

## SERMON – LOCATING OURSELVES – PRAYER

This morning I want to do something a little different. I don't want to just explain the theme of Prayer; I want us to experience one of the most beautiful prayers in all of scripture. **“This only do I seek, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.”**

I'm going to explore 3 Pathways to Prayer that have been a treasured part of our Christian tradition down the centuries. Spiritual practices that encourage us to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord by engaging our God-given senses and imaginations. **The Pathways of Music, Art and Poetry.**

Because it's fair to say it's been quite a week. And the other beautiful words of scripture that have been so very close to my heart are these words from St Paul. **If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. God's Spirit is right alongside helping us. The Spirit does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, and our aching groans. Our groans too deep for words.**

**'Wordless sighs' and 'aching groans'** ... really do capture much of my own personal journey and I know the journey for many others. It's been an emotionally intense start to 2026 and a challenging week and at times I've struggled to know how or what to pray. But in all of this I've been very aware of God's intimate presence being right alongside me and our community - helping us along.

As many of you know on Monday, we held the funeral for our own Christine Mangold after a heartbreaking journey with the darkness of depression. As you can imagine it was emotionally charged and we had to create an overflow into the Church Hall because we couldn't fit everyone in.

But what I can say without one ounce of religious triteness, is that God's healing presence was alongside us in our aching groans. Husband Tim and family expressed their deep appreciation of being able to express their profound grief and at the same time give grateful thanks for the life and love they shared with Christine.

On Friday morning I received the news from my 2 brothers in the UK that my dad had passed away. For those who may not know, I made the spontaneous decision last September to go and be with him because we all sensed the end was drawing near and I wanted to be with him for his 94<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was a good decision. We had a final sing-song together in person. This is very poignant because Dad and I sang to the elderly in care homes for 8 years together back in the early 2000's.

### PLAY VIDEO

I had one final moment with him 2 days before he passed and my brother captured him singing along in very whispered tones to the song "You are my Sunshine".

So this past week I've found myself in a place of deep reflection on the fragility, the pain and the precious beauty of our human experience. And I'm still very much processing all that's been evoked and stirred in the deeper waters of my soul.

**But what I do recognize is how integral and precious prayer is to this journey.**

We've spent the past 3 weeks exploring how our sense of place, people and our past - shape and form us and keep us 'located' and tethered, in what it means to live a meaningful life. What's been emphasized so clearly for me is that for any church community seeking to be located in a union with Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... then *prayer* is the **binding power** that holds everything else together.

It binds us to the sacredness of our places, our people and our past. Prayer gives oxygen to all the qualities that make life so beautiful and meaningful. Our loves, hopes and shared human expressions.

**At its most essential meaning,** prayer is how we have a deeper connection with God and with each other. This is the deep truth of Jesus' prayer we heard today from the gospel of John.

His longest prayer in scripture. **21 I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you, may they be one in us.**

**This is important because there's another dimension to all the personal sadness of this week. And that's the sadness of our world.**

There is simply no escaping the sense so many of us now have - of a world losing its bearings.

The sense that the powers of dominion and darkness are very evident. Paul describes this as Creation groaning with birth pangs. All I can say is that these pangs feel very painful at this moment in time.

I'm not sure how much you've followed the murky darkness of the Epstein files and I'm not going to explore them here, but the sheer corruption and depravity on display across so many positions of leadership - in all sorts of organisations and institutions - is mind blowing and actually shattering to realise.

**But we as the people of Christ are a people located in a different story.**

**The story of light breaking into the darkness and the story of HOPE.**

As I've tried to push back against this darkness. I'm more and more convicted of the need to locate ourselves in the power of prayer. At all times for all situations.

More and more convicted of the need to echo the inspiring prayer of the Psalmist.

**One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. (the temple of all Creation) For in the day of trouble, he will keep me safe in his dwelling.**

If we want to push back on the darkness, then we must draw upon the power of prayer to dwell in a more intimate connection with God. Draw upon the power of prayer to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. To focus our gaze on all that is true and beautiful and good. Because all that is true, beautiful and good *IS* the light of Christ made manifest in every part of our lives. This is *how* we help to illuminate the darkness and for the light of Christ to prevail.

**So let's do this now and explore these 3 pathways to prayer that encourage us to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. Music, Art and Poetry.**

These pathways may be familiar to you or they may not, but as I said they've been a treasured part of our Christian tradition down the centuries. Engaging our God given imaginations and awakening our soul to the transcendent. Helping us to recognise the presence of God alongside us in our 'wordless sighs' and 'aching groans' – our groans too deep for words. My prayer is that they can be helpful to you in your prayer life. And I want to start with **MUSIC**

The Psalms are poetry set to music and the power of music as a pathway to the Divine is all over the Psalms. It's why Paul told the Colossians to **"Let the word of Christ dwell richly within you as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."** I truly believe that music can transport us to an intimate place of transcendence into the presence of God. As I say in the Spirituality of Music night concerts that we do... **"Music is the language of the soul"**

St. Augustine famously claimed that singing is equivalent to "praying twice," because melody adds intensity and depth to the longings of our soul. **And we witnessed this at Christines funeral.** Music was a healing force that brought all of our heartfelt emotions together as one. It gathered up our aching groans, and we could feel the presence of God alongside us.

