

Praying the Scriptures: Prayer as listening to God – 14th March 2010
By Rev Andrew Osborn

Old Testament: Psalm 1: 1-6
New Testament: Ephesians 1: 15-23
Gospel: Luke 1: 26-38
Verse: Psalm 46: 10

Hook: Are you spiritually dry?

Let me tell you a story...

It's a true story

James is studying theology

He's at one of the most prestigious institutions in the world

With some of the best scholars

He has a high view of scripture as the word of God

He's memorised 2 Timothy 3: 16

His bible is well worn from cover to cover

He understands the original languages

The grammar, historical, social contexts

The place of the particular passage in the unfolding story of God

But he feels parched, spiritually dry...

He's lost that spiritual warmth he once knew

Do you feel spiritually dry, parched?

Do you long to regain that spiritual warmth that you once enjoyed?

Many of us have begun to experience something of an answer in prayer

As we have met together for the last 3 Thursdays @ St Cuthbert's Chapel

This morning we will explore the Praying Scripture

And we begin with the simplest way to pray scripture

Praying a prayer in the Bible

Let's sit beside St Paul and overhear him at prayer

Explain: Paul @ Prayer – Ephesians 1: 15-23

1. Thanksgiving

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you, as I remember you in my prayers. Ephesians 1: 15-16

Paul begins thanking God for the Ephesian Christians

He thanks God for their faith and love

He thanks God because their faith and love is a result of God's grace (6)

God has given them every spiritual blessing (3)

God has given them everything they need to trust him and care for each other

A young boy is at the bookshop with his Dad

And his Dad offers to buy him a book
The boy is deliberating over two books
And he decides to ask for the book that he knows his sister would like to read too
The Secret Army by Robert Muchamore
He could have got the other book
But he chooses to the one his sister would like too
He is a thoughtful child
The boy's mother is also a particularly thoughtful person

Paul sees good in God's children
& gives thanks to the one who is the source of that good.

2. Petition

First we overhear Paul giving thanks
Now him asks for three things... knowledge, hope & power

(i) knowledge (17-18)

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened...

Ephesians 1: 17-18

Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians might know God
And for Paul knowing God is a rich experience
It involves three things

(1) A spirit of wisdom

First, people who know God are wise
Wisdom in the Bible is the ability to live God's way in God's world
Knowing God is practical, pragmatic
It has hands and feet
It works

The boy didn't just think thoughtfulness was a good idea, a laudable notion
He acted thoughtfully

(2) A spirit of revelation

Second, People who know God, have been let in
Paul prays that God would reveal himself to them
That they would experience a personal relationship with God

I have often spoken of my Uncle Frank
I have told you of the time I asked him whether he had experience post-traumatic stress after the Vietnam War
And he tells me of a time twenty years after he came back
When out of the blue, a veteran of the Korean War thanked him for his service
It was the first time he had be thanked

That night he told me he cried for the first time
I feel like I really know my uncle Frank
Because he let's me into his world
He reveals himself to me

In a similar way, Paul prays that his readers might let into God's life and person

(3) A heart thing

Finally, Paul prays that the eyes of their heart might be enlightened
Knowing God is a heart thing
In the Bible the heart is less about the emotions
And more about the will

My Uncle Frank is a life-giving person
Being in his presence is to feel, to know that you can be the best you can be...

How do we make our heart, will supple?
to listen to God and be moulded by God
by the will of God?
We'll come back to this...

(ii) hope (18)

Second, Paul prayer that these Christians might know hope

you might know what is the hope to which you were called, what are riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.

Ephesians 1: 18

We use the word hope very differently to the way it was used in the first century

When a woman hopes that George Clooney invite her out to dinner
Or a teenager hopes to be invited backstage with Taylor Swift
Or a child hopes for a 21-scoop ice cream
We don't expect it because it is an unlikely future

But for the Bible hope is a certain expectation

Paul is praying these Ephesian Christians would have a certain expectation of their eternal inheritance

& they can

Because God in Christ, in his death & resurrection
God has done everything necessary to secure their future
& Paul prays that they might live in the light of that security

About 12 years ago I learnt how to ride a motorcycle
& one thing I particularly remember from those lessons
Actually there are many things I remember
The very real possibility of death

somewhat grabs the attention of the mind

the instructor was teaching us how to corner
He warns us that statistically
The highest occurrence of fatalities is single bike accidents
And mostly failing to negotiate a corner safely

The key is to look where you want to go
Not where you don't
Don't look at the tree on the side of the road
If you do, you're likely to hit it
Look at the exit you want to make out of the corner

& it's similar with the Christian faith
St Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians might focus on where they're going
An unfettered relationship with the living God & one another that it might
permeate every part of their present life now in every way

(iii) power (19-23)
Finally Paul prays for power...

