

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

Produced by Rev Robin Allison, Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church

The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>

Sunday 7th June 2020 – Prayer (1) – “Hold on in there”

Introduction

Hello and Welcome to this Podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton’s Chalmers Memorial Church.

Today, I am planning to begin to a new six part series of thoughts on the subject of Prayer. Not that I am any expert on this subject, mind you. As we’ll be thinking about shortly the subject of prayer, and more importantly how we actually spend time in prayer, is one of the hardest challenges of the Christian faith.

As I was preparing for this podcast, I found myself challenged by something that a great Christian of the second world war years, Corrie Ten Boom, once said. Many of you will know Corrie’s story – about the years she and her family, who were all devout Christians, spent in a concentration camp for harbouring Jewish families from the Nazi’s. In her writings she often spoke of the centrality of prayer to her life once asking the question that got my mind racing earlier in the week, namely, *“Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tyre?”*... Let me read that again, *“Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tyre?”*

Is it something that guides our daily living? Is it something that comes naturally? Does it guide us, just as a steering wheel points a car being driven in the right direction?

Well, I can’t promise that these next few weeks will answer all the questions we have, if ever there were an end to the questions we could ask. But, at the very least, we will be able to journey with some of the great people of faith in the Bible who show us, in their own unique way, how prayer helped to shape their lives.

More of that in a moment, however. For just now, though, shall we pray?

Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord’s Prayer

Our loving Heavenly Father, great and mighty, awesome and above each one of us, we thank you that you are ever ready to hear what we have to say to you, even in those moments when we do not always hear what you say to us. That willingness to listen tells us much about the compassion that drives you... the love that fills your being and your desire that your people are able to enter into your presence.

That compassion and love overwhelms us and yet, it also challenges us. It makes us aware of the things that let us down... of our failings and foibles... our desire to go our own way... our belief that we can answer all our own questions.

As we come to worship you this day, however, remind us that there is nothing that we can say that you do not know already.

Encourage us with the knowledge that your knowledge of us is complete, beyond anything we deserve.

Reassure us too that we are forgiven and that your forgiveness is also a renewing of our relationship with you.

Enable us, therefore, to be able to bring our prayers to you and to lay our lives before you.

May we sense your presence with us as we sit in the silence of our own homes where, in these recent weeks, we have learnt to worship you in a different way and where, too, we have joined with others who share that same faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that motivates us and helps us at times such as these.

Grant us your presence and hear our prayers as we now bring them to you in the words that Jesus has taught us to say, saying:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen

Bible Reading – Luke chapter 11 verses 1 to 13

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.’

2 He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:

“Father,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come.

3 Give us each day our daily bread.

4 Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation.”

5 Then Jesus said to them, ‘Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; 6 a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.” 7 And suppose the one inside answers, “Don’t bother me.

The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything." 8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

9 'So I say to you: ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

11 'Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Amen and may God add his blessing to this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

In a single phrase those words that I quoted from Corrie Ten Boom at the outset of this podcast - *"Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tyre?"* – sum up almost everything that is hard about the life of prayer.

Is prayer the thing that guides our lives or is it, rather, something we only tend to turn to when life is a bit harder than usual?

And, anyway, does it really matter if we only pray now and again, especially in those moments when life is hard? Does that mean that God doesn't listen to those sorts of prayers or that, somehow, he is disappointed with the fact that we only find words to say him when life isn't running according to our anticipated plan?

It would, in fact, be hard to back up that kind of argument. Take, for example, the Psalms. At least 40% of all the words that the Psalmist wrote were prayers of lament. In other words, they are prayers spoken by believers at the edge of their daily existence, people struggling to keep going.

Take the words of Psalm 18 and verse 6, for example, where the Psalmist writes this: *"In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears"*

At the point of deepest distress, he opens up his heart to God knowing that he will be heard.

So, no, God does not just listen to those who speak to him often. He listens whenever we call upon him and it wouldn't surprise me one bit if he also fully understood just how difficult it is for some folk to pray, especially in times such as we are living in just now when life is still unsettled and restricted.

A week or two back a colleague sent out a web link to a video that can be found on YouTube that really caught my attention (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_pZqv5ym2g) It's an interview with the well known preacher and speaker, Jeff Lucas. Lucas is British but spends a lot of his time in the States. The title of the video is, *"Keeping faith and learning to laugh in lockdown"*. It was recorded by the Christian radio station, Premier Radio. In it Lucas shares with the interviewer some of the challenges that he's been facing in these days, challenges not at all unlike those that we've been facing ourselves – boredom, an excess of tiredness

even when there's not so much to be done. He spoke about wanting to see family, friends... to be back in church again.

The question the interviewer wanted to ask him, however, was about how this time of lockdown has helped his spiritual life. Again, Jeff Lucas was candid. At the start of lockdown, he had decided that he would use this time almost as a spiritual retreat. This would be a time to get back into a right relationship with God and prayer was going to be a big part of that. He anticipated, he comments wryly, that at the end of this he'd be luminous in appearance so spiritual was his life going to be!

Reality, however, turned out to be a bit different and prayer much harder than he thought it would be. He spoke of how he had always had difficulty in praying because speaking to someone who is invisible is a difficult idea to overcome at the best of times.

He likened the act of prayer to twiddling the knobs on an old fashioned wireless radio where you had to turn the knob by small degrees to find any sort of signal and feedback at all... a solid signal in amongst the fuzziness and crackling. And when he prayed, overwhelmed by just how much he could pray about that was of such huge significance, he said his prayers often sounded a bit like this - *"Hello Lord, I don't know... I don't know... I don't know..."* followed by the word *"help"* and ending with a high pitched squeal as he handed over his unspoken concerns to God.

