which we have sought by coming into God's presence. His threefold command to ask, seek, knock is a direction to disciples to press into God's heart, confident of the gracious love we will find there.

This approach to prayer is not in vain. Luke 11:10-13 is a remarkable promise. Will we receive it? 'For everyone who asks receives ... how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?' What Jesus says challenges our faith (will we believe him?) and our understanding of God (do we know who God is - a loving, generous, kindly Father?).

Questions

- Can we recall occasions when we have persisted in asking or seeking or knocking? What was the result?
- If God would give us one gift today, what would you like to receive?
- Is the Holy Spirit the answer to all our prayers?
- Why does God want to give us the Holy Spirit?

Praying together

Prayer after this study could be in two parts, Persistence in Prayer followed by Asking for the Holy Spirit.

(1) Persistence in prayer: the group decides on one topic for prayer (any topic, whether personal or general, whether for a specific need of an individual or for a particular situation). It would be important not to spend more than a few minutes making this decision. The group then prays for that topic (and only for that topic) for ten minutes.

(2) Asking for the Holy Spirit: in one of several possible ways* the group prays for the Holy Spirit to fill each member of the group. The prayer could be as simple as 'Come, Holy Spirit, fill your servant Jane.'

*(i) each member of the group prays for the person on their left until all have been prayed for.

(ii) the whole group gathers around each member of the group in turn, laying hands on the person, with one person praying for the Holy Spirit to come upon that person.

(iii) the leader of the group prays for the gift of the Holy Spirit for the group, with silence following for several minutes, with the Grace being said by all as the conclusion.

Notes from week four

Praying persistently

The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge

Introduction

When I was a lay chaplain in Oxford in the UK, my claim to fame was that I lived next door to the professional atheist Richard Dawkins. We used to smile nervously and avoid catching each other's eye, the way you do in England when you know exactly who someone is but you've never quite been introduced. The only problem came when I invited the chapel congregation over at the end of each term for a party. The mass gathering of Christians next door seemed to incense him. He would respond by playing Verdi's Aida discouragingly loudly through the walls. The party would continue and we would simply raise our voices to make ourselves heard over the music from next door. Eventually the opera would be playing at a volume so loud it made the windows rattle and even a shouted conversation was impossible. At that point the students looked at each other and made a decision. They galloped out into the back garden and arranged themselves on each other's shoulders

so they were visible above the fence. Then they started to sing hymns at the top of their voices pointed directly at Richard Dawkins back door. It's amazing how threatening 'Shine, Jesus, Shine' can sound when you really put your heart into it.

This week's story from Luke teaches us specifically to persist in prayer even when the noise of the opposition is almost overwhelming. It's so easy to become disheartened when we pray. Perhaps we're praying for another person and what we have pleaded and requested for them just never seems to happen. Or perhaps we're praying for ourselves and yet our circumstances never change. Or maybe we're committed to the prayer of adoration and contemplation, to simply gazing on God and trying to listen to him, but we never have any real sense of God's presence with us. It's so easy to just let prayer fade in and out of our lives like a shaky radio signal and think, 'Well, this is not for me. It's just too hard.' Jesus tells this week's parable as an



Unknown artist, late 20th century

encouragement to “pray always...and not lose heart.”

Prayer, says Jesus, is a bit like a helpless widow who refuses to accept that she doesn’t have a chance. The odds are stacked against her, and even the judge she turns to is corrupt and disinterested. But she carries on struggling for justice and in the end her persistence wins the day. It’s interesting that Jesus is equating prayer here with the yearning for change. Prayer may change our circumstances or it might change the world around us but it always changes us. One of the quietly dramatic things that prayer does is to bring us into such a relationship with God the Father that, by the power of the Spirit, we are continually shaped and moulded to be more like Christ. It’s hard to sustain a life of prayer unless you’re prepared to change.

One of the books which had the biggest impact on me when I was younger was the autobiography of a Carmelite nun called Ruth Burrows. She has been trying to pray as a nun for 65 years. And what has she to show for it? Darkness, by her own account, and the feeling that God does not exist. As a young woman, when she prayed, nothing “happened”, and she soon realised it would always be like this. “It is impossible to understand my life unless it is seen all the time against this background,” she wrote in *Before the Living God*. So is prayer just a failure? Should she give up

and move on to something more satisfying?