And what is the greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the
working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he
raised from the dead and seated him at his right hand in heavenly places far
above all rule and authority and dominion, and above every name that is
named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. And he has put all
things under his feet and he has made him head over all things for the church,
which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 1: 19-23

Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians might know God's power
The same power that God used in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus
As power goes that's some power

Why does Paul pray that the Ephesian Christians might experience God's power?
Because he understand that change is beyond human grasp
The power that Paul prays for
is for the Church
It's for us
The fullness of him who fills all in all
This is an obscure phrase

but it's repeated in Ephesians 4: 12-13
to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until
all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to
maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Ephesians 4: 12-13

Do you feel helpless when it comes to change?
Pray for the same power that God used to raise Jesus
that same power is available to us his church to become mature
More than that we as the church are the body of Christ
The power of Christ flows through us his body

But Paul in prayer will not leave us there
As if we are the pinnacle of God's purposes
As if the purposes of God can be summed up in our self-actualisation
Even if this is maturity in Christ
Paul's prayer will be left unanswered
until in this we bring glory to God in Christ

Back in North Eastern Tasmania
Jenny & I have two friends, named Peter & Gaynor
They have brought up three very thoughtful and responsible children – in Blue,
Elise and Rusty
Gaynor works in the local bakery
Peter is retired from the Navy, he was chief
He now works their smallholding
Ordinary working class Australians who brought up exceptional children

The sons and daughter do their parents credit
And in a similar way as we display the likeness of the Son of God
We bring glory to him

Application

(i) Praying the Scriptures

At one level this is an incredibly rich prayer
And just by changing the pronouns
we can pray this prayer for people, for ourselves
And as it is part of holy scripture we know that we are praying God's will after
and before him
We can be assured that this is the sort of prayer the Father longs to answer in the
affirmative, yes!
And this is the bread and butter of my own prayers
I read a passage of scripture
And armed with the list of people I am to pray for that day
I pray the scriptures for them and for myself

(ii) Listening to God

But at another level,
we who have been around the Christian faith for a long time
We know all this
We understand grace, faith, love
A personal relationship with God
that knowing of God is supposed to change us
that we are to live in the light of our eternal destiny

that we have access to a power that is not merely satisfied with our maturity but in the glory of God

We read a passage like this
and we draw these well-travelled conclusions
We understand the meaning of the text
But some of us I suspect feel dry, parched
I want you to attend to those feelings this morning
I want you to notice them
I want you to be frustrated with this sermon
Even bored
Because I suspect we're catastrophically missing the point

When you go home this afternoon
I want you to reread Ephesians 1: 15-23
Or the gospel Luke 1: 26-38
And mediate
Spend several hours on it
And tomorrow do the same thing
Do it for a week

I want to do more than understand the meaning of the text
I want to ask yourself the question...
What does it teach me?
What does it say to me?
what strikes me in it?
Where do I experience God in my reading?

I want you to read it more with your heart than your head.
I don't want you to try too hard
We're not trying to control God, manipulate God
Ultimately, we want him to control our reading, our learning
Be open to receive what God has for you

It's like sleep, you can't make yourself go to sleep
You can only create the conditions that will allow sleep to occur

Open your Bible, and read slowly
just listen to it and reflect on it

Yes understanding the passage is important
the grammatical, social, and historical context will help
The place it falls in the grand narrative of God
But it's also important to contemplate scripture
To listen to God as we pray
To listen to what the text says to me
What God is asking of me in it?
What it is asking me to hear

The text doesn't just parallel our present
The text intersects our present
When we read the Bible we are reading about a world that is as much now as then
Paul isn't just praying for the Ephesian Christians
This is God's prayer for us

The Bible is primarily aimed at our wills, our hearts
How can we create the conditions that our hearts, our wills may be supple to God's will?
The trick is to create the context, to create the environment where the words of Scripture wash over our will

my suspicion is that, that will take time
it will involve contemplating scripture
a solitude
silence from the noise and hurry of our world
for long enough for us to hear God's word speaking to us

It will involve deep reflection, repetition, patience and persistence
But as we read the words of God slowly they will begin to strike a chord with us, they will resonate with us
And our wills will begin to resonate with God's will

One of the joys of being part of the Prayer Pop-up @ St Cuthbert's Chapel that we have been conducting over the past three Thursdays is that we've had the immense privilege to be lead through this process by David Crawley & Jeannie Blaker
We have another chance to have a go at doing this, this Thursday and you are most welcome to attend.