

# VISION 4 *LIFE*

## YEAR OF PRAYER

The 1<sup>st</sup> in a series of Sermons by Rev. Peter Chave

### WHAT IS PRAYER?

A little boy was on holiday with his parents in Italy. The three of them entered a beautiful historic church. Inside there were people kneeling down and looking upwards toward the lighted area at the front. 'What are they doing?' asked the boy. His parents told him that the people were 'praying' and when he asked 'What is that?' they gave him the best explanation they could manage.

The little boy then went and knelt down himself and gazed towards the front of the church. After a few minutes he came back: 'I asked God for ice cream' he reported. 'I even knew the right word "Gelato".'

Well, good for him, and we may hope that God inspired the boy's parents to action, and his prayer was answered.

We recognise the 'ice cream' prayer, and it is fine. Jesus himself authorised a more basic variant on it: 'Give us this day our daily bread'. But we would like to tell the little boy, and need to tell ourselves, that prayer has many other facets too. It is a wider, deeper activity - and relationship, in which 'asking for things' takes a natural, but small, part.

The United Reformed Church in its Vision4Life Process suggests we spend a year thinking about prayer and - while we are at it - praying. Our Lent groups will be looking at material on prayer. House Groups may well do the same. I shall preach some sermons on the topic and I hope we shall discover as we go some riches of prayer - maybe some novel approaches - that we can share in Sunday services. I want to encourage you to some sustained thinking about prayer - What are we up to when we pray? But also to encourage each of us, individually and together, to pray and make our prayer as vibrant as we can. But: moderation in all things - If we go on about the subject too much, so that you end up thinking 'Oh no! Not prayer again!' then the special year will be counter-productive.

We need a wide enough idea of what prayer is. When the Temple was destroyed and the Israelites could no longer offer animal sacrifices they substituted prayer. As the smoke of burning meat had gone up to God so now they tried, not so much to send their prayers aloft as to lift themselves into the presence of God.

This we can and should do as individuals - we think of the 'little boy kneels at the foot of the bed' sort of prayer or whatever variation we personally make upon that.

But the biblical emphasis is on praying together and that is where the importance of worship comes in - and my 'thank you' the other day to you for being worshippers. We each have our individual prayers but there is strength in sending them off together. Sometimes we all want to concentrate on making the same prayer. But remember the definition I gave earlier. It is not really a case of 'sending off' prayers to a distant destination but of lifting ourselves - each helping the other - into the presence of God. I suggest therefore that not only the bits of the

service marked 'prayer' on the sheet are prayer but the whole of our time of praise, learning and fellowship. And this spills over into our weekday life too, for God does not depart when the Sabbath is over. The Cistercian monks even used to say 'To labour is to pray'.

There are various different types of prayer which some people neatly summarise in a helpful list, such as: Praise, Thanksgiving, Confession, Petition (i.e. prayer for our self), Intercession (prayer for others). One writer looking at this list joked that he 'didn't know the first thing about prayer'. He meant he had trouble with item 1 – Praise. Why did God need Praise?

Telling God how wonderful he is seemed plain embarrassing. But someone helped him with the thought that Thanksgiving thanks God for this particular gift or that special blessing, but Praise is really saying 'Thank you for being God'.

Prayer is like no other relationship and no other conversation. Our partner is not another human being but is 'beyond'. This makes a very important point about the way we see life. We feel, we believe that humanity does not have all the answers. We feel that the deep meaning and purpose of our life points 'beyond' us. To enter this relationship of Prayer with something/someone 'beyond' is to show a proper humility about ourselves.

But this is not an ordinary conversation. It is our only conversation with the 'beyond'. In human conversation we speak and hear an answering voice. In prayer we do not (usually) hear a voice. Which proves it's phoney and a waste of time, doesn't it?

No! How would we expect a conversation with the 'beyond' to be? We seem to experience simply the swirl of our own thoughts. Yet into these thoughts come insights we feel we did not manufacture. We feel our actions judged by standards that are not just our opinion. And we feel love addressed to us and tenderness shown to us of a quite different character from our own paltry self-love.

No doubt prayer puts us in touch with our own psychic depths. But prayer is richer and more fundamental than just the deepest bits of me. It seems to link us with the universe, with life and with what is behind and beyond even that – 'deep calls unto deep'.

Why do I say 'seems to link us...'? Because this is a strange conversation. It is not like chatting to our human best pal – and yet, the message from beyond feels like tidings of a best pal on a cosmic scale. Prayer is not an activity carrying easy certainty. Prayer is an act of faith. Its rewards can be immense. But prayer is a strange and adventurous activity. It needs an input of enthusiasm and energy – a bit of effort from us. And then a sensitive listening to whatever may come.

Talking about Prayer can soon get airy-fairy. It is in trying it out that it makes sense and becomes real. But it never becomes ordinary or obvious.

God is mysterious.

For Christians the mystery acquired a human face in Jesus Christ. But that still does not make it ordinary and obvious – We may address our prayer to Jesus. We shall find his values flooding back into our thoughts; and his courage inspiring us to do the right.

It is still strange to have a relationship with our Risen Lord. The challenge is to try it. To my mind the main point of our Year of Prayer is to gain confidence in this strange but wondrous activity.

One closing suggestion of a way that prayer may 'work'. Human beings have been described as a collection of jumbled passions. Plenty of enthusiasm for good things but also for bad, and all a bit disjointed. In prayer our passions can be ordered by contact with a greater wisdom – and a deeper love.

One writer says 'We might imagine Christian prayer as a fluid "energy exchange" within a field of love. Our love reaches out to God's love which is reaching out to us. Amidst the jumbled passions love grows stronger:

'This might explain the power of prayer to move more violent passions (like anger, fear or grief) toward gentler, less self-assertive ones (like compassion, wonder or mercy).' Prayer lets love flow and grow and change things for the better.

AMEN.

(This sermon includes material used from Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (eds.) (2005)  
The Phenomenology of Prayer, New York; Fordham University Press.)