I don't think prayer can ever be a failure, even though we sometimes say to ourselves "I can't pray"; or "I pray and nothing happens" or "I'm praying to myself." To believe in the God of Jesus Christ is to know that, through what God in his love has done for us, there is absolutely no barrier between God and ourselves. We have free access. God is always available, always there, always with us. If we set aside some time to pray, to affirm God's loving presence and offer ourselves to do everything he wants, God will not fail transform us. Whether we feel it's happening or whether we don't doesn't really matter.

Prayer is essentially God's work. Our part is to give time, do our best to keep attention, surrender ourselves as best we can. Then we can be sure that God works. Prayer does not ask for signs or for tokens of confirmation, although we might sometimes want them. It is God who prays in us, so what should we expect to see and feel? When we really grasp that prayer is essentially God's business, not ours, we will never talk of failure, no matter how unsatisfactory prayer seems to us.

The religious word for addressing God intently and persistently is supplication. It's a declaration that we are deadly serious about this prayer business. John Calvin

says, "We must repeat the same supplications not twice or three times only, but as often as we have need, a hundred or a thousand times...We must never be weary in waiting for God's help."⁶ This parable is an encouragement to those curiously unfashionable virtues of fortitude and steadfastness. It inspires commitment, even if the results of prayer are never clear and certain.

Much of this parable is about not losing heart and maintaining hope, a continual theme in the Biblical accounts, though it can be hard to do that when you feel that you're on your own. This is where a community of faith comes in. A large chunk of the book of Isaiah was written when the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon, strangers in a strange land, uncertain that they would ever see their homes again. In Isaiah 51:1-6, Isaiah says, remember the rock from which you were hewn. Look back to your origins, your personal history, your spiritual ancestors like Abraham and Sarah. Remember who you are and the promises that God has given to you. Remind yourselves of the stories of those who went before you who acted with faith and imagination on the promises of God. Despite the delays and the struggle, God never abandoned them. God won't abandon you either.

At its best, that's how the church works too. The church

is not a kind of holy citadel with rigid membership requirements, and its not a feel-good club committed to keeping people entertained. The church is just this – the people who participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus. When you individually feel that your faith is shaky, or is failing, or is honestly not really there at all anymore, the church is there to step in and hold that faith for you until it makes sense again. And it will. I was talking to a woman once who said, “You know, I could never be part of the church. And if you knew what I’d done, you wouldn’t want me.” And I said, ‘If you knew what I’d done, you wouldn’t be worried.”

In the meantime, keep on praying persistently.

Read the gospel text: Luke 18:1-8

Reflection

Text in context

Despite the apparent simplicity of its memorable plot, this is a very complicated story: obstructive judge, obsessive appellant, obsession wears down obstruction!

The complexity lies in the framing of the story.

It begins with an explanation that this parable is told to the disciples ‘to the effect that they ought always to pray and

not lose heart’ (18:1).

It ends with two messages, one slightly different and the other quite a bit different to the initial explanation. First, ‘And will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night ... justice to them speedily’ (18:7-8). Secondly, ‘Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’ (18:9). But, is the difference so great?

To pray for anything concerning human life is to seek justice, that is, to seek for people to be in right relationships with one another and with God.

To pray for any matter at all is to be a person of faith. A praying person has not given up the faith and when the Son of Man comes he will find faith on earth wherever he finds people who pray.

What is the application of this complex passage?

Sometimes we are called to persist in prayer. Alert to the dangers of heaping up empty words on God (Matthew 6:7-8), nevertheless on some matter we feel led to persist in prayer (like the widow in the parable persists in seeking justice). Perhaps a friend is ill, or a workmate is in trouble, or a country we love is embroiled in a very long civil war. We sense that God is asking us to pray, and pray. And pray. To do so is to enter testing territory. Will we persist ‘night

and day,' trusting that God will give justice?

