

Sermon 12 February 2023 Prayer

Matthew 6:5-8

Last Sunday you may remember that we heard from Isaiah about the need to be sincere in our worship. Jesus is making the same point with regards prayer in this gospel passage. *'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by other.'*

In other words, it's what is inside that matters, not the outside. I am sure you have all at some time bitten into what appears to be a nice, juicy apple only to find that inside it is actually a tad rotten. So the apple immediately goes into the bin; it is worthless. In the same way, for prayer to be effective, to be good prayer, it must come from the heart. As long as it is genuine and we mean what we are saying and what we are doing, then God will take notice and will do what is best for us.

There is the story of a little shepherd boy who was watching his sheep one Sunday morning and he heard the bells of the church ringing. As he watched the people walking along to church, he thought to himself, 'I would like to communicate with God, but what can I say to God?' He had never learned a prayer.

So, on bended knee, he began to recite the alphabet. Repeating this prayer several times, a man passing by, heard the boy's voice and peaked through the bushes. He interrupted the boy. 'What are you doing, my little friend?'

The boy replied, 'I was praying, sir.' The man seemed a little surprised and said, 'But why are you reciting the alphabet?' The boy explained, 'I don't know any prayer, sir, but I want God to take care of me, and to help me take care of my sheep. And so I thought, if I said all I knew, he could put the letters together into words, as he would know all that I want and should say.'

The man smiled and said, 'Bless your heart, God will.' And he went on to church knowing full well that he had heard the finest sermon he could possibly hear that day.

Just tell God what is on your heart. Keep it simple. God is not impressed by highfalutin, theologically-pretentious words. He knows what's in your heart and that's all that matters. As Jesus says, *'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'*

Whatever you do, persevere! The fact that you persevere shows God that you are genuine, that you are sincere in what you are saying and doing. You might be familiar with the story Jesus told of the persistent widow, who pestered a judge for justice. In the end, because of her persistence, the judge granted her what she was seeking. Jesus finished the story by saying, *'Learn a lesson from this judge. Even he rendered a just decision in the end, so don't*

you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who plead with him day and night?’ Luke 18:6-7.

And think about this, Jesus often spent most of the night praying. *‘One day Jesus went to a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night.’* Luke 6:12. If Jesus felt the need to pray all night, what does that say about what we should be doing?! I don’t need to tell you that his relationship with God was considerably closer than any of ours, so we need to be spending even longer in prayer! That’s kind of challenging, to say the least.

Someone said, *‘Persevering in prayer is like rowing a boat upstream; if you do not persevere, you will be carried downstream by the current.’* I like the image.

Another thought on prayer. An effective way of praying is to reflect or meditate on a Bible verse. Pick a verse that is relevant and applicable to you according to your circumstance or needs at the particular time and repeat it to yourself over and over. Let it percolate through your mind and into your being.

Just to give you an example. Perhaps you are feeling under some pressure, feeling a little weighed down with problems. So you take the verse, *‘Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about what happens to you.’* 1 Peter 5:7. Repeat that to yourself as you go about your daily routine. I’ll be surprised if it doesn’t bring you comfort.

I want to finish by emphasising the point Jesus makes in our gospel passage. Keep it simple and most importantly, be sincere and genuine. Let me take a leaf out of Jesus’ book and illustrate with a story.

A bishop and several pilgrims are travelling on a fishing boat. During the voyage, the bishop overhears a discussion about a remote island nearby where three old hermits live a spartan existence focused on seeking salvation for their souls. The bishop decides he would like to visit this island. The captain of the fishing boat tries to dissuade the bishop, saying that they are foolish old fellows, who understand nothing and never speak a word.

However, the bishop insists and the captain steers the boat to the island. The bishop is met on shore by the three hermits. The bishop informs them that he has heard of their search for salvation and enquires how they are getting on with their relationship with God.

The hermits say they are not too sure but that they pray, simply, *‘Three are ye (Holy Trinity), three are we, have mercy upon us.’* The bishop acknowledges that they have a little knowledge but are ignorant of the true meaning of the doctrines of the incarnation and the Holy Trinity. He tells them that he will teach them and also how to pray the Lord’s prayer.

The hermits struggle with the words of the Lord’s prayer. They keep forgetting the words but the bishop persists until the evening. Finally, he takes his leave, satisfied they have memorised the words of the Lord’s prayer. He climbs back on to the boat and they sail away. They hadn’t gone very far when the bishop sees what looks like another boat

following them. However, it is soon apparent that it is not another boat but the three hermits running across the surface of the water.

The hermits catch up with the boat and say to the bishop, 'We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God. When we stopped saying the prayer for a time, the words wouldn't come back to us. Please could you teach us again.' The bishop was humbled and replied, 'Your own simple prayer will reach the Lord. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners.' And with that, the hermits turned around and walked back to the island.

Rev Warner Wilder