

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

John 4:43–54; Isaiah 26:1–9

there was a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.” The nobleman said to Him, “Sir, come down before my child dies!”

This morning I am talking with you about the importance of prayer. ‘Sir, come down before my child dies!’ is a prayer that the nobleman made to Jesus. A fairly blunt and demanding prayer on the face of it. Jesus had some reservations about the kind of prayer it was. he had some suspicions that the people in Galilee were interested in him only because of the signs and wonders he had done in Jerusalem. When what he wants them to have is a relationship with their heavenly Father through faith in him. So he questions the nobleman’s request to come down and heal his son: ‘Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe’. Whether this is true of the nobleman or not we don’t know. He may be coming to Jesus just for what he can get out of him, and he may be asking Jesus almost in a superstitious way. But the nobleman will not be put off by what Jesus says. He is desperate, and is fixed on one thing only: ‘Sir, come down before my child dies!’ And whether it was a good or proper prayer or not, it was a prayer that the Lord heard, and that the Lord answered:

Jesus said to him, ‘Go your way; your son lives.’ So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way.

And, as we know, by the time he got home he found the boy healed—from the very moment that Jesus had spoken to him.

He was a nobleman, but on this occasion he did not stand on ceremony. ‘Sir, come down before my child dies!’, kneeling on the dust in the street may not have the niceties of coming to church and having cushioned kneelers. It might have been abrupt and impolite and even a bit suspect as a prayer. But prayer is not so much about how we go about praying, but about the one we come to when we pray. In coming and imploring Jesus, the nobleman had come to the right person. Because Jesus, whatever he may think of us and our good or bad prayers, is full of God’s mercy and compassion and love. And the nobleman’s prayer was answered.

So a prayer like ‘Sir, come down before my child dies!’ may not be the best kind of prayer, but it can be a good place to start. Have you ever prayed a prayer like that, for yourself, or for another person? Vivien and I have a grandchild born in Alice Springs who is now seven, but before he was one year old he had a growth that was blocking his windpipe, and he was flown down here with the flying doctor and in and out of the Women and Children’s Hospital with procedure after procedure and it was touch and go whether he would live, and I remember praying one morning, ‘Lord, I’ve had a good life, and he’s just starting out—if You need to, couldn’t You just take me and let him live?’ I think it was a prayer that had more to do with God’s love for that little boy than with my heroics; but it may have been a bit of a crummy prayer, because the Lord didn’t take me up on it—I’m still here! But so is that little boy—he’s now a healthy seven-year-old out at Yuendumu.

Many years earlier, when our first child was on the way, he was threatening to come ten weeks earlier, and we were in a country town without a lot of support—except that some friends happened to visit that day and we prayed together and Vivien just had a wonderful sense of the presence of the Lord with us whatever might happen, and the contractions kept coming all day and the hospital staff thought ‘This is it’, and then they stopped. And the child went almost to full term and is now thirty-six with four children of his own. But even if he hadn’t lived—and some of us will know situations where our prayers have not been answered in that way—I think that sense of the presence of the Lord would have stayed with us.

So we can start with prayers like ‘Sir, come down before my child dies!’ which can often be fairly self-concerned or concerned about what we want now—and, whether well-expressed and well-appointed or not, the Lord in His mercy and compassion and love can hear and answer those prayers. One of the things the Introduction to Morning and Evening Prayer says about why we come together is ‘to ask those things that are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul’. It can be large or small: I remember in one parish I was in, there was a man whose big toe was giving him a lot of pain—don’t know whether or not it was gout—and I said to him, ‘Why don’t you ask the Lord to do something about it?’ And he said, ‘Oh no—God wouldn’t be interested in a little thing like that’, and I think I said something like, ‘God made your big toe—He’s very interested in it!’ So we can bring Him our personal concerns—we can also bring him the larger concerns: we’re told to pray for all people and ‘for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence’ (1 Tim 2:2)—and we do that when we come together as a church. The people in Isaiah’s time, in the Old Testament reading today, seven hundred years before the time of Christ, were concerned in their praying for the poor and needy who were being oppressed by the rulers of their day, and they were given a promise from God that the city of pride would be trodden down by the feet of the

poor and needy who trust in God and are loved and justified or vindicated by Him (see Isa. 26:2–6). All good matters for prayer.