Conversely, disciples of Christ wait for the Son of Man to come with the justice of God at the conclusion of all things (alongside Luke 18:9 we might also read 21:7-36).

How will we wait? Will we steadily 'lose heart' as time marches on and no end is in sight? Or, is Christ saying to us, will we persist in prayer, never losing heart, because through prayer we express our faith in God as the just judge who will bring justice? Indeed, our persistent praying should include prayer that we will not lose heart and will remain faithful under pressure (similar to the prayer, "Lead us not into temptation").

A puzzle: in our passage at its conclusion there is a tension between crying to God 'day and night' and Jesus' promise that God will give justice 'quickly' (18:7-8). Commentators have tied themselves in knots over the apparent discrepancy between justice delayed and justice delivered speedily.

Here we mention two explanations.

(1) The sense is "suddenly": when justice finally comes, it will happen quickly. We can think of the parable itself: for a long time the judge resists the widow's entreaties and then, suddenly, he gives in and immediately grants her request.

(2) The sense is "soon": the judgment of all things, when

justice will be granted by God and the kingdom comes in its completeness, is always imminent. Though delayed, we should live as though it will come tomorrow. From our perspective we are impatient for vindication. From the perspective of eternity, the span of time between Christ's first and second comings is but a day or so.

Questions

- Who is the hero in the story: the widow or the judge?
- What are we praying for at this time which fits well with this story? How does the story illuminate our situation?
- How does faith relate to prayer?
- Do we ever give up praying for something which seems a long time in coming? Should we ever give up praying for something which does not appear to be coming?
- If we are growing impatient in our prayers, what and who could help us to deepen our patience?

Praying together

For this time of prayer, one possibility is to continue the 'persistent prayer' begun the previous session.

Another possibility is for a period of silence to mark the prayer session, but with each member encouraged to use the time to pray for something they have been praying for in the past and for which they have not yet received an answer.

A third possibility is that each member of the group prays for the person on their left, specifically, that they might have faith when they pray and patience when they are tempted to stop praying.

Notes from week five

Praying in desolation

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane

Introduction

On the Dingle Peninsula in the very far west of Ireland, as far as you can go before you drop off into the roiling Atlantic Ocean, is a peak called Mt Brandon. Traditionally, it was the place from which St Brendan the Navigator went to pray on the night before he set off in a leather coracle to discover the new world. The mountain rises about 3000 feet straight up from the sea, and there is a path covered in sheep droppings and almost choked with gorse. Every so often there are weathered wooden crosses and the invitation to pause and pray for a while.

One January, a week before I moved to New Zealand, I decided to climb Mount Brandon as my farewell to Ireland. The first part of the walk was easy enough – over a ridge and down the other side - but soon the track got steeper and rougher. Then a fog began to roll in from the sea, slowly and gradually until I could only see a few feet in front of me. Climbing in the fog is an eerie feeling. At one point,

I panicked and thought about retracing my steps, but the path behind was as wet and treacherous as the one ahead, so I carried on picking a slow path upwards. I trusted that the people who had climbed there over the generations had known where they were going, even if I didn't. Eventually the path flattened and I reached the summit as dusk was starting to fall. I would love to say I savoured the moment, but instead I looked around and saw... absolutely nothing.

There are times in all of our lives when it feels like we are walking through a thick fog on a path with steep drops all around. Jesus experienced something very similar in the passage we're considering this week. It is the night of his arrest and one of his closest friends will betray him. He knows what awaits him, so he faithfully he goes to pray in his usual place with the disciples.

Who can doubt his anguish? There are two parts to his prayer. The first is resonates all too often with us. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me." It's too much



El Greco: *The Agony in the Garden*, 1590-1595

to bear, Lord. It's too hard. Please, please, take it away. Here we have the incarnate Son of God praying through his tears and not receiving what he asks for.

The second part is much more unexpected: "Yet not my will but yours be done." I am in your hands, Lord. You know what will happen next, even if I don't. I surrender. You'll note in the passage that an angel comes and gives Jesus strength, but it seems temporary. Immediately afterwards he is in such agony that his sweat falls from him like drops of blood.

