

## The Adventure of Prayer

### 1. BEING LOVED

Romans 5:1-8

John 3:16-17

Prayer is our love affair with God. Prayer begins as the opening of my heart and mind to God's love for me. And it never ceases to be that, however wide the demands of that love are discovered to be... For how can I love my neighbour as myself unless I am deeply aware of what I am, that I am being loved into fullness of life by the Father of us all. (Harry Williams)

The trouble with prayer is that most people have hang-ups about it. We know we should be doing it, but we're not sure how to go about it, whether we're doing it right, and we know we should be doing more of it than we are. This sermon series on prayer is not meant as a guilt trip, but as an encouragement, as an incentive to try out different ways of praying and to embed prayer into our daily lives. And I want to start not by focusing on techniques and practicalities - there are resources in the booklet on this sermon series which you are welcome to take home and use- but on the relationship with God that is at the heart of all prayer. The relationship that Harry Williams describes - the relationship of being loved. God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8-10)

One of the great unfairnesses of life is that some people experience love, and some don't. We don't choose our parents/ families and yet our own ability to give and receive love depends quite a lot on whether our parents loved us, or on the quality of that love. Not entirely, because poor parental care is often compensated for by the love and care of friends, teachers, and partners. Even so, those who have been loved from an early age and come from a stable loving home have a huge advantage over those who haven't. They will almost certainly be more confident, more trusting, more open hearted. The poet Philip Larkin got it exactly right:-

In everyone there sleeps  
A sense of life lived according to love.  
To some it means the difference they could make  
By loving others; but across most it sweeps  
As all they might have been had they been loved.  
That nothing cures. (from *Faith Healing*)

The heart, the absolute epicentre, of the Christian Gospel is the conviction that each human being is, infinitely loved, not because we deserve it, but because that's the kind of God God is. Hence St Paul's words: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us".

OK , you say, I have believed that for years, and I believe now that God loves me. But what's this got to do with prayer? Well, I think most of us in our Christian lives go on a bit of a journey of discovery. We start by being taught things, reading our Bibles, attending worship, believing in our heads that there is a God who loves us. That's stage 1 of the journey. We discuss God and the Christian faith in confirmation classes, study groups, or read books about God. But unless we actually experience God's love, we won't get much further. Believing that you are loved by God is Stage 1.

It's something you can study or take courses in. Christians call it "theology". But experiencing that God loves us is Stage 2. It's something you can in the end, only find out by trying it. And Christians call that "prayer". Prayer, I suggest, is paying attention - being attentive - to ourselves, to one another and to God. As that lovely Harry Williams quote says. Firstly, we must pay attention to ourselves, because you are special, you are loved. So take time at the end of each day to think about what you have done, what was good, what was bad, and turn it over in your mind, consciously, with God. Where was God in my life today? Were there opportunities I missed, things I put off? Doing this on a regular basis makes you alert and attentive, able to spot the moments when we need to listen carefully, summon up the courage to speak the truth in love, moments when God is calling us to pay attention to Him.

But we must also, if we're not to be totally self-centred, pay attention to others.

You can tell when someone's really paid attention to you, because you feel better; and you can tell when you've really paid attention to someone else, because it's hard work. Good prayer involves paying attention to others, and not just those around us: to pray for someone who's sick, or for Ukraine, or the Middle East is to hold them, however briefly, in your arms and give them your full and undivided attention. The Psalms can be a huge help here if you find it hard to intercede in this way: you can read Psalm 88 as a way of praying for someone terminally ill and I guarantee that every word of it will bring you intimately close to them. If you want to pray for someone who's isolated and angry, pray Psalm 69; for someone sick, Psalm 6; for someone really happy and thankful, Psalm 103. Again, when you pay attention in prayer to others, watch out: God may be asking you to do something for them. Your prayer may lead to action.

Paying attention to ourselves, paying attention to others.

Finally! We need to pay attention to God. And the best way of paying attention to God is to take off your watch (metaphorically). Forget all the demands of your schedule, your diary. Very little is so urgent that you can't take a moment and be still.

Having taken off your watch, say a familiar prayer, and then allow your mind to wander. Play, daydream, fantasize about how things could be, or go for a walk and enjoy paying attention to the beauty of the countryside. Read a poem, or savour a memory. Do not speak, or watch TV. End with another prayer; and put your watch back on. There's a time to pray as well as a time to be busy.

A time to simply be still within God's loving presence. I hope I have said enough this morning to make clear that Prayer isn't just petition, or talking to God, or listening to God. Prayer is both the discovery and the experience of being infinitely loved. "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" . If we find it hard to pray it may be because we find it hard to accept someone else's love, hard to believe there's someone out there who loves us. But supposing there is? Then all kinds of things become possible. You are free from the fear of being unloved or unwanted, free to doubt, and be angry, and ask questions; free to fail and go wrong and yet be accepted; free, in a word, to be you. The moment we start to pray we start to make that freedom our own.

*"Prayer is our love affair with God. Prayer begins as the opening of my heart and mind to God's love for me. And it never ceases to be that, however wide the demands of that love are discovered to be... For how can I love my neighbour as myself unless I am deeply aware of what I am, that I am being loved into fullness of life by the Father of us all." ( Harry Williams)*

AMEN