

Sermon 01/03/26 Sharing in prayer

If you were here last Sunday you may remember that the Genesis reading was taken from The Storyteller Bible and was in a dramatic form. It's the Bible we use in schools when we Open the Book. At the start of the story of Adam and Eve rebelling against God we heard that God wanted us to enjoy three loving relationships:

With God himself, with each other and with the world he created.

Sorry. I realise that we don't usually start by talking about last week's readings but this week in the Draw Near books and in next weeks Lent conversations we are thinking about sharing in prayer. For me prayer is about developing our relationship with God and many of the things we pray about involve our relationship with other people and with the world. So that seemed a really helpful reference.

Enter Nicodemus. He came by night which we can interpret as a need for discretion, or that he was important and busy, or just that he did. He is obviously an intelligent and thinking person. He has recognised that Jesus comes directly from God but is uncertain about the message he is hearing. Jesus explains the need to be reborn – not in an earthly way but in a spiritual way – a reset of his thinking. Importantly he also explains that it is not necessary to know everything for it to be real. We do not know where the wind goes but that doesn't mean it is not blowing and we cannot hear it.

Jesus is setting out the relationship that Nicodemus can have with God. For us there is the good news that he reappears in the crucifixion story as one of the two men who took Jesus body for burial. They had become disciples.

If you have been following the reflections in the Draw Near booklet you will be very aware of the breadth of what can be included under a sort of prayer umbrella. The booklet lists adoration, confession, thanksgiving, lament, intercession and supplication. It also suggests that you might alter your posture in accordance with the substance of your prayer. In our house, the word posture caused much discussion and rummaging in a dictionary, as well as reading the book properly before we really understood what the author was getting at. Even now we are divided as to whether it is intended that those postures should be literal or metaphorical.

So the Draw Near author has made some suggestions about types of prayer and body language but they can only ever be suggestions. If prayer is about our relationship with God it will be as individual as every relationship, depending not just on the two individuals but on the circumstances. We would not be human if at times of great stress our prayers were not more like a lament and about ourselves than at times when things seem to be going well. At other times, when our view is less restricted, we will want to prayer for others, known and unknown.

While it may be helpful to understand the different aspects to our prayers it will not be helpful if we get too tied up in analysis and lose sight of the reason for our prayers. That relationship with God, which like all relationships needs to be nurtured to be at full potential. How can we do that? St Paul in writing to the Romans tells them to 'persevere in prayer'. Like so many other things the more we practice the 'better' we will be.

People will tell you all sorts of things about the best way and place to pray. Again it is very personal. We go where we need to go and do what we need to do to avoid distraction as much as possible. One friend when he was younger used to prostrate himself as it shut out the rest of the world. For others a comfortable chair, not so comfortable that they fall asleep, but where they will not fidget provides the best place. Another friend on moving into a house with a big garden was told by the outgoing occupant that doing the weeding was a good opportunity to pray. Not necessarily an opinion that my friend shared!

When we look about us, listen to the news and talk to others we can be overwhelmed by the need for our prayers. God understands. We will always need to focus on a finite number of issues, and not be drawn into trying to encompass everything. Sometimes we need the formality of the intercessions during a service - we need to know what are the issues others here are concerned about, we need to add our prayers to theirs. Often they will reflect our relationships with each other and with the created world.

It is good to develop a pattern of prayer, a time as well as a place where the distractions can be put on hold. Perhaps some structure on what to pray for at different times, in the way that the intercessions are often structured at a Sunday service.

This week we as a parish have seen what can happen when a community comes together to pray. On Wednesday morning John asked for our prayers as Alfie had emergency surgery at the Children's hospital. The immediate response was over 20 people offering prayers for Alfie and his family. It was probably more – not everyone needs to tell people what they are doing. Nothing could illustrate a praying community better than that.

Nicodemus in his private nighttime conversation with Jesus is told that although he hears the sound of the wind, he doesn't know where it comes from or where it goes. This does not make it any less real. Likewise sometimes what is concerning us is too vast or complex to be put into words, but God can take up our silent anxieties, our wordless prayers. He hears us as we shout noiselessly, 'I don't know how to do this' he understands and responds.

Amen