Each of us live through our own crucifixions. Sometimes they are small; desolate patches that are entirely genuine but forgotten once they are past. At other times they overwhelm us, sorrow heaped upon sorrow. The unexpected hits us and our lives are suddenly derailed – by the death of someone we love, a life-threatening illness, the end of the work we value, a problem in the family, a messy relationship or some other crippling disappointment. And all at once we lose the habit of self-defence that allows us most of the time to march blithely onward into the future. We are left experiencing the world in a series of unprotected moments, and our most honest prayer may be "Lord, please take this away."

Waiting on God in the middle of desolation is a theme of

many of the Psalms, and it is what Jesus requests of the disciples in the passage, even though they fail. "For God alone my soul in silence waits; from him comes my salvation." (Psalm 62:1) This kind of waiting is a serious business. To wait humbly on God, enfolded in God's mysterious silence, is lonely work. Even ordinary waiting is hard. Think of a hospital waiting room with its rigid plastic chairs and ancient magazines which people flip through but never read; or a dentist's surgery with its lingering sense of dread and threatening posters of decayed teeth. No one would willingly choose to spend time there. And yet, in the most desolate places that is exactly what we are called to do – to turn up, spend time in prayer, and wait on God.

Sometimes we have to go further still, and learn to pray "Not my will but yours be done." We struggle with God's will. We may beg or pout or demand our own way but eventually for each of us there comes the process of maturing, when we realise that God is not Santa Claus, poised to give us whatever we want. In this prayer on the Mount of Olives, Jesus shows us the way of helplessness and surrender. To do the will of God is not hard until we come up against something God asks of us which is directly at cross purposes to what we want. Then so often the battle lines are drawn and self-deception takes over. In Jesus' prayer we learn that our way and our will and our good

must yield to a higher authority.

Why are we tested, it seems, almost to breaking point? There are no easy answers. I believe, sometimes against all the evidence, that testing has a purpose. It's not the same as toying with someone, or teasing them or tormenting them. Serious tests can push us to the very limit, bring us to the edge of despair when we are sure that we are not strong enough and we will be destroyed. But when they are past we can emerge fatigued, shaken, usually changed beyond recognition, but surprised at the depths we have found in ourselves.

An untested faith, like an untested fire extinguisher, is full of promise but not yet dependable enough to be trusted. It's not enough to base a deep relationship on. Spending time with God is a bit like falling in love – it's a fantastic experience, but it isn't yet love itself, just a kind of prelude to it. Love needs to be deeply rooted, both in our relationships with other people and our intimate relationship with God. It requires us to grow up, and that is sometimes a laborious and painful process. But it takes a major step forward when we can give up all of our desperate grasping and longing for control, and simply say, "Your will be done." Then we can allow ourselves to fall back into God's waiting arms.

Read the gospel text: Luke 22:39-46

Reflection

Text in context

Strictly speaking, Luke places the agonizing prayer of Jesus on his final night on 'the Mount of Olives' and makes no reference to the part of it known as '(the Garden) of Gethsemane' (see Matthew 26:36; Mark 14:32 (both 'Gethsemane') and John 18:1 ('a garden')).

There are two aspects to prayer in this story.

One concerns the disciples who are told not once but twice to 'pray that you may not enter temptation [*peirasmon*]' (22:40, 46). The repetition of this instruction is peculiar to Luke's account (Matthew and Mark have the final call to pray, but not the initial call).

Since Luke is particularly good at picking up at a later point in his work something introduced at an earlier point (we see this often in Luke-Acts), we must reckon that Luke is underscoring the importance of the line in the Lord's Prayer, 'lead us not into temptation' (11:4). There is always the possibility for disciples of Jesus who take up their cross daily that they will face *peirasmos*, even a time of trial as severe as Jesus himself faced. Remarkably the point of this prayer is that we may pray that we will not actually have to

endure such trial but may be able to avoid it.

The second aspect of prayer in the story is Jesus' own prayer, a prayer in a desolate situation. Yet worth noting is the detail Luke gives us in 18:39-40: Jesus goes to the Mount 'as was his custom' and he came, on this evening, to 'the place', details which suggest a regular prayer time in a regular place of prayer.

