

## **Year C Proper 17**

Genesis 18: 20-32

Colossians 2:6-19

Luke 11: 1-13

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, my Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Can you remember what it was like when you had driving lessons? When I learnt to drive, I knew I was a novice and worked hard at driving well. Recently I was talking to a friend who took a test with the Institute of Advanced Motorists. He said he had to almost totally re-learn how to drive; he was taught how to be far more present and consciously thinking all the time, whereas I must admit most of us drive fairly unconsciously. By that I mean things like we change gears without noticing that we have made that decision to change gears. We just do it when it is right to change up or down a gear. My friend said driving has become a new experience for him.

And, in one sense this is how Luke's gospel starts out. One of Jesus' disciples, no doubt a practising Jew, who would have prayed every day, and knew the set prayers off by heart and could recite them without thinking, said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray..." A disciple, who knows how to pray, asks Jesus to teach him how to pray. Clearly the disciples saw something in how Jesus prayed to God that was significantly different from how they prayed. So, despite years of praying, they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.

Jesus taught them what we call the Lord's Prayer. Jesus then goes on to tell them a parable to describe prayer to God. In the culture of that time hospitality was important. No one would have let their neighbour knock loudly on their door, they would not have said, "don't bother me"; they would have responded immediately to a request to help a neighbour provide hospitality.

So, contrary to how we sometimes read this gospel passage, Jesus isn't saying that God will only respond to persistent prayer. He is making the point that God will respond exactly as a hospitable neighbour would; the response would be immediate.

Jesus encourages the disciples, and us, in our prayers to ask, to search, and knock. Jesus says those who ask will receive, those who seek will find, and those who knock will find the door open. But, that leaves a big question hanging. What will we receive, what will we find, what will the door open to?

If prayer was that straightforward then it would be very easy to get everything we desired, whether it was right for us or not. I don't know about you but I would have won the lottery, people I have prayed for would have their health restored, miraculous recoveries from terminal illness would have happened, the world would be at peace, I would own a Motto Guzzi 850cc California motorbike, many more peoples' lives would have been transformed by coming to faith, Penelope Cruz would be Mrs Penelope Bowry... and so on. Prayer isn't answered just how we might want, even based on what Jesus said to his disciples in the gospel passage. God isn't like a vending machine; we don't insert our prayer for a bar of chocolate and out it tumbles. It isn't that simple a transaction!

Jesus in the last verse of this passage tells us that our heavenly father, who loves us unconditionally, more than we can love our own children – just think of that, more than we can love our own children – will give us the Holy Spirit if only we were to ask for it.

Hmmm, so no lottery win then? No Motto Guzzi motorbike? Instead I get to win a greater indwelling of the Holy Spirit!

And let us think back to the beginning of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught the disciples. The second line we pray is, 'Your kingdom come'. And in the version we say during our service, we add, 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

We mean that our personal and collective prayer is that we want to pray that our actions will contribute to bringing God's kingdom to be present in everyone's life today, now, this minute. And how better to be part of that great endeavour than by being guided and led by the Holy Spirit. And in that

guiding by the Holy Spirit, we may find our own lives transformed as much or more so than the person or situation we may be praying about. One of the transforming powers of prayer is how it can change the person praying.

So, although we may wish that prayers for someone's recovery from serious illness are met, what if our prayers are for a different kind of healing? A healing that makes that person 'whole' despite being ill. That enables them to live as fully as they can with their illness, to be present, to be able to have the conversations they need to have with their loved ones, to be able to be shriven, what a lovely word – to offload all that worries and burdens them, so they can be totally present with whatever their situation is?

I have prayed with people who are terminally ill. If I pray for their healing but they die, has my prayer not been answered? Has God said 'no' to them? Was my faith, or the person's faith not 'good enough'? Of course not.

Pastorally, it is important that my prayers for healing and wholeness are understood. I would love it for someone to unexpectedly and inexplicably be healed, and sometimes miraculous things do happen. However, I don't think God is so capricious to save some but not others, to say it was God's will that person X dies but person Y does not, based on some strange sort of divine reward and merit system. God's grace doesn't work like that, I am sure.

As you have probably heard me say before, I think prayer is *also* a place where we are changed. Where in praying for situations or issues that weigh heavily on our minds God challenges us to do something about it. For example, when we pray to God to ask why God isn't doing something about people who are suffering from starvation, God's answer maybe to ask us exactly the same thing; why aren't we doing something to stop people from suffering?

And prayer is also a time for God to speak to us. Silence, to open our hearts and minds to God, to quieten the chatter in our heads and hearts so we can hear God talk to us, through the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Holy Spirit gives us little subtle nudges – how are we going to be aware of those if we are constantly babbling out loud or have noisy minds? Sometimes the Holy Spirit decides we need told in giant neon lights so obviously it is hard to miss the nudge. Sometimes it is a gentle nudge that we may miss, if we are not careful.

What can we learn from today's gospel?

- ✝ That prayer takes effort, it takes a particular approach, modelled by Jesus, if we want to get the equivalent of the Institute of Advanced Motorists badge for praying. It requires us to become so familiar with God that we use words like Abba, daddy.
- ✝ That no matter how fervently we pray for a lottery win, for someone's health to be restored, for world peace, or whatever, Jesus taught us that our prayer is answered when it enables more of God's kingdom to be experienced on earth. And in the mystery of prayer, sometimes we know that our prayers are answered; that something inexplicably changes, changes for the better. We don't always understand how it happens, but we are encouraged by Jesus to pray.
- ✝ That Jesus taught us that our prayer will change us; if we ask, seek and open the door, the Holy Spirit will dwell within us, and we shall be more like Jesus, and more able to bring God's kingdom down to earth, more of the time.

Prayer can be literally life changing.

And the simplest of prayers, can sometimes be the place to start, the place to finish, or the prayer to say when other words fail us. It is often called 'The Jesus Prayer', or sometimes, 'The Prayer'.

*"Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me. Amen."*

Are you ready to up your prayer life, to go for the advanced badge? All you need to do is pray more often, allow silence, allow time for you to hear the Holy Spirit's promptings. And gives thanks to our gracious God for the love shown to us, that the Holy Spirit can guide and lead us. Our own driving instructor for prayer.