**So let me share an expression of how I've incorporated this into my own prayer life.**

Most of us have heard of the **Daily Examen** as an ancient form of Prayer. It involves

- **Asking the Spirit to lead you in a review of your day with a spirit of gratitude.**
- **Acknowledge all the emotions, you've experienced. Joy, sadness, anger, peace, or confusion.**
- **Notice the presence of God in all of these movements of the heart.**

I've done this for the past 6 months set to a few evocative pieces of music and it's been one of the most beautiful experiences of my prayer life. I'm going to play a brief part of one piece of music that's been very special. **Shuberts Impromptu No. 3 in G-Flat Major**. One of my most moving experiences has been to play this in a spirit of gratitude, giving thanks for the life of my mum who passed 2 and a half years ago and my dad as he approached his final days.

Instead of just thanking God for their presence in my life with dry words, I've allowed the music to transport me to a deeper place beyond just words. And the sense of intimacy and connection I've felt with them both - has been truly beautiful. I've literally wept tears of joy as I remember **the places, the people and the past** that are all located in the cherished memories of what they meant to us all.

So as you listen to this piece, think of a cherished memory of someone who has touched your life and you want to give your grateful thanks to God for. Or someone in this present moment you want to hold in prayer. We all have our different tastes but just allow this music to wash over you and let the Spirit take you - where it would want you to go. **PLAY MUSIC**

**I want now to explore the gift of Art as a pathway to prayer.**

Because Art has served as a profound pathway to a deeper connection to God down the centuries. Religious Icons were the language by which people understood the Biblical Story long before the printing press. A pathway to keep us connected and located to our sense of place, people and past. And like music, Art engages our God given senses, emotions, and imaginations,

Anyone who has been to Barcelona and stood inside Gaudi's **Sagrada Família** or encountered the works of **Michael Angelo** and **De Vinci** knows just how powerfully these act as a pathway to the divine. They take us into a living encounter with the living God. We are dwelling in the house of the Lord. They are a non-verbal way to connect with the God when our words are insufficient.

When I was exploring the Christian faith through Alpha, I was deeply sceptical of organised religion, And I can tell you that it was music and art that helped pierce my defences. This famous picture of **Holman Hunt's The Light of the World** was a pathway into my heart.

It shows Jesus knocking on an overgrown, handle-less door. Based on Revelation 3:20, it symbolizes Christ seeking entry into the human soul. The lack of a handle indicating that the door must be opened from within.

I still remember when I first encountered this image and it moved me to tears. It opened up an entry for Jesus into my soul. The image became one of the most famous 20th-century religious art pieces and is sometimes described as a "sermon on canvas".

I didn't know it at the time but this is the ancient Christian practise of **Visio Divina** – which means a (Sacred Seeing) It's similar to **Lectio Divina (divine reading)**.

**So this coming week take time to find a piece of Art that moves you in some way.**

Focus on a painting, photograph, or icon. Gaze and linger on the whole image. Focus on what catches your eye first and notice the emotions it evokes. See it as a "doorway" to a deeper connection with God. Pray for the Spirit to speak to you in your wordless sighs and aching groans.

Or simply create some art yourself as an expression of your prayer.

Finally, I want to bring out the power of POETRY as a pathway to prayer. As I said, all of the Psalms are prayers expressed through poetry and song capturing our human desire for a deeper connection to God. **I want to show a video now that really touched me when I came across it.**

It's an interview with Tyler Staton who's the Lead Pastor of Bridgetown Church in Portland, Oregon, where he lives with his wife Kirsten and 3 young sons. He has a close ministry relationship with Tim Mackie of the Bible project. It's a truly beautiful testimony to the power of Poetry to bring **life, wisdom and hope.**

### **PLAY VIDEO**

I just think that is such a beautifully insightful interview.

As he went through his cancer journey, the best way to express what he was experiencing came out in poetry. It became his medium of talking to God at greater depth than he knew how to have the words for. A pathway for his wordless sighs and aching groans.

**How did his insight about not wanting to waste the treasures to be found in this wilderness experiences speak to you?**

Maybe you're going through a wilderness experience of some kind at this moment.

What might it look like for you to find the treasure that God is offering?

I just loved the way he captured the gift of a poet to us all. He said, **"A poet is someone who sees beyond the surface of creation to the image of the creator within creation and then pulls back the veil for the rest of us."**

Poetry teaches you to see like the poet so that you can live poetically. And this is what prayer will do for us over time.

**Prayer will teach us to see like God so we can live like God.**

**Prayer teaches us to see like God – so that we can live like God.**

So this coming week as a pathway to prayer and a deeper connection to the Divine, read some poetry or write some poetry. I recommend Page 157 of the NZ prayer book in the pews. The Poem by Edward Carpenter called 'THE LAKE OF BEAUTY' We read it at our Staff meeting on Tuesday. Maybe read it in Communion

**I'll finish on a personal note of prayer.**

On Friday night Kim and I, along with our daughters and Jack came to dwell in this house of the Lord and gathered here at the altar table. We placed a favorite photo of Dad and Mum on the table and lit the two candles in memory of them both. Reunited in the heavenly realm.

We each took a turn to share a cherished memory, and it was a powerful reminder of just how much they are woven into the fabric of **our places, our people and our past.** And like so many who have lost both their parents tell me... I have a sense of being orphaned.

But we all went away thinking how precious this time had been. A pathway into the presence of a sacred God moment. Small threads of grace woven into our human experience. Something to savor and something to cherish. A pathway to prayer.