

5th September 2021: Reflective Worship

Wisdom in our attitude to prayer

This evening's reflective worship brings to an end our series on wisdom in the book of James. We've considered the wisdom in our attitudes to tough time, to what we do, say and have. Tonight, we consider wisdom in our attitude to prayer. So before we start exploring this, I just want you to think about two things. What is prayer to you? And why do we pray? Have a couple of minutes just to reflect quietly.

When we pray together in our church services, often we pray for all sorts of reasons. We pray to prepare ourselves for worship, we pray in thanksgiving, we pray in penitence and for forgiveness, we pray in worship and we pray in blessing. Some of our prayers are shared by Christians across the world, such as in the Lord's Prayer. Some are shared by others in the Church of England, such as in our collect prayers, and some are unique just to us.

But why do we pray? What does it actually do?

In this evening's reading from James, we hear many suggestions for why we pray: if we are in trouble and seek help, if we are happy and seek to praise, if we or others are sick and seek healing, if we have sinned and seek forgiveness.

Jesus understood the importance of prayer. Again and again in the Gospels and throughout the New Testament are examples of Jesus praying. If we look at some of the examples of why Jesus prayed, they seem remarkably familiar to why we might pray now.

He prayed for 40 days before setting out into public ministry, something that we remember each year in Lent when we are likewise encouraged to spend time in prayer with God.

He prayed all night before choosing his disciples, as we may pray before making big decisions or when faced by difficult choices.

He prayed after feeding the 5000 and after healing many people, when the day's work was finished.

He regularly climbed mountains to pray all night, seeking the quiet and inner peace that comes from prayer.

He prayed when feeling overwhelmed by what he was asked to do.

He prayed in grief after the death of John, as we may do through our tears.

He prayed in Gethsemane when he was failed by friends and facing his own death. He prayed "thy will be done", as we all do sometimes when we ask God to lead us in the right way even though it won't be easy.

He prayed even on the cross when it seemed like all hope was gone.

So as well as prayer being a way of following the example of Jesus, why else do we pray?

Prayer changes us, it is said. It deepens our relationship with God, with Jesus- "come near to God, and he will come near to you" we read in James. The more time we spend with God, the deeper our relationship grows; without communication, the relationship falls apart. It's like time spent with those we love, I guess. Most nights, I talk on the phone to my mum. Usually, the conversation goes something along the lines of, "yes, I'm ok", "I've done x, y and z today, what about you?" and that's about it. Sometimes, it goes a bit deeper. But in a way, the content doesn't really matter. It is the dedicated time given to a relationship, to maintain a relationship that matters. And I think that's what I'm trying to say about prayer too- that it is the dedicated time given to deliberately taking the time to cultivate that relationship with God.

Another way that prayer changes us, especially when our prayers are for others rather than ourselves, is we realise that the world does not begin and end with us. "Pray for each other" says James, "so that you may be healed, for the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective". It is very easy for prayer to become "all about me", what I want, what I'm thankful for, what I feel. But in prayer for others, in bringing other people and situations

before God that are outside of ourselves, we both acknowledge that God is in control and that we trust God in whatever the circumstances are.

And prayer changes our faith, as we place ourselves ever more in the hands of God. We rely more on God's strength and God's wisdom rather than our own. Never has this been more true for me personally this year: back in February I was made redundant in the middle of lockdown. Among the stressing out and worrying, my prayer to God was simply to trust him that it would all work out in the end. And thankfully, I had a new job offer just before leaving the first job. Later in the spring, the prayer was slightly different as I was going through the final stages of selection for ordination training- this time, my prayer was "I trust you God, and I trust that whatever happens, it is the right thing". That's just two examples out of many where my faith has been changed through prayer and through placing myself into the hands of God.

And for the scientists among us, research suggests that prayer can literally change us physically. It increases our dopamine levels, responsible for joy and calmness; it can lower blood pressure and reduce stress; and it can even boost your immune system!

I wonder what God thinks of prayer. If we think of prayer as a conversation with the God who loves us as a child, how does that change our prayer? If you were having a conversation with someone you love, and they say 'this is wrong, change it' or 'I want that' or 'God this happened and I'm sad' or 'why won't you listen to me', without letting us getting a word in edgeways, what would that be like? God wants us to listen too in our prayer, our conversation, not just to keep speaking. How many times do you just take time to listen to what God is saying? How much have you missed because you aren't listening? So for me, I pray to listen to God too, to ask him to tell me where I am needed and how I can best serve.

Because prayer is not just about talking to God, but also listening attentively to his voice: "My sheep listen to my voice, I know them and they follow me". The thing to remember of course, is that it's unlikely to literally hear God speaking words to us that we hear with our ears. But rather in the "still small voice" that Elijah heard, the "daughter of sound" that

Daniel felt speaking inside him, or the sudden realisation of God speaking deep within our hearts like Saul felt.

So as we take some time now to reflect on the wisdom of prayer, maybe also take some time to say to God “here I am, God, and I’m listening”.