

The Praying Community by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 13th May 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Acts 1:12-26*, John 17:6-19

(Revised Common Lectionary Year B, Sunday after Ascension)

(* extended from the verses set in the lectionary)

Introduction:

I wonder what is your relationship with prayer? My guess is that if I were to ask you that question, most people in this church would feel awkward. Most of us feel a sense of inadequacy, even guilt. We all know we should pray more, but find it hard to do, or hard to find (make) time for.

That's how I feel too. So I'm not going to tell you to pray more. But I am going to take a few minutes to think about what it means to be a praying community, which means a community of people who pray, whether on your own or with others.

Some questions to consider:

1. How often do you pray? When?
2. What do you pray about?
3. What does it mean to you to be praying with others, in a service or in a group?
4. Do you ever ask someone else to pray for you?
5. What ways of praying do you find helpful?

One reason we pray is that we are prompted to do so by an event or experience: things are going wrong in my life, or a loved one is sick, and I really feel that some divine help is needed; or I'm overwhelmed by the wonder of a new birth, by the joy of being with my children, or by the beauty of a scene of nature and want to give thanks.

We can pray for ourselves and for others (including people in other parts of the world we've never met), we can give thanks, offer praise or ask for God's forgiveness and help to overcome our faults.

We can pray individually or with others, which could mean joining with the prayers of others in a service of worship, or praying for each other in a small group, or asking other people to pray for us. Some of us are more introverted and prefer to pray on our own. Others find that prayer is much easier when done in a group or church setting.

Many of us are very private about our personal needs, but the New Testament tells us to bear one another's burdens and pray for each other, and doing so can really make a huge difference both to how we feel and to the situation we are praying about. So don't be embarrassed to ask someone to pray for you!

Jesus prays for us

Did you know that Jesus prays for you? St Paul says so in Romans 8:34, and the letter to the Hebrews frequently mentions that Christ is our High Priest, and that he intercedes for us constantly at the right hand of God (Hebrews 7:25).

In today's gospel reading we get an insight into what is on the heart of Jesus. This is part of a prayer which Jesus makes for his disciples at the Last Supper, before he goes to Gethsemane to be

arrested and later crucified. But the way it is written in John's Gospel indicates that this is what Jesus prays for all his Church.

There isn't time today to unpack this prayer of Jesus (often known as the "High Priestly Prayer"), but here's a summary of what Jesus prays for his followers (including you and me) in this passage:

- for protection from the Evil One (17:11)
- for our unity (17:11)
- for us to be full of his joy (17:13)
- for our sanctification (17:17)

The Jerusalem Church

In our passage from Acts 1:12-26, we see Jesus' followers returning from the Mount of Olives, where he has just said goodbye to them and commissioned them to continue his work, taking the gospel to all nations. How would you have felt if you'd been one of them? Pretty daunted, I would imagine! The only consolation was that Jesus had promised to send them his Holy Spirit to enable them to carry out their mission (Acts 1:6). It's no surprise, then, that the first thing they did was get back to base (the upper room where they had been staying) and start praying!

There were three things they did that are mentioned:

- They met together (13)
- They constantly devoted themselves to prayer (14)
- They recruited a new apostle (15 ff)

Please note that this was not just the 11 apostles (12 minus Judas): verse 15 says that there were about 120 disciples, both men and women, who met together to pray. And they were *devoted* to prayer, in other words they made it top priority.

As they prayed, Peter had a thought: with Judas gone, we're one man down in the leadership team. So the apostles consulted the whole community about who would be a suitable replacement. 2 men were shortlisted who fulfilled the criteria (verses 21-23). They were both equally qualified for the job. So the disciples prayed that God would pick which of the two would join the leadership team of 12. Drawing lots isn't the usual method we use for choosing members of the PCC! But the believers prayed about it and then trusted God that the right person would draw the short (or long) straw.

This pattern of bringing their needs and concerns to God was to continue (see Acts 4:23-24, 6:6, 13:3-2 as examples).

We too have a mission to fulfil

The mission of the Church today is the same as it was after the Ascension: to take the good news of God's love and salvation in Jesus to everyone in the world. We may feel as inadequate as the early disciples, but we have the promise of the same Holy Spirit to help us, and the same weapon of prayer to use.

Why pray?

To close, let me make 3 observations about prayer.

Firstly, *prayer is not a substitute for action*. Some people have no problem with the idea of spending time praying. But others, particularly those who are more action-oriented, can wonder whether instead of spending time on our knees praying about things, it wouldn't be better to just get on and do something!

I can relate to this myself. I see a challenge and like to think up a solution and start implementing it. But you will all have heard the saying "time spent planning is seldom wasted": the same is

true with prayer. What's the point of going ahead and engaging in an activity, asking God to bless it as you go, only to find that it doesn't achieve what you'd hoped because that wasn't what God wanted you to do? Prayer and action should go hand-in-hand, but don't forget that time spent *praying* is seldom – no, never – wasted.

This brings me to my second point: *Prayer helps us to tune in to what God wants to do and what God wants us to do.* Time spent in prayer (provided it is prayer that involves *listening* to God and not just telling him what you want) helps us to tune in to God and begin to see the situation or the people we are praying about from his perspective. In my experience this usually leads to a much more appropriate response to the person or situation we are praying about. As our minds become more in tune with God's will, both our prayer and our actions start to line up.

And my third point is that *Prayer opens a channel to God's supernatural power.* The events of the Day of Pentecost bore witness to this principle: when Peter stood up in the street to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus on that day, 3,000 people signed up! The way I see it, God wants to work in the world. But because he has given us free will, he does not impose himself on the world, even though he sees so much that is wrong, unjust and hurtful. He longs for us to invite him to be involved. When we pray, we are giving God permission to intervene in the world. Does that seem strange? For me, it's a humbling thought that God chooses to let us ask him for help, because he respects our human freedom. But if we are serious about involving God through our committed and earnest prayer, his power is released to bring restoration, healing, transformation.

Over to us!

I hope these reflections on our bible readings today have given you some reasons to look afresh at your relationship with prayer.

We pray because this is a natural reaction to the experiences of our lives. We pray because prayer is a way of acknowledging our dependence on God. We pray in confidence that Jesus himself is constantly praying for us at the Father's side. And we pray because it's an essential preparation for carrying out the mission that Jesus has entrusted to us.

This Ascensiontide, we are invited to join in a worldwide wave of prayer under the initiative *Thy Kingdom Come*. There is a range of resources to help us, one of which is the Prayer Journal that is available in church, and others are available at <https://www.thykingdomcome.global/> In particular we are asked to pray for up to 5 individuals we know who we'd like to come to know Jesus for themselves. You may like to watch a 3-minute video of Archbishop Justin Welby talking about how the prayers of others had been instrumental in his becoming a Christian.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=4_AMDxsDkAc

Our prayers could have the same effect on those we know and love. As Jesus' first followers spent the days before Pentecost in prayer, why don't we make a commitment to make prayer a more central part of our own lives? We cannot foresee how much of a difference this could make!