

I had a few days in Hong Kong after a SCM student training event in Korea, 18 long years ago. I stayed in a vast rambling brick ex-convent, surrounded by lawns and lush flowering bushes, just a bus ride from the concrete jungle of down-town Hong Kong. It was quiet against the background buzz of the city. I remember sitting in the high-roofed chapel, alone, asking God, over and over, “Lord, teach me to pray.” Later that evening there was a thunderstorm, and I have never experienced anything like it. I sat upstairs on the verandah for well over an hour watching the sky explode with light and sound. Feeling at the same time very small and yet very honoured by God’s love for me. The magnificent power of the lightning was somehow deeply personal.

“Teach us to pray”. So begins this reading from Luke. Jesus prayed, and he taught them to pray. Doesn’t it strike you as interesting, odd even, that Jesus modeled intense solitary prayer in his own life but he never told his disciples to pray this way. He didn’t say “Go off into the hills on your own”, but he gave them a few simple sentences to say. These obviously weren’t intended to be the only way to pray, but in comparison to the elaborate formal prayers of Jewish piety they are outrageously accessible and straightforward. They are a condensed essence of prayer, within which lie a universe of meaning and possibility. Praise, commitment, request, confession, adoration. A flow not a formula. A flow that leads us deeper into prayer, leading us from repeating familiar words into the strange and wonderful possibility of encountering God.

“Teach us to pray”. And of course God does teach us to pray. Because when we pray God is praying with us, in us, through us. The Holy Spirit opens the possibility for prayer and draws us into God’s own dynamic conversation and community. Thank God that prayer is not another assignment to complete! Prayer is gift. Prayer is food.

Or is it really? ‘cause often it isn’t.

How would you rate your prayer life at the moment? Can I ask you to respond to that ... hands high if prayer flows easily for you and you enjoy it and do it often
In the middle if it’s going OK but a bit of an effort.
And down low if it seems an impossible struggle to enter into prayer or to find time for it.

Prayer is gift, and Prayer is also obligation. Here’s what us ordinands will promise when we get ordained, like it or not!

The moderator will ask you

“Do you accept the call to be minister to this parish and congregation?”

And you say, “I do, and I intend, by constant prayer and careful study of the Holy Scriptures, to equip myself to be a faithful pastor” etc, etc.

Wow. Constant prayer. Can we really promise that? How many ministers can in all honesty say that they fulfill this part of their ordination vow?

Constant prayer and careful study of Scripture. Here’s another question for you: how many courses have you done to train yourself in the careful study of Scripture? Come on, a quick tally. To be in this room you will have to have done at least 4 university papers, ... how many?

You can predict the next question, can't you. How many courses have instructed you in prayer? So how are we supposed to learn how to pray? The occasional sermon? A home group series? If you're lucky!

So does prayer matter for ministry? Of course it does. How, exactly? In what ways is prayer essential to "equip myself to be a faithful pastor"?

You will be delighted to know that I have three points!

The first is this: Prayer feeds us.

Sometimes for me, on a good day, prayer is like sinking into a deep hot bath. I have an almost tangible feeling of relaxing into God's presence. The mind stills. My breath slows. My stresses and tangles of emotions soften and disentangle. Just soaking in the love of God.

Other times it is hard work to stop running around long enough to be still enough to pray. Do you know the most common response in the Old Testament when God calls someone's name? Just 3 words. When Moses stopped to wonder what the hell was happening with this bush on fire and a voice said "Moses", what did he say?

"Here I am".

Where I am? Here!

No! I'm much better at being somewhere else, planning something for next week, worrying about what someone said yesterday, wishing I was somewhere warmer! Prayer is essential for our lives because it forces us to be here and now. But watch out, because when you stop running then what you were running from gets a chance to catch up with you!

As we say to God "Here I am", we take hold of all our weird and wonderful collection of feelings and thoughts and weaknesses and struggles and lay them all down. As we sang earlier, "Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness" "These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness, he will accept". All that we cannot accept about ourselves will be accepted in prayer. This is why we ask for forgiveness in prayer. Without it we cannot be who we are called to be. Without confession and forgiveness we cannot minister in Christ's name.