But God doesn't just leave us there, in prayer for the matters that concern us. What else does the Introduction to Morning Prayer say about why we come together? We come together 'humbly to acknowledge our sins before God'—our need for His great mercy and love—and 'to render thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands', and so to 'set forth his most worthy praise'. But we can only do this as we get to know who God is and what He is doing, and we can only do this if we 'hear his most holy word'—so any praying we do, whether together or on our own, requires good doses of the Bible to be read and taken on board—which is why we always read from the Bible.

After all, what is praying? Praying is talking with God—hearing what He's got to say, and saying what we want to say to Him. It's a two-way thing—we hear from God, and He hears from us, and so we get on with life together. Why do we pray? Why do we talk with anyone? Because we know them, and want to get to know them better, or simply because we like them and want to spend time with them, and we want to be about something together with them. So we pray because we know God, and want to get to know Him better, or simply because we like Him and want to spend time with Him, and be with him in what He's on about.

And, however we start out in prayer, this is what God brings us to. The nobleman began with his own heartfelt concern, which God heeded and answered. But God didn't leave him there:

Jesus said to him, 'Go your way; your son lives. So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way. And as he was now going down, his servants met him and told him, saying, 'Your son lives!' Then he inquired of them the hour when he got better. And they said to him, 'Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.' So the father knew that it was at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, 'Your son lives.' And he himself believed, and his whole household (John 4:50–53).

That's what God wants from us in prayer in the end—not just our prayers, but the whole of us belonging to Him, one with Him, in faith. So if that is not where we are this morning, perhaps that could be our first prayer: 'Father, let me be yours, heart and soul and strength, by believing in You—I and my whole household!' That's a good place to start. Then, in our prayers and in our lives, we will be with God in what He's on about, and we will be about His business with Him. The people in Isaiah were concerned for the poor and needy—probably they were pretty poor and needy themselves. but where did God take them to? They ended up praying like this:

Yes, in the way of Your judgments, O LORD, we have waited for You; The desire of our soul is for Your name And for the remembrance of You. With my soul I have desired You in the night, Yes, by my spirit within me I will seek You early (Isa. 26:8–9).

So where God has brought them? to a place where they are now even more concerned about God that they are for themselves and their own

concerns. They can see God's judgements coming on them in their days to deal with wickedness and evil and oppression, yet their eyes and their loving expectation are on God and on what he is going to do, and they rejoice in that, and so, by their prayers and in their lives, they become a part of what God Himself is doing in his world:

With my soul I have desired You in the night, Yes, by my spirit within me I will seek You early; For when Your judgments are in the earth, The inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness (Isa. 26:9).

I am beginning this morning as your parish educator, and I would like be a part here of God bringing us to that place. During Lent, beginning March 13th, we are going to have an intensive time of finding out more who God is, and so who we are in relationship with Him. Over five weeks we are going to ask five questions:

Who is God?

Who is Jesus?

What Does the Holy Spirit Do?

Why the Church? and

What Does This Mean for Me?

I'll be preaching on those questions morning and evening on Sundays, and then at the group meetings in the hall on Monday nights, or Tuesday mornings, or Tuesday afternoons—you can pick which time to come—there we'll be looking more closely at the Scriptures and going into it in more detail. I encourage you to be here on those Sundays, and to sign up for those groups, and encourage others to come—maybe even people who have never prayed before, whom God is calling to get to know Him better, and to come to love Him.

What are we hoping and praying for from these sessions? A better educated parish? Not primarily. Rather, a people who, having heard God's word, have come to belong to Him by faith, and so are wanting to know God better and, knowing and loving Him, are wanting to spend more time with Him, and to keep on asking Him for whatever is 'requisite and necessary', and so, in prayer and in life, to be with God in all He is doing in His world.