

Sunday 31st January 2010

St John's 10:30am

Acts 12:1-17, James 5:13-18, Matthew 6:5-15

Praying in Faith

Prayer: It is only by the grace of God that I speak to you in the name of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Week 2 of Deepening Faith course, this week 'Praying in Faith'.

Hands up anyone who finds prayer easy?!?

Of all the topics relating to the Christian faith prayer is probably the one with the most books written about it and the thing that most people agonise over. Why should we pray? What difference does prayer make? Do our prayers change God's mind? Is there a right way of praying? What about unanswered prayers? What should I pray for? These and many other questions may well spring to mind on the topic of prayer. You may be relieved or frustrated to know that I am not planning to answer all of these in the next few minutes. Although if you want to explore these and other questions about prayer then a good book that I can recommend is Philip Yancey's '*Prayer, does it make a difference?*'

If we spent all morning answering these very good questions then we would neglect the most important thing, which is actually to pray. I am sure all of us gathered here this morning can agree that prayer is a good thing even if we struggle when it comes to praying. At the heart of prayer is relationship, our relationship with God.

Relationship depends on communication, just as we need to spend time talking and listening to those we love, our family and our friends so we need to communicate with God, to talk and listen to him.

As Samuel gets older it is great to hear him string words together into a sentence. Not that he uses words that you would all understand; sometimes Angie and I don't understand them either! But just because Samuel can communicate, it does not mean that he always gets what he wants. At times it is still frustrating for him because he clearly wants to play with the candle flame but we say no. Often it is frustrating for us as we don't understand him or he does not understand us when we ask him to do something. All of this may mirror our experiences of prayer, the frustration, the misunderstanding, and the not getting what we want. But if we view prayer as communication with God then it may help with some of our difficulties in starting to pray. God longs for us to communicate with him, he is not worried about how our prayers are worded, he wants to know all that concerns us and it is ok to have time in prayer when nothing is said by you, but instead you take time to be quiet and listen to God.

The biggest scheme of the enemy to try and make us ineffective as Christians is to rob us of the gift of prayer. Not because it stops things happening but because it damages our relationship with God.

Prayer is not just about a shopping list of things that we want God to do for us; prayer is about us knowing and loving our creator. Too often we turn God into a dispensing machine when we are in need. If we neglect God at all other times and only ask for his help when we need it then why are we surprised that he does not react instantly? If however, we invest time in our relationship with God he will at least know who we are and what is going on when we come to him and ask for something. It is as we cultivate our relationship and build it daily in prayer that we begin to see prayer make

a difference. It is as we seek God for the little things, for the things we need, our daily bread, that we start to see God at work. It is as we remember to go back and thank God for what he has done and acknowledge his goodness that our faith levels will rise.

Do you expect God to answer your prayers?

If we look at the story of Peter in Acts we find him in a difficult situation. He was arrested, put into prison and was facing death. The Church was earnestly praying to God for him and then we read this amazing story of how he was led out of jail by an angel. I think the next part of the story is great and I can just imagine the scene. Peter goes to the Church to let them know that he is now a free man and they are so caught up in their concern and prayer that they miss the fact that Peter is there with them. Peter has to keep on knocking to get their attention and show them that God has heard and answered their prayers.

If we don't believe that God can and will answer our prayers (and so we pray in a way that reflects that) we will never pray in faith, God is likely not to act but at least we save ourselves being disappointed. If however, we believe that God can, does and will act (and pray in such a way) we should not be surprised when God does answer. It does not guarantee that God will answer in the way we want. Prayer does not come with a guarantee but as James encourages us, the prayer that is offered in faith, trusting in God, can and does work.

Do you believe that God is able to answer your prayers? Do you believe that God is good? Do you believe that God is all powerful? Do you believe that God is all loving?

Do you believe that God is actually interested in what concerns you? If you do then carry on praying, believing all those things to be true and then you are praying in faith, trusting the answers to God.

It is trusting God and seeking his will that makes the difference to our prayers. For when we pray 'your kingdom come, your will be done' as we do in the Lord's Prayer we are seeking what God wants and not what we want. To do that is to offer a prayer in faith. For as we seek God's will we leave our own, we surrender our own will and plans and trust that God will do with us what he wants. Too often we are in danger of living our lives our way, doing what we want, making our own plans and then asking God to bless them, if we remember, at the end.

It is as we come to develop our relationship with God, get to know, love and follow him better that we become more aware of what his will is for our lives. It is as we live by faith that it becomes easier to pray in faith. It is as we look back at what God has already done and give him the praise that we can go on trusting God for what lies ahead and praying in faith that his will be done. Ultimately time spent in prayer with God does more to change us, the people who pray, than it changes God. In a relationship of open communication through prayer with our creator it is we who grow and benefit and learn to live by faith trusting in the goodness of our heavenly Father.

Let us pray. Father God, thank you for the gift of prayer and that you are always ready and waiting to hear from us. Help us to communicate with you more easily in prayer and to grow in faith as we grow closer to you. Amen.