Prayer feeds us. There's lots more I could say about this, but I'd like to invite you to think for a moment about how you are fed in prayer. How does God gift you, inspire you, comfort you, challenge you?

Let us pray:

Dear God, thank you for your presence. Thank you for the gift of prayer. Thank you for praying with us and through us. Lord, sometimes prayer comes easy, sometimes it is hard. Assure us always of your desire for us, and draw us closer to you.

Point number two: Prayer is a tool for ministry

Jesus told one of his provocative stories. If you needed food for a guest your neighbours would help you out, wouldn't they? Of course they would (well, in Jesus' day anyway), even if you ask at a bad time, even if they don't like you, even if they were already asleep. They might complain about it, but they'd still help. How much more, then, will God help us to provide for the needs of others!!

Jesus words in this reading from Luke emphasise the human initiative involved in prayer. It's active, it requires keeping at it. And yet God's response does not depend on the quality of our effort. God is willing and eager to give. So why does he need us to ask? But that's the whole thing about the God of the Jewish and Christian traditions. You wouldn't think he needs us and yet he does. Again and again in this book the question hangs in the air, "Why does God bother with us stupid, rebellious human beings?" Those of you with far more theological training than me will be better equipped to answer that question. All I know is that God does invite us to ask, to seek after blessing, to nag him with the problems of the world, to cry out for healing and peace.

I guess it is possible to do ministry without prayer. We can go quite a long way under our own steam. We can plan and preach and do lots of stuff. But without prayer it slowly and inevitably winds down. The problems get bigger. The conflicts get nastier. Our energy and faith gets less. Prayer is not a magic fix-all for ministry, but it is a resource without which ministry is poorer and less effective.

Again, let us pray.

Loving God, we pray now for the people you have given us to minister to. For our families and friends. For each other. For our churches. For the churches who will receive us in the future. For those who are in special need at this time. Open our hearts to the needs of your world. Deepen our love and concern for your people and your creation. We pray for mercy and justice, for daily bread and clean water. Bless all those who minister in your name.

Amen.

And the third and final point: Prayer is an act of obedience

Paul writes to the Church in Colossai:

"As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, abounding in thanksgiving." The glory of life in Christ only comes through dying with Christ.

OK, so what does this heavy duty Pauline theology have to do with prayer? For me it is about the Lordship of Christ. That is a hard concept to grasp in our culture of self-fulfilment, but what it means for me is the big scary idea that I don't have all the answers and even the answers I do have probably – all right, definitely! - aren't right all the time! God is simply bigger than me. Way, way bigger than me. And God is at work in the world. Not just through me, or you, or any of us. God's purposes and actions are utterly beyond us, and yet in his grace God invites us to participate in what he's up to. He lets us in on the big secret, just a little bit at a time, and mainly through prayer. Each time we pray "Your kingdom come, Your will be done", we relinquish a little of our own will, our own need to build empires. As we pray we allow our priorities to be gently reframed, re-imagined in the light of God's purposes. We allow Christ to be Lord, over our lives and our work.

Did you ever see Ghostbusters 2? I know, not exactly a peak of Western Civilisation, but good for a laugh. At one point Bill Murray and his gang climb down a man-hole in a New York street, and one of the guys is lowered down on a rope, down, down, and he emerges in a vast sewer pipe, through which to his astonishment is flowing a mighty river of glowing green psychoactive slime. Now, forgive my no doubt warped sense of metaphor, but couldn't this, just maybe, illustrate the action of God. A river flowing beneath the city, out of the awareness of the people above. And prayer feels

like going deeper, as we seek the ways of the Lord, and attempt, in our small and fragile way to participate in what God is doing in the world.

And so, I invite you to pray with me again.

Jesus Christ, we proclaim you as Lord of our lives, Lord of all creation. Call us to fullness of life in you. Have your way in us. All that we are, have been and will be we offer again to you. Make of it what you will.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.