

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 6th Sunday after Trinity

24th July 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

I once heard a story of a young child during the Second World War who announced to his family one evening: 'I prayed that it would snow at Christmas, and it didn't. I prayed that I would be given a puppy, and I wasn't. I prayed that God would keep my father from being killed in the War, and he didn't. I'm not going to pray to God any more.' How do we square that small child's experience with the words of Jesus in today's Gospel reading: 'Ask, and it will be given to you ... for everyone who asks receives'?

There is a mystery about prayer. We have probably all known times when we feel that a prayer has been answered, when there is a sense of God's presence in the situation and we feel blessed and full of gratitude. But many of us have probably also known times when the thing longed for didn't happen, when heaven seemed silent and we felt bereft and alone with our need. We may have been left wondering whether it was because we didn't pray hard enough, or well enough. And if we didn't receive what we asked for, are we, like the child in the story, to give up on prayer altogether? I have known more than one devout Christian who, faced with this kind of experience, has done just that. But in the extract from Luke's Gospel we heard this morning, Jesus urges his disciples not

to give up on prayer, but to persist in it. Yet what should we be asking for when we pray? That's a question Jesus's disciples asked him too, as we heard in our reading this morning.

A couple of years ago, the Feast of St Luke (known as 'the beloved physician') fell on a Sunday, and we looked at three different types of prayer we might want to pray for someone we love who is ill. First, we can pray for their recovery. Even if the evidence is that they are unlikely to survive, somehow there is a deep instinct in us to will God to bring life from death. It's a prayer of resurrection. Secondly, we might wish to pray that our loved one will find strength in their suffering, will find courage and patience to last them through the time of distress and a sense that God in Christ will be alongside them. It's a prayer of incarnation.

Finally, there is the third kind of prayer. If we cannot find it in us to ask for a miracle, but we want to pray for more than acceptance, we might pray that if this illness has to be, then let it somehow be not only a time of pain and sorrow but also of grace and gift. May it be a time when the person we care for finds a depth of love, companionship and truth; that as they stare down the approach of death they may have a richer sense of the wonder of living, a thankfulness for all they have seen and known, an ability to bless others as those others face challenges themselves, and a piercing insight into the heart of God. We pray that our loved one may discover their real nature and destiny and see a glimpse of heaven beyond. That's a prayer of transfiguration.

Prayer in the end is about holding before God the people and situations which we carry on our hearts. Someone said to me this week that a lot of what prayer

is doing is trying to get ourselves into a position where we can say 'Thy will be done' and let go of control, to let God be God. There is something about sending out our deepest desire into God's infinite and loving presence, as strongly as we can, knowing that it is the most we can do and that it comes from the depths of our hearts. Knowing too that the outcome is not ours to dictate, but trusting that the response will be loving, albeit in ways we may not fully understand. Which, if we think about it, is the prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' (Luke 22.42.)

When Jesus's disciples asked him how they should pray, he gave them a few short sentences which offered them an insight and an invitation into his own relationship of intimacy and intensity with God, a relationship characterised by the sort of love that a parent gives to a beloved child. It has been said that the prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer contains in many ways everything humanity needs for its wellbeing. The version given in Luke's Gospel is slightly shorter than the one in Matthew, on which is based the prayer we use in church. But the essence is the same.

The Lord's Prayer contains three direct requests. The first is 'Give us'. 'Give us today our daily bread.' In other words, help us to live in the present tense, not to be so burdened by guilt or scarred by hurt that we live in the past, and let us not be so anxious about the unknown or obsessed with a particular goal that we become prisoners of the future. Give us enough, it says – not so much that we don't know what to do with it or so little that we can't see past our own need. 'Give us' is a prayer to be given the grace to live in the present.

The second request is 'Forgive us'. It is a request to take away the burden of the things we have done and of the things others have done to us. Forgiveness is a complicated thing, but it's vital to our wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around us. Allowing ourselves to be dispossessed of our hatred for someone whom we perceive has done us harm. It doesn't mean that wrong things haven't been done. But it does mean getting to a point where we can say: 'Those wrong things done to me or by me will not always determine the meaning of my life'. To be permanently consumed by hatred or resentment or guilt is to confine ourselves in a world in which the only things that matter are the bad things that have been done to us or by us. And that's a very small world. 'Forgive us' as we forgive is a prayer to be given back the past.

The last request is about the future. 'Deliver us.' Offering God our fear that the future will bring challenges that are too much for us. The request comes in two halves – fear of ourselves, of our own weakness ('Lead us not into temptation') and fear of what lies outside us, of the things we can't control ('Deliver us from evil').

Give us. Forgive us. Deliver us. If we can pray those three things, we will find that we begin to live more abundant lives, not burdened by regret for the past or fear for the future. The prayer says those three things. For the present, give us what we need and the grace to recognise what matters. For the past, forgive us what we can't undo as we forgive what others have done to us. And for the future, don't let us be overwhelmed by something that's too much for us.

One commentator has written: 'The Lord's Prayer says everything we need to say in words and brings us into God's presence as surely as the disciples were

present to the person of Jesus. We can pray with confidence, certain that our prayer is heard.'

I hope the child in the story may have discovered that when he grew up.

Amen.