22nd January 2017

Luke 18.9-14

This month I am looking at the topic of prayer. Two weeks ago I suggested there are two types of prayer in scripture: Communion prayer emphasises that prayer is a means to experience God’s love and to know his presence. Kingdom prayer is more of a wrestling match, calling on God to bring in his kingdom and seeks obedience to God’s will and purposes. I went on to stress the importance of praying scripture, because otherwise we could be praying to an imaginary God. Scripture reveals God’s nature and character through revelation to people of faith through Israel, Jesus and the early church. It is how God addresses us and calls us into conversation and encounter.

Last week I shared my own struggles and experience of prayer in the week I went to be by the bedside of my dying mother. She is still with us, though the outlook hasn’t changed. But thank you for all your prayers and support at this time.

Over the next two weeks I want to return to theory again and look at how we should pray. I know an anxiety of many is that they don’t know how to pray and are worried that they somehow are not praying right.

When I was a teenager I remember my minister saying that when he heard people praying out loud he could tell by the quality of their prayers whether they had a close relationship with the Lord. Such a comment just intimidated me and I vowed never to go the church prayer meeting so that he couldn’t find me out!

However, the teaching of Jesus this week and the passage next week suggests that we have to approach prayer with the right attitude. Next week the passage is about becoming like a child to enter the kingdom of God. This week we read how Jesus tells a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector who go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee is all self-righteous ‘I’m not like these other people – the godless riff raff and immoral low life. I fast twice a day and give a tenth of all I get’ – in other words on paper I am a good god fearing and pious person who takes my religion seriously and does all the right things.

The tax collector comes along to pray but stands at a distance and not even looking up to heaven beats his chest: ‘God have mercy on me a sinner!’. And Jesus commends him rather than the Pharisee who is doing everything by the book. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted is the punchline.

This week and next I want to draw on the advice on how to pray from two of the church’s greatest theologians and Christian leaders. Augustine and Calvin. Next week we will look at Calvin’s four rules for prayer. This week I will share with you Augustine’s advice to a Roman noblewoman called Anicia Faltonai Porba at the turn of the fifth century. She was Roman noblewoman and a Christian believer and she had written to Augustine because she was afraid she wasn’t praying as she should. Augustine responded with a brief practical essay.

Augustine’s first principle is that before you know what to pray for and how to pray for it, you must become a particular kind of person. He said ‘you must count yourself desolate in this world, however great the prosperity of your lot may be’. The scales must have fallen from your eyes and you must see clearly that no matter how great your earthly circumstances become, they can never bring you the lasting peace, happiness and consolation that are found in Christ. Unless you have that clearly in view, your prayers may go wrong.

I spoke to the Women’s Guild about Augustine mong others when I gave a talk on Famous prayers last Tuesday. I shared with them Augustine’s theology when applied to prayer. **First we must recognise that our heart’s loves are ‘disordered’: out of order.** Things we ought to love third or fourth are first in our heart. God, whom we should love supremely, is someone we may acknowledge but whose favour and presence is not existentially as important to us as say prosperity, success, status, love, and pleasure. Unless at the very least we recognize this heart disorder and realize how much it distorts our lives, our prayers will be part of the problem, not an agent of our healing.

For example, if we look to our financial prosperity as our main source of safety and confidence in life, then when our wealth is in grave jeopardy, we will cry out to God for help, but our prayers will be little more than ‘worrying in God’s direction’. When our prayers are finished we will be more upset and anxious than before. Prayer will not be strengthening. It won’t heal our hearts by reorienting our vision and helping us put things in perspective and bringing us to rest in God as our true security.

Augustine goes on. If you have settled this – if you have grasped the character of your heart and admitted your desolation part from Christ – then, he says, you can begin to pray. And what then should you pray for? With a bit of a smile (!) he answers that you should pray for what everyone else prays for: a happy life. What however will bring you a happy life? If you have embraced Augustine’s first principle of prayer, you have realized that comforts and rewards and pleasures in themselves, will only bring you less enduring happiness. He turns to Psalm 27 and points of the psalmist great prayer: ‘one thing have I desired of the Lord, one thing will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord to behind the beauty of the Lord’.

**His second principle is to recognize where our true joy lies**. This is the fundamental prayer for happiness from a mind that the Spirit has cleared of illusions. Augustine writes, ‘we love God, therefore, for what he is in Himself, and we love ourselves and our neighbours for His sake’. That doesn’t mean, he quickly adds, that we shouldn’t be praying for anything else but to know, love and please God. Not at all. The Lord’s Prayer shows us that we need many things. However if we have made God our greatest love, and if knowing and pleasing him is our highest pleasure, it transforms both what and how we pray for a happy life.

