

Deepening Faith 2010

Praying in Faith (31/1/10 100.00am LKB)

Acts 12 1-17; James 5 13-18; Matt 6 5-15

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

“God has not always answered my prayers. If he had, I would have married the wrong man..... several times !”

It’s a great one-liner. I confess to having borrowed it from an elderly, long and happily married American lady, one Ruth Bell Graham. (*married 13/8/43*)

But beneath the touch of humour lies a whole theology..... ‘ God has not always answered my prayers.....and thank heaven that he hasn’t.’ The best analogy I can think of is that we do not always give our children what they ask for because we know it would not be good for them, or their timing is wrong, or they don’t understand what they are asking for,..... or perhaps we have something better planned for them. And so it is when we adults pray to the Lord and make requests.

The title of this second sermon in Charles’s “Deepening Faith” series is praying in faith. I think praying in faith means believing two things:

... That our prayers will be heard and

... That our prayers will be answered.

There are so many assurances that God hears our prayers throughout both the OT and NT it is hard to quote the best one. For instance we read in Matthew 7, "Ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you. Your Father who is in heaven hears your words and gives good things to those who ask". Or I love the words of Psalm 94, "If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have dwelt in the land of silence".

God always answers our prayers, but he will answer them in his way, and his way will be the way of perfect love. Often if he answered our prayer, as we at that moment desire, it would be the worst possible thing for us, for in our ignorance, we often ask for the gifts which would be our ruin. We should never make the blunder of trying to forecast the way God is going to answer our prayers. The Christian life is full of surprises.

Does God answer our prayers of faith? The answer is 'yes', but his answer is sometimes 'no'. And occasionally, with the passage of a little time, we can see how God answered our prayers and more. And sometimes we can't. It is a mystery beyond us because we only see through the glass darkly and our understanding is limited.

When, and if, by the grace of God I get through the pearly gates, I will have a lot of questions to ask about prayers that seemed to be unanswered.....
But I suspect it will be a long queue!

Sometimes, quite simply, we do have prayers answered. Problems are solved; the sick get better; unexpected cavalry gallops in to the rescue. It can come as a shock. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, "God answers sharp and sudden on some prayers and thrusts the thing we have prayed for in our face; a gauntlet with a gift in it". The Christian life is full of surprises, but I have noticed that when I pray coincidences happen, and when I do not, they don't!!.

We read in Hebrews (4 v16) "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need".

So God wants us to pray boldly and specifically, expecting our prayers to make a difference. In our reading from Acts, the early Church were praying boldly and specifically for their leader, Peter, to be released from prison. And their prayers were answered. Peter was freed..... Peter himself was surprised. Rhoda was so surprised she forgot to open the door and left Peter on the doorstep. The other church leaders think she is hallucinating. Weren't they expecting their prayers to be answered? Do we?

In the letter of James we hear of the power of prayer for healing, prayer that was answered. Do we expect the people on our parish prayer list to be healed?.....

There is a lovely Tennyson poem which begins "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of". We should expect of prayers of faith to be

answered.. Sometimes there are sudden, inexplicable, miraculous happenings. More often in the world we know it seems that prayer changes people and then people change things. However, the great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer.

Prayer is one of life's great mysteries. Most people pray at least sometimes..... in extremis, for a parking space, for a winning lottery ticket. At its lowest, prayer is shouting into a void on the off-chance there may be someone out there listening. At its highest, prayer merges into love, as the presence of God becomes so real we pass beyond words and into a sense of his reality, generosity, delight and grace. For most Christians, most of the time, it takes place somewhere between the two extremes.

The gospel reading from Matthew introduces us to the quintessential Christian prayer. In the time of Christ, prayers were very prolonged and formulaic, with long complicated magic words and many repetitions. So Jesus provided his followers with a beautifully simple, framework-prayer..... A sequence of thought which covers everything. You can find it again in Luke chapter eleven. It can be used as it is. It can be added to and made more specific. It lends itself to all occasions, private and public. No matter how often it is used it remains a good prayer, 'still fresh and fair in the eyes and ears of heaven.'

I always think it is significant that there is no record of the Lord teaching his disciples how to preach, but he took time to teach them how to pray. And his

framework is meaningful and gives us permission to pray in ordinary language. We are to call God 'Father', and know that his kingdom is both in heaven and here on earth among us. We can ask him for all our worldly needs, in the safe knowledge that he is far more concerned about it all than we are. We are to pray for forgiveness, because that is at the heart of our faith..... unlike some religions in which every single action carries eternal and unbreakable consequences. And forgiveness is freely available as often as we need it for 'nothing is able to separate us from the love of God' Then there is that clever, guiding phrase "Your Kingdom come; your will be done" which provides a blueprint for our prayers and our lives. If our hope is for the Kingdom of God on earth, and wish is that God's purposes will be carried out, then we will indeed pray in faith.

The Lord's Prayer provides a starting point and is used in almost every Church Service, but how can one move on from there. What should we pray for, apart from just adding the names on the parish sick rota and our wish list to it?

In Philippians we read "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God". If we are praying in faith, we can talk to him of all our hopes, wants, troubles, and our joys and thrills too. We cannot speak too freely, too trustingly to him. The world needs more Christians for whom prayer is a first not a last resort..... And just as we share with an earthly loved-one, so it is alright to share with God too. That means it is OK to share anger, hurt

disappointment, worry and grief too. If you want a role model, look at David's words in the Psalms. They are full of great mood swings, from praise and thanksgiving to shoutings and bewailings at a God who has deserted him. In prayers of faith, you don't have to be polite!! It is safe to be totally honest because love is the basis of our relationship with God.

The great enemy is apathy..... keep praying. The self-sufficient do not pray; the self satisfied will not pray; the self righteous cannot pray. The Christian prays anywhere, everywhere, constantly, regularly..... in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer..... for better and for even better..... till death do us unite permanently.

Let's keep praying, but being thankful that God's answers are always much wiser than our prayers.

Let us pray (Ps 95)

"O Come, let us sing unto the Lord, let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving. For the Lord is a great god and a Great king above all gods. Let us say we love the Lord, for he has heard us and listened to our prayers." Amen