

Praying in Faith **A Sermon preached in St Mary's Walton-on-Thames on Sunday 31st January 2010, at the quarterly Healing Service.**

Readings: **Acts 12. 1-17; James 5. 13-18; Matthew 6. 5-15**

In one sense, "Praying in Faith" may seem a strange title for a sermon. After all, doesn't all prayer require faith? Here's an answer which proves I'm an Anglican: yes, but not necessarily.

Yes, in the sense of the Lord's Prayer, the quintessential Christian prayer, a kind of template for all other prayer, in which Jesus taught his disciples how he wanted them, and us, to pray. In case you hadn't noticed, the Lord's Prayer is steeped in faith, right from the outset. To say 'Our Father in heaven', and mean it, takes faith; we haven't seen him; we take his very existence on faith, let alone that he is the Creator God whose essence is Love. It takes faith to pray 'Your kingdom come, your will be done', because that means being willing to do what God says. It takes faith to ask God to provide our basic needs; and it certainly takes faith to ask for him to forgive our sins, as we forgive the sins of others. So yes, to pray the Lord's Prayer — and mean it — takes faith.

It also takes faith to pray in the sense of laying someone or something before God, because that person in need or that crisis situation is on our hearts. That's a good thing to do and there's Scriptural warranty for it in I Peter 5.7, where Peter writes: "Cast all your cares on him, for he cares for you". Casting our cares on God not only prevents us from keeping the problem to ourselves; admitting God into whatever it is also stops us thinking we can solve it on our own.

That kind of prayer depends upon us believing that God hears and answers prayer. But it also opens us up to the possibility of our prayers being answered in a way other than we'd hoped. We may try to get round it with a bit of gentle humour – it was Billy Graham who said that "The only time my prayers are never answered is on the golf course" – or we can fall back on familiar words about more tears being "shed over answered prayers than over unanswered prayers". Nevertheless, to pray means to taking the risk of not getting the answer to our prayers that we had hoped for.

And at that point we have two choices. We can stop praying; we can stop taking that risk. “Blessed are those with low expectations, for they shall never be disappointed.” Or we can keep faith with God, even if we don’t understand fully why; and go on trusting in God, work through the disappointment, and go on praying.

So, yes, to pray in all those ways requires faith. But ‘not necessarily’, in the sense that often when Christians pray for other people, and particularly for people in need, it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that we’re praying without any real expectation that anything will change. The trouble is that whenever we pray along the lines of “I’ve told God, the rest is up to him, if it is his will”, that prayer has more of a flavour of fatalism rather than faith. That’s why I want us to think about a particular kind which appears in our second reading from James 5, where he writes that “the prayer of faith will save the sick”.

The prayer of faith. What might that be? First, the prayer of faith is not the same as a prayer of hope. A prayer of hope is when we pray into something that God has promised, believing it will come to fruition in God’s way and in God’s good time. For example, we speak of ‘the hope of heaven’, a core Christian hope based on verses such as “and I will raise them up on the last day” (John 6.40). In other words, this is a promise that Jesus made that we believe will be realised in the future, but which can fuel our prayer now.

The prayer of faith is subtly different. The prayer of faith is also based on God’s faithfulness and his promises, but its purpose is to change things **now**. In James 5, the context of that hoped-for change is illness. James writes: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.” That’s a clear example of how the prayer of faith is about changing things now; and James goes on to assure us that ‘the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective’ (James 5.16b).

Why does James call this the prayer of faith? Cast your mind back to our verse from last week: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That’s exactly what is going on in James 5. James says we’re to pray into this situation, that illness, this person’s need, which is

in the natural realm; so that the spiritual reality of God's Kingdom in the heavenlies, which we cannot see, can so break in and that the situation, in this case illness, may be changed.

This may sound new like a new idea, but in fact anyone who has prayed the Lord's Prayer (as opposed to just saying it), has been praying like that every time. Whenever we pray 'Your kingdom come, your will be done in earth as in heaven', we're praying that the supernatural kingdom of God will break through and be more fully realised in the material world in which we live.

So how do we pray this kind of prayer of faith? Just like the Lord's Prayer, we begin with worship: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name". It's vital that we begin with our attention on God, in worship and praise; because that will help ensure that we're tuned in to him, and to his generous love, and in particular to his will, rather than primarily on the problem or the crisis. The reason God's will matters is because the prayer of faith is never about us bending God to our will, but always, always, about us bending in to the will of God.

Now, this is where it gets difficult. How many times have you heard a prayer for healing end up with 'if it is your will'? And I understand why those words are used: it's because we want to be in the centre of God's will whenever we pray, and so we often add on those words just in case we're not. The trouble is that if we approach prayer in that way, and the desired outcome doesn't happen, we almost always end up assuming either that it can't have been God's will; or that we must have been doing something wrong. Neither is necessarily the case. More likely it's because we are living in a kingdom conflict between the Kingdom of Light and the kingdom of darkness.