Jesus kneels down to pray. Why is this? Likely it is a sign of his humility (Bock, 1758). In humility before God, he prays words which are inexhaustible in their mystery.

'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.'

'This cup' is an image of wrath and of suffering, when read against the Old Testament (e.g. Psalm 11:6; Jeremiah 25:15-16; Ezekiel 23:31-34), and other references to 'cup' in the New Testament (e.g. Matthew 20:22-23; Mark 10:38-39 [strangely, Luke has no parallel to these passages]; Revelation 14:9-10; 16:19).

Why does Jesus face 'this cup'? Space does not permit a full discussion of the significance of Jesus' death but we do not do justice to the full witness of the New Testament if we downplay the cross as the place on which sacrifice for sin was made, victory over evil was secured, the depths

of God's love for us was demonstrated, and an example of righteous martyrdom was shown. 'This cup' particularly points to the cross as the place on which the wrath of God against sin was borne by Jesus as the final and full sacrifice for the sin of the world. For Jesus to receive this cup was to receive the cup of unimaginable suffering.

So we read on about 'agony' and 'sweat ... like great drops of blood falling down to the ground' (18:44).⁷ We may be prompted to ask why Jesus as Son of God needs an angel to help strengthen him. (Surely it was not because of the frailty of Jesus but because of the magnitude of the suffering he faced).

We have already been reminded of the Lord's Prayer in this passage and we are being reminded of it again. Interestingly it is Matthew's version to which we are taken: in the Gethsemane prayer Jesus prays a prayer which might be ours in any situation, 'Not my will, but yours, be done' (18:42).

These words recall 'Your will be done' (Matthew 6:10 – there is no parallel in Luke 11:1-4). The Greek itself conveys that sense of a parallel (compare *me to thelema mou alla to son ginestho* with *genetheto to thelema sou*). All prayer, whether in times of plenty or times of desolation, whether facing a trivial question of life or a dark time of trial, is conditional on God's will (not ours) being done.

Jesus also prays, ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup [of suffering] from me’ (22:42). This prayer encourages us to ask God according to his will to respond to our situation – that is, to respond to any situation we find ourselves in. We are also encouraged not to take for granted that it is God’s will that we should suffer. It is not necessary for our life’s journey to go through a place called Desolation – the desolate circumstances we face may be removed.

But if Desolation is God’s will, then we find a third encouragement implicit within Jesus’ example here. We are encouraged to engage in prayer as part of what it means for us to face the desolation.

With black humour, Luke tells us something that happened to the disciples at this time: they were sleeping (22:45). They could not keep up with Jesus in prayer, not even praying for themselves. Their failure to understand the importance of Jesus’ instruction fits with a failure to understand the seriousness of the situation Jesus was in. Consequently, they were prone to faithlessness: before the night is out, they will run away, Judas will betray Jesus and Peter will deny him. The antidote to failure as disciples lies in Jesus’ example of prayerful dependence on God. When we pray we depend on God; to depend on God in the midst of great tribulation, we should pray.

Questions

- When have we faced desolation which has caused us to cry out to God pleading with him to take the desolation away?
- Is it easier to pray in a desolate situation if we have been regular in prayer when not facing disaster?
- From the perspective of our prayer lives, what can we learn from Jesus’ prayer in this passage?

Praying together

Possibilities for prayer here could depend on the confidence the group members have in each other.

- (a) What has been an experience of desolation in our journey with God, and in what ways do we need prayer now for our journey with God? Prayer would then follow as a response to this sharing.
- (b) What do we identify with, this week, in Jesus and/or the disciples’ experience of prayer in Gethsemane? What would we like prayed for by the group?
- (c) If Jesus was praying for us today, what would we ask him to pray for?

Wrapping up

At the conclusion of this final study, what things would you like to say to each other and to God about this six week journey on The Praying Life, through Lent, with the assistance of Luke's Gospel?

Notes from week six

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- ⁷ Not all ancient manuscripts of Luke's Gospel have verses 43 and 44.



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