



SERVICE FOR PERSONAL USE – 25TH OCTOBER 2020

Hymn STF 51 “Great is thy faithfulness”

Prayer

Loving God, we praise you for each new day we receive from you. We come to lift up our hearts even when we cannot lift up our voices in song. We come to celebrate your love and goodness to us. We think of the opportunities that come to us and for the things that we enjoy each day. We thank you for the things we can do though we are aware of the many things we cannot do. We thank you that we have so many things to be grateful for, so many things that give us pleasure and cause us to rejoice.

Forgive us that we sometimes take these things for granted. Forgive us that sometimes we seek more instead of appreciating what we have. Loving God, help us to accept all you have given us with true gratitude and thankfulness. Amen.

Reading: Matthew 22:34-46

The first commandment is not only the most important, but the one which is the foundation on which all the others are built. Jesus does not cite the first commandment on its own, we cannot love God in the abstract. Conversely we notice that love of neighbour is a secondary command, it arises from our perception of the nature of God.

Reflection

An all-age exercise for thinking about loving our neighbour.

Love is being **N**eighbourly

Love is **E**ncouraging

Love is **I**nviting to tea

Love is **G**ardening

Love is **H**oovering

Love is **B**abysitting

Love is **O**pen house

Love is **U**nderstanding

Love is **R**esponding

Hymn STF 20 “Be still”

I was told recently that we never preach about prayer these days. We may disagree with that comment but I realise that it is a subject I haven't tackled that recently. So our second reading is one of Paul's prayers in his letter to the Colossians.

Reading: Colossians 1:3-9

Sermon

What is it that makes human beings special? What is it that makes us unique? Many would say it's our intelligence, the fact that we can think, we can learn, we can make choices and decisions. But are we that intelligent? A woman once rang American Airlines. She asked, "Can you tell me how long it takes to fly to San Francisco from New York." The agent replied, "Just a minute." To which the woman said, "Thank you" and hung up.

One thing that does mark us out as unique is that we pray. People in every age and in every culture have prayed, it seems to be part of being human. Sometimes the prayer simply comes out of desperation, they've tried everything else. Even in our secular age it's amazing how many people pray in extremis, when they're really at the end of their tether. Most people will pray when they get really desperate. There is that old saying that in a foxhole there are no atheists.

At a university there was a debate with speakers on each side speaking for the Christian faith and for atheism. The atheist speaker ended his contribution by arguing that the human race has now grown up and can sort out the things that damage life like war and disease. His last sentence was "If we can't sort these things out, then God help us."

Most people will pray when they get desperate, but what is distinctive about Christian prayer? It isn't just meditation, it's about communication. Prayer isn't just a private thing, it isn't something that only involves us communing with our own thoughts. We are communicating with God and of course that communication works the other way as well. We are giving God the opportunity to communicate with us. We are spending time with God.

To have access to God in that way is a huge privilege. Privilege can mean different things. The tenth Duke of Marlborough went to stay with his daughter. He appeared at the top of the stairs and announced that his toothbrush wasn't working. It turned out that his valet had always put toothpaste on the brush, so the duke was unaware the toothbrush didn't foam up spontaneously. The privilege of prayer is that we have direct access to God our heavenly father. We can talk with him, we can bring our concerns, our needs and our joys to him.

Prayer is a constant reality for us. We know that we can pray at any time and in any place. There are some places that are more conducive, there are some places where

we find it easier to pray than others. Many people find it easier to pray in church, but we know we can talk to God anywhere.

We should remember who it is that we are praying to. When we pray we pray to God our heavenly father, almighty God, the creator of all life. God is our heavenly father, he is a person not an amorphous power, he isn't an it. We use phrases like almighty God to remind us of his awesome power, but he is a personal God, not an impersonal God. He is a personal God who knows each one of us individually. God hears our prayers and answers them. Sometimes that can be very hard to believe, sometimes we seem to be getting no answer at all, sometimes of course it isn't the answer that we want.

But how do we get on in practice? Many of us find prayer a lot harder than we feel we should. We find that we get distracted very easily. We find we often get stuck in a rut and it all seems very repetitive and not very helpful. What used to work well doesn't work so well any more. Just a few practical pointers which may be of help to some.

It can help to say prayers rather than just think them. In the past people would always say their prayers out loud, just as they would always read out loud, the concept of reading silently was unknown. Sometimes when we speak it can be easier to keep our focus. Our thoughts are always prone to wander, but saying words out loud can help to keep us on track.

We know that we can pray to God at any time. The reality is that sometimes we really don't feel like it, we don't feel in the mood for whatever reason. But those are the very times when our prayers can be most meaningful. It's more costly because it involves more effort, but it shows that we're serious about it. We aren't just fair-weather Christians, we don't just pray when the sun's shining and everything's right with the world.

We can and we should pray for our own needs. Sometimes we think that we should really be praying for others and our own concerns are much lower down the list. But prayer for ourselves is no less valid than praying for others. We shouldn't feel guilty about praying for ourselves. We are the ones who know what our true needs really are. We shouldn't become totally self-absorbed, it would be quite wrong only to pray for ourselves, but those prayers are just as valid as our other prayers.

Our prayers should be natural. We are conscious that praying to almighty God is a huge privilege. It isn't something we take lightly, but we should use normal words. If you were at the meal table you wouldn't expect your daughter to say "Verily, verily, I beseech thee wilt thou be gracious enough to pass unto me the tomato ketchup." We can talk to God naturally, which doesn't mean being matey, but just using the normal words we use in our daily lives.

Our prayers don't need to be lengthy. Michael Ramsey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, was once asked by a young journalist how much time he spent praying each day. Ramsey said about a minute. The journalist was astonished and asked if he really only spent one minute a day praying. Ramsey said, "Yes, but it takes me twenty-nine minutes to get there." It isn't the length of time we pray that matters, it's the quality not the quantity that counts. Jesus had hard words for the Pharisees who used to pray at great length, using long and impressive words. What matters isn't how long we pray, it isn't about using impressive words. What matters is finding time for God, making space in our busy lives to pray and to open ourselves up to him.

Prayers

Loving God, help as us we pray. Help us to know when to speak and when to remain silent. Help us to know when to accept things and when to go on asking. Help us to know when to persevere and when to let go.

When we pray help us to accept the challenges that come to us. Help us to receive encouragement as we pray. Help us to be transformed as we spend time in prayer.

When we pray help us to be taught your truth. Help us to receive the comfort you offer us. Help us to be strengthened by the time we spend in prayer.

When we pray help us sense your presence with us. Help us to discover your will. Help us to hear your voice and to respond to your call.

When we pray help us to receive your forgiveness. Help us to be more aware of your love for us. Help us to feel a new awareness of your presence.

Loving God, hear these prayers as we offer them in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Hymn STF 378 "Father of everlasting grace"

Blessing

Go in peace.

May the love of the Father enfold you.

May the wisdom of the Son guide you in the truth.

May the power of the Spirit strengthen you.