The prayer of faith, on the other hand, starts at the other end of things: having worshipped God, and prayed that his will would be done on earth, as it is in heaven; before we start praying for the particular situation, we try to seek out what God's will might be. Steve reminded those who were on the PCC*plus* day us that some things are God's will always and everywhere, while others are God's will for a specific place and time.

So let me ask you: is there any oppression, or injustice, or poverty, or hunger or sickness in heaven? No. But why do we think not? The answer is because we know each of those things is clean counter to everything we know of God from the Bible. So if it is not God's will that these things happen in heaven, why should we assume that it could ever part of God's will that any of these things should be accepted on earth? The reason they still are on earth is not because they're part of God's will for us but, again, because we are in that kingdom conflict.

We worship our Father God; we seek his will. Next, bearing in mind that it's the 'prayer of the righteous' which is powerful and effective, and because 'the righteous' is someone who is in the right with God, it's important that if we want to pray for someone or something we do so from a place of repentance and forgiveness. We're not going to be able to tune in to God's will, if unconfessed sin is in the way. So before we pray for the situation that's on our hearts, we repent of any sin of which we're aware, clear the decks, and receive God's forgiveness.

And then, with our focus on God, and wanting to be in line with his will, then we pray; and, says James, "the prayer of faith will **save** the sick". Not every translation says that; some say "the prayer of faith will **heal** the sick", but in this context that's not the best translation. My reason for saying that is because just a few verses later, in v.16, James writes about confessing our sins to one another, and praying for one another, "so that you may be healed" (iathete); that's definitely a 'healing' word. Whereas in the previous verse, he uses the word **sōsei**, which is part of the verb **sōzo**. In the New Testament that word carries a wealth of meaning: save as in salvation, heal, make whole, rescue.

Part of our difficulty is that there's no one English word that accurately conveys the sense of **sōzo**, and so our English versions of the Bible differentiate between different possible meanings of the verb, depending on what the editors or translators select as the most likely translation given the context, But in the Greek of the New Testament it's all one word. It's important we understand this, because it affects how we perceive Jesus' own understanding of his earthly ministry, which he said was "to seek and to save (**sōzo**) what was lost" (Luke 19.10). So also in James 5, the apostle writes that when we offer the prayer of faith, God will do what Jesus did: he will **sōzo** that person.

Now, before any of us grasps the wrong end of the stick, the prayer of faith is not magic. It's not a formula which guarantees 100% success all the time. But it is the New Testament's way whereby we can pray into circumstances, whether oppression, injustice, conflict, or sickness (which we know from Scripture are never part of God's will for our lives), and look to see a change.

Three final points. 1) James teaches earlier in his epistle that if we're going to pray in this way, we need to "ask in faith, never doubting" (James 1.6); and that if we pray doubting, we "must not expect to receive anything from the Lord". I want to say something very important. Often, when there has been prayer for healing, and the prayed-for outcome has not happened, people begin to ask 'why?' We're reluctant to blame God, because we believe he's good; so maybe it was a lack of faith on the part either of the person being prayed for or of the person praying. **Neither is the case.** Whenever in the New Testament there is reference to healing not happening because of lack of faith, it's never about the faith of an individual. It's always to do with the lack of faith of the **community**. And so the more the faith level rises in the community, the more we shall see people healed, come to faith, grow in love, offer to serve, and much more.

2) We need to pray persistently. Often, the answer to our prayers doesn't come right away. There are examples in many parts of the Bible about persistent prayer being needed before something changed.

3) We need to pray expectantly. We heard that wonderful story from Acts 12: Peter is in prison, condemned to death, and we're told that "the church prayed fervently to God for him". Interestingly, we're not told what they were praying; most people have assumed that they were praying for his release, but it doesn't say that. It simply says that they were praying for him. But when Peter is rescued, makes his way to the house, and hammers on the door; and the servant girl, Rhoda, goes to answer the knocking at the outer gate, recognises his voice, and runs in to tell the others, their response is "You are out of your mind". Wow. They may have been praying fervently; but on the face of it, it doesn't appear as if they were necessarily expecting God to do anything very much about the situation. And when she insisted that it really was him, they began to spiritualise it. "It must be his angel" — angel in

the sense of ‘the spiritual counterpart of the man’’, but not the man himself. But God had taken decisive action and, in rescuing Peter, opened their eyes to the importance of praying with the expectation that God will answer.

What we are about to do in this Healing Service is to pray in faith, trusting in the promises of God and following the example of Jesus. What we are about to do is not magic. It is faith in action, faith released through prayer, with confidence that God’s purposes for us are good. May God increase the faith level of our church community, so that God’s kingdom may grow here in Walton, and make a difference now.

Charles Stewart