In fact, one of the few things that had genuinely helped him was his occasional use of what he called a *"set liturgy"*, a more formal written prayer and reading time where he could plug into something that someone else had spent thoughtful time preparing. Doing that helped, he said, much more than he ever thought it would even though it was not part of his normal way of praying.

Sometimes there is something to be said for fixing the way we pray or the time we pray, especially in those days when it's a bit harder to find the words to say, as well as to accept that God listens to us just as much even when the words we utter are *"I don't know"* and *"help"*. What's key here is that the prayer is brought in an attitude of trust that God will still do something with the feelings behind what we say, or even what we do not say.

And finding something we can hold onto as a sort of framework for prayer can also help. It's maybe one of the main reasons why those who appreciate worship in such places as the Abbey at Iona or Taizé speak of how, using the thoughtful words of others in a quiet and evocative space, can make such a difference. I offer that as a suggestion and possibility that is worth pondering.

Was this also, I wonder, how Jesus knew how to help his own followers when they asked him, in our reading from Luke chapter 11, how they should pray?

"Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples"

Now, the only reason they could have for asking Jesus that sort of question was because one of things that they had observed about him was that Jesus spent a fair amount of time in prayer.

In fact, William Barclay suggests that this is how we should interpret the words at verse 1 of our reading - *"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place"*.

What does that mean, asks Barclay? What place? And what time?

The question, however understandable it is, is misplaced. The point is not about the place or the time that Jesus prayed but rather the fact that Jesus prayed so regularly that he was always praying in that proverbial “*certain place*”. He didn’t reserve his prayers – as with other good Jews – for the Synagogue and Temple but rather, just as we are right now, he prayed wherever he happened to be.

Just like us in that favourite armchair or in a study where our computer is... or in the kitchen whilst listening on a mobile phone... or sitting in a conservatory soaking up the sun and the presence of God... or with headphones on whilst striding down the street on a daily walk...

All Jewish people prayed and did so often. It was part of their daily routine. But Jesus taught us, first of all, that all places are places where God can be found. God speaks to us right where we are.

Now, just as I suggested that sometimes when the words will not come easily that it is ok to borrow someone else’s words, Jesus would have been used to using certain set prayers in the places of worship too – borrowed prayers, if you like.

So, when the disciples ask him for help with their prayer life, he thinks for a moment and then offers them the prayer that we now know as the Lord’s prayer as the basis for their own devotions.

We’ve prayed it so often over the years. When I was a wee boy my mum used to pray the words with me when she tucked me up in bed at night. It was even the prayer that started my school day, at least in my early primary school years until social attitudes to that sort of thing changed.

There’s too much here to look at it in any detail. That would be a series in itself. Instead, I offer the wonderful brief summary that the American preacher Scott Hoezee offers in his words about this passage... Here they are:

“What do we pray for? (he asks) The hallowing of God’s very Name. That’s pretty cosmic (he says). What do we pray for? The coming of the kingdom. Hmmm, that’s pretty big, too. What do we pray for? Daily bread and ongoing forgiveness — we pray to be forgiven by God on the basis of the fact that we are ourselves engaged in acts of forgiveness all the time. What do we pray for? That we not be led into temptation” (https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-12c-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel)

I find that really helpful because, in a few short sentences, Hoezee is able to highlight the essential simplicity and balance in the life of prayer... the balance between offering worship to a Holy God... praying for the arrival of an eternal Kingdom... asking for food to sustain our bodies... the ability to forgive and to be forgiven and finally the strength of God to avoid or overcome the things that would seek to tempt us away from our heavenly Father.

There it is...a few short and simple phrases that reveal to us just how true it is that keeping things simple and honest in our prayer life is always more meaningful and more effective than making things more complicated.

You know, prayer is not a test that God has set us. Rather, it’s a relationship he wants to draw us into.

And here, in a few short lines, Jesus shows us – in perfect simplicity – how to pray our way into the presence of God.

These are words worth using. After all, they came from the Saviour who, wherever he was, spent his days “*praying in a certain place*”.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Loving and listening God, we once again thank you for the opportunities that you provide us with to pray in our daily lives. As we have been thinking about, we confess that praying is not easy for us. Sometimes the words will not come. Sometimes we are too weary to think of the words to say. Sometimes all we want to do is to say, “*I don’t know*” and leave the rest to you.

We are assured that you understand what is in our hearts and not just the words which leave our lips. That is good news indeed.

We pray today for those who find it hard to approach you in prayer because they feel distant from you or who are travelling down a lonely road in their life where the things of faith struggle to find a place to be heard.

Father remind them of the compassion of Jesus and remind them, too, that Jesus found time to pray because it helped him to feel connected to you and to feel guided by your presence with him.

We pray for those who want to pray but who cannot find the words to say because they want the words to sound powerful and majestic. Assure them that the glory of prayer is not in the words alone – not even in the glory of the words – but in the love with which prayer is offered simply and sincerely.

Help us, we pray, to use the prayer that Jesus taught us as the guiding point for our own prayer life. Help us to use the balance of the words – which point us both to heavenly as well as to earthly things – as a way in which we shape our own prayers.

And hear us now as we pray for your world – for those in need this day, the grieving, the lonely and the lost as well as those who have offered such amazing care to others in the days that we are journeying through. May your kingdom be brought to life in their lives as we pray for them.

Hear us now as we offer these our prayers through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, Amen.

Benediction

God’s love surround you, God’s Spirit guide you,

God’s whisper cheer you, God’s peace calm you,

God’s shield protect you, God’s wisdom arm you,

wherever God may lead you.

And may the blessing of almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit –

be with you and with all whom you love

this day and forevermore, Amen