Augustine then cites Proverbs 30.7-9 as an example:

‘*give me neither poverty nor riches;  
    feed me with the food that I need,****9****or I shall be full, and deny you, …  
or I shall be poor, and steal,  
    and profane the name of my God.*

This is an excellent test. Consider the petition ‘O Lord – give me a job so I won’t be poor.’ That is an appropriate thing to ask God for. Indeed, it is essentially the same thing as to pray, ‘Give us this day our daily bread’. Yet the proverbs 30 prayer reveals the only proper motivation beneath the request. If you just jump into prayer without recognizing the disordered nature of the heart’s loves, your prayer’s intention will be, ‘make me as wealthy as possible’.

The proverbs 30 prayer is different. It is to ask, ‘Lord, meet my material needs, and give me wealth, yes, but only as much as I can handle without it harming my ability to put you first in life. Because ultimately I don’t need status and comfort – I need you as my Lord’.

Timothy Keller in his book on prayer gives the following illustration: ‘Imagine an eight year old boy playing with a toy truck and then it breaks. He is disconsolate and cries out to his parents to fix it. Yet as he’s crying, his father says to him, ‘a distant relative you’ve never met has just died and left you one hundred million pounds’. What will be the child’s reaction? He will just cry louder until his truck is fixed. He does not have enough cognitive capacity to realize his true condition and be consoled.

In the same way, Christians lack the spiritual capacity to realize all we have in Jesus. This is the reason Paul prays that God would give Christians the spiritual ability to grasp the height, depth, breadth, and length of Christ’s salvation (Eph 3.16-19).

In general, our lack of joy is as Shakespeare wrote: ‘The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves’ (Julius Caesar Act! scene 2). We are like the eight year old boy who rests his happiness in his ‘stars’ – his circumstances – rather than recognizing what we have in Christ. That is why in the Lord’s Prayer we don’t get to the petition for our daily bread and needs until we have spent time remembering the greatness of God and reigniting our love for him. Only then can we pray rightly for happiness and for our needs.

**Augustine’s third directive** is both comprehensive and practical, and we have already alluded to it. Once you have learned to pray in full awareness of the disorderdness of your heart and where true joys are found, he says, **you can be guided in the specifics of how to pray by studying the Lord’s Prayer**. Look at all the kinds of prayer in it – adoration, petition, thanksgiving, confession. Look at the order and form of the petitions:

He who says in prayer… ‘give me as much wealth as you have given to this or that man’ or ‘increase my honours; make me eminent in power and fame in the world,’ and who asks merely from a desire for these things, and not in order through them to benefit men agreeably to god’s will, I do not think he will find any part of the Lord’s Prayer in connection with which he could fit in these requests. Therefore let us be ashamed to ask these things.

**Augustine’s fourth principle is about prayer in the dark times.** He admits that even after following the first three rules ‘we still know not what to pray for us as we ought in regard to tribulations’. Even the most godly Christians can’t be sure what to ask for when we are enmeshed in difficulties and suffering. ‘Tribulations… may do us good… and yet because they are hard and painful… we pray ... that they may be removed from us.’

Should we pray, then for a change in circumstances or just enough strength to endure them? Augustine points to Jesus’ own prayer in Gethsemane, which was perfectly balanced between honest desire – ‘let this cup pass from me’ – and submission to God –‘nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.’ He points also to Romans 8.26, which promises that the Spirit will guide our hearts and prayers when we are groaning and confused – and God will hear them even in their imperfect state. So, Augustine concludes, pour out your heart’s desire, but remember the wisdom and goodness of God as you do so.

Anicia Proba was a widow by her early thirties and was present when Rome was sacked in 410 AD. She had to flee for her life to Africa with her granddaughter Demetrias, where they met Augustine. Her former life had been upended, and from what we know about her from the historical record, she never again enjoyed the secure life she had previously known. Augustine, however, argues not only that we grow in prayer in spite of these difficulties but because of them. He concludes the letter by asking his friend, ‘Now what makes this work or prayer specially suitable to widows but their bereaved and desolate condition?’ should a widow not, he asked, ‘commit her widowhood, so to speak, to her god as her shield in continual and most fervent prayer?’ what a remarkable statement. Her sufferings were her ‘shield’ – they defended her from the illusions of self-sufficiency and blindness that harden the heart, and they opened the way for rich, passionate prayer life that could bring peace in any circumstance. He calls her to embrace her situation and learn to pray. There is every reason to believe she accepted his invitation.

How should we pray? According to Augustine: first of all humbly recognise we all have disordered hearts. ‘Have mercy on me O God, a sinner. .’

Secondly we focus on what will give us real and lasting joy – our love for God.

Then thirdly we pray in this light and use the Lord’s Prayer as our model.

When we e praying over difficulties we balance honest desire (‘let this cup pass from me’) with humble submission (‘yet not my will but yours be done’).

As we humble ourselves in prayer may we experience the Lord lifting us up.