

Matthew 26.36-46

Well, Who'd have guessed that today, such a short time after celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we'd be looking at this gospel reading - the passage that describes Jesus, not now in the resurrection garden, with the empty tomb as His glorious backdrop, but in that other garden - the Garden of Gethsemane.

The title of today's short talk is 'does prayer make a difference' so this reading doesn't, at first glance, appear to answer that question in the way we'd like it to. I have to admit that when I first read the sermon title and the reading together I was tempted to wonder if there was a mistake on the rota! But no. No mistake.

The fact that this wasn't a clerical error on my part has led me to become a bit of a bookworm of late - most notably, having recently read Pete Greig's 'Dirty Glory', I also devoured his 'God on Mute' together with Tim Keller's book simply entitled 'Prayer'. I've found that nothing concentrates the mind quite like the thought of standing here having nothing at all to contribute to the topic of the day!

It also encourages me to jolly well pray in a most concentrated manner. And I have to confess that that's not something I'm generally good at - at all. I don't like sitting still. I love being on the go. If possible I like to be juggling several projects at any given time. So - life is busy. I can just about cope with a prayer list - the church directory, the lent booklets we were using until recently, the list of people who need our prayer on the weekly sheet or the list compiled at home group, but just being, - Sitting, or indeed kneeling, as I know some wonderful prayer warriors at St Luke's do, is SO difficult for me....

I wonder if that rings any bells with anyone. Perhaps I'm the only one who's rubbish at prayer, in the conventional sense, but perhaps there's someone here who thinks that because they too are 'no good' at that kind of prayer, that they might as well give up altogether.

But you know what I've found? Because the Lord made me, (He knows how I'm formed, He remembers that I'm dust), and He loves me, He oh-so-graciously hears my prayers anyway, even if they're not couched in the kind of language they should be, even when they're offered 'on the hoof' when I'm walking the dog, or when a situation comes to my mind or to my attention that simply needs God's loving touch - when I offer up even the 'arrow prayers' which are a kind of short cut to His generous

heart, He hears and time after time after time, He answers. He comes through for me. Even those 'unworthy' prayers are heard, and I believe they do make a difference. Somehow the Lord allows even these prayers to affect the way things work, and offering them changes something in me. Romans 8 tells us that the Spirit, even when we don't know how to pray, takes our core prayer and prays as we should be praying before the throne of God. Isn't that amazing?

Some months ago I was supporting a friend who was going through a very real time of trial. I was very concerned and was praying hard for the situation. And day after day, I found that the Lord gave me words of Scripture which were just so relevant to what was happening on that particular day. I was able to use those verses to encourage the family that God knew, that He cared, and that all would, in the end, be well, which, praise God, it was. In the end, as we heard when we looked at the healing of the man born blind a few weeks ago - it's all for the glory of God.

And that was Jesus' focus, even in Gethsemane. In Mark's account of those hours, Jesus calls His Father 'Abba, Daddy'. It's the intimate word a child would use to address a strong and powerful and loving Father. Through it we catch a glimpse of the intimacy and humanity of Christ's interaction with the Almighty.

When we approach God our Father with sincerity, expressing our hearts' desires, He doesn't assess the merits of our prayer technique. He looks on us with deep compassion, sharing in our sorrow, or our grief, or our anxiety, or perhaps our joy.

C.S Lewis, who lost his own mother aged just 10, and went on to experience a great deal of tragedy and loss in his life, tells the story of Digory, a little boy who asks the great lion Aslan to cure his dying mother. Aslan appears to ignore his desperate request and eventually Digory dares to ask again:

'Please, please won't you - can't you give me something that will cure Mother?' Up until then he had been looking at the Lion's great feet and the huge claws on them; now, in despair, he looked up at his face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and, wonder of wonders, great shining tears stood in the Lion's eyes. They were such big, bright tears

compared with Digory's own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his mother than he was himself'.

Digory's prayer remained unanswered, but everything had changed. Now, he knew that the great Lion, in whom all his hopes were resting, truly cared. When we carry a burden to God in prayer, and in our pain, or our shame, we dare to lift our gaze to His face, we find it bent down near our own, with great shining tears in His eyes.

In that moment we are so close to Him - and that makes such a difference to us whether or not our prayers are answered in the way we hope.

We've all heard it said I'm sure that there's no such thing as unanswered prayer, but to those who've prayed for a dying spouse or child or parent to live, and then have watched them fade and die, that will seem hollow at best, and untrue at worst. If God denies these, our most heartfelt and desperate prayers, how can we ever have the confidence to trust Him with our prayers again?

Yet, as disciples of Jesus, we're called to follow in the footsteps of the Master who has gone before, and in the Garden of Gethsemane, His prayer 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me' was unanswered. Tim Keller writes 'Jesus' prayers were given the rejection that we sinners merit, so that our prayers could have the reception that He merits'. He argues that we know God will answer us, within His wise and just economy, when we call, because one terrible day He didn't answer Jesus when He called.

It is a mystery why some of our prayers seem to go unanswered, but it isn't a reason not to keep praying. We don't have time this morning to read the parable of the persistent widow, but we know the story and Jesus encourages us to keep on keeping on in prayer, whatever the circumstances. He does so Himself on this night in the garden. Three times He asks His Father to deliver Him, but in His prayer He also asks that the will of the Father should prevail.

Had Jesus not been willing to submit wholly to the Father's will; had He not spoken those words, had He not endured the mocking, the trial, the flogging, the cross, the terrible separation from His Father that followed, there could have been no resurrection, and we would be without hope. But The writer to the Hebrews tells us 'Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that

when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised'.

Our part is to follow Jesus in praying, and then to 'do the will of God' whether or not our will is in line with His. Those poignant, costly words of Jesus 'not as I will, but as You will' were spoken in total abandonment of His fully human self, and we need to learn to echo them.

Oswald Chambers asks 'are you prepared to ask yourself what it is you want from God and why you want it? God always ignores your present level of completeness in favour of your ultimate future completeness. His concern is not to make you blessed and happy right now, but He's continually working out His **ultimate** perfection for you'.

Let's end with a prayer from Pete Greig -

Abba, Father, I know all this stuff about Your love in my head, but my heart gets hard to it and I'm tired. Please do whatever You have to do (and I mean whatever) to unclench my fists. Pry open my eyes so that I can see Your tears, and soften my heart so that it moves me deeply.

I don't understand why You don't just answer my prayers, but I do choose to trust that You have heard me, that You actually do care and that You're somewhere out there on my case.

Abba, Father, thank You for all the ways You have blessed me.

I honestly don't know where I'd be or even who I'd have become without You.

Abba, Father, I'm going to try to trust You today.

Amen