Prayer and Service

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 20 October 2024

Isaiah 53:4-12 • Hebrews 5:1-10 • Mark 10:35-45



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

In Jesus' journey on earth, one of his main concerns was to educate his disciples so that they could continue his work after his crucifixion and resurrection. We are the beneficiaries of his teaching, which was originally intended for them. As we know, Jesus told stories, he spoke in parables, he pointed out the practices of the Jews of the day and how they often clashed with God's desires, and he revealed what must happen to him, and what his Father had sent him to do.

An important teaching, which came up again and again, was about the way we are to relate to our fellow humans. Israel was under the rule of Rome; the Israelites also had to answer to rabbinical rule. The master/servant relationship was therefore very important and a major concern in everyone's life. Most people would have been looking for ways to have more control over their own

lives and, as we see in today's reading, some would very much like to be in power themselves.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are no exception. They want to secure their places in the new kingdom, when Jesus enters his glory. At least their request shows some faith in what Jesus has been trying to teach them — that their will be a new kingdom. But they don't understand that such a kingdom doesn't operate on the same rules as earthly kingdoms. No one will be first in importance or power in God's kingdom — except God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. And those whom God will recognise and reward will not be those who strive for the highest places. As Jesus says,

> If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all. (Mark 10:43-4)

Jesus has taught this idea consistently to the disciples, but it is a difficult lesson for them. To be great in God's kingdom isn't the same as being great in the earthly kingdoms. The theologian David Garland, however, makes an interesting point, saying that the idea of service to others is actually quite common in our society, and not just among charitable organisations. One of our parishioners was remarking the other day how much she appreciates a particular driving service. She likes them because they offer more than just the ordinary taxi, with assistance getting from the building into the car and other help. She chooses them because they offer service. It's the same with a lot of companies we patronise. We tend to choose the ones that give us the best service, and such companies do better business than others who don't offer the same level of service. Of course there is a profit motive; but if one considers that God is Creator of all, and the structures of civilised society are ultimately God's creation, then isn't it wonderful that they tend to support one of the great tenets of our faith?

Another big part of our faith and our relationship with God is prayer. One passage from the Hebrews reading particularly caught my attention:

> In his life on earth Jesus made his prayers and requests with loud cries and tears to God, who could save him from death. Because he was humble and devoted, God heard him. (Hebrews 5:7)

God heard Jesus' prayer, and likewise hears our prayers. I've had a good example of that recently. A few months back, I started regular prayers at Prebbleton before the service. Every Sunday morning, a few of us meet together from 8.30-8.45 in silent prayer for the growth of the parish. In my prayers, I ask God to send us his people, that we may help them to know God better and come closer to him. I pray also for inspiration for us all to do as God wants us to do in order to reach more of his people.

Well, we have had a few new faces at Prebbleton lately, and also at Halswell, which is what we have been praying for — more people in our churches. But as we know, God also may answer our prayers in ways we don't foresee. You will know that I take services monthly at the Bupa residence in Prebbleton. This started early this year, and I used to get 6-7 people each month at the service. Well, in recent months, this has grown tremendously. A week ago Friday, we had 20 people at the service! I have also seen growth at our Banbury Park services in Halswell. In both cases, God has been working through the ladies who handle entertainment and events at these two facilities; and both ladies have been actively promoting our services. I give thanks for them and, above all, I give thanks to God for answering our prayers. I was not expecting those services to bring in so many; but God works his will, and the only appropriate response is thanksgiving.

I hope that all of you have some sort of daily prayer practice. It can be as simple as saying the Lord's prayer every morning, and sitting in silence for a few moments as you think about those you love or those you're worried about, asking for God's comfort or healing. In the Lord's prayer is everything we need to meet God where he wants us to meet him. We acknowledge God's sovereign will and power; we pray for the coming of the kingdom; and we humbly acknowledge our sins and ask for forgiveness and the will to forgive others. Think about the words as you say them. The prayer is so familiar that we can easily just rattle it off without much thought; but try saying it very slowly and considering every line. This practice, I find, quickly leads me into a deeper space of prayer.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you have given us the best words to say when we pray; and thank you, gracious God, that you hear our prayers and answer them as is best for us. In Jesus' name, amen.