

Praying with purpose (Acts 12:1-17)

Membership matters (Simon Rea)

Sunday Morning 10:45am 4 May 2008

I wonder if anyone recognises this: Lincoln Burrows is on death row for the murder of the vice president's brother. He insists he's innocent and only his brother Michael Scofield believes him. Michael takes drastic measures to help his brother. He helped build the prison so he gets himself arrested and sent there to help him escape. But - and there always has to be a BUT doesn't there! - Michael discovers a massive conspiracy that is determined to see Lincoln's sentence carried out. Breaking out will be more difficult than he thought, but he's still going to try. [Prison Break] It's another one of those blockbuster American series that's supposed to tempt us all to subscribe to Sky television. Originally Fox TV had turned the script because the company felt that it was just too far fetched.

Reworked with 3 Pooh types [Peter = Pooh, bewildered; Roda = Tigger; Disciples = Eeyores]

Our reading from Luke's gospel tells us about events which also seemed far

fetched -even for the people who were part of them. You only have to close your eyes to imagine poor old Peter, chained to 2 guards and with another 14 or so burly Roman soldiers looking after him, to imagine him wandering bleary-eyed out of his cell, past the warders and through the prison gates almost before realising what was going on. The words Luke uses imply that he was in a half-awake trance. Or try to imagine Roda who was so excited by hearing Peter's voice that she forgot to open the door and let him in. Or what about the disciples who just didn't want to believe that God had really sent the answer to their prayers - on 2 legs around to their door.

But - and here's the big But again - the whole report is part of Luke's carefully researched, orderly account of what happened in the first century. The reading shows us how important prayer is and what happens when people pray with purpose. The events in our reading from chapter 12 of Acts challenge us in many ways and today we're going to focus on what they show us about prayer, about persisting in prayer, about preparing ourselves for God to answer prayer and

about proclaiming what God has done in response to prayer.

We'll be dealing with each of these in turn as we go through the passage, so it might help if you kept your Bibles open at p1106 as we do so.

Let's start with persisting in prayer. V5 tells us that the people in the church were really pouring their hearts out in prayer to God for Peter. Why were they so fervent in their prayer? Quite simply because he had just been arrested by a psychotic madman and who had been trained in Rome, influenced by Caligula and who wanted to make nice to both the Jews and the Romans. Killing Christians was a sure fire way to keep both groups happy, as his execution of James reminds us. That's why the church was praying so hard and with such purpose. When the going gets tough, the church gets praying! Prayer is the most powerful weapon of the powerless against the powerful. Sometimes it's their only weapon, too.

Then again in V12 many people had gathered and were praying for him. Lovers of grammar will notice that pray is in

the imperfect tense in both cases. This is important because it means that they kept on doing it. Not just a quick. "Hi God, please free Peter. Amen" and then leaving it at that - although there's nothing wrong with that type of prayer but the way Luke writes tells us that they kept on praying, kept on bringing Peter before God. In our reading from Matthew, Jesus takes it for granted that his hearers would be praying regularly. He also told those parables he tells about persistent widows and annoying friends in the middle of the night. Prayer is something we should be persistent in, not something we should just do when we have time for nothing else. Regularly setting aside time to pray is one way in which we can discipline ourselves to be persistent in prayer. It might be in a morning before or after breakfast or it might be after reading the newspaper or watching the TV news - there are so many places, people and peoples that need prayer. Using your copy of What's On can help to as can the church prayer diary. It is so important to persist in prayer. Our song reminded us about how we can carry unnecessary burdens if we don't take things to the Lord in prayer, too! Add

prayer meeting on Wednesday

Persisting in prayer. Preparing ourselves for God to answer prayer. Well, I suppose it's logical really isn't it. The Bible tells us that God hears and answers prayer Ps 65:2 you who hear prayer, to you all men will come. Ps 86:7 I call to you in times of trouble, because you answer my prayer

So if we pray God will answer our prayers, won't he? But what happens when he doesn't? One of the great problems we all face is not how to pray, but what to pray. When a person we love is troubled, we wonder what is best. We are reluctant to be specific in our intercession because we fear telling God what we think best. We get into the muddle of what's our will versus what is God's will, as if the two could not be the same.

Years of trying to learn how and what to pray for others have taught me how important it is to spend time waiting and listening, rather than always rushing in with requests and petitions. Sometimes asking God what he wants means finding that He is more ready to give than I may

have had the courage to ask. In Ephesians, Paul reminds us that God is able to immeasurably more than we can even start imagining. That's what happened when he brought us here to serve him in Moreton and that's what he'll do when he takes us to London to do the same.

Discouragement over what we perceive as unanswered prayer in the past may make us pause before praying boldly. We assume that there was no answer because what happened was not what we wanted. Our limited view of time and eternity narrows our own perception of what an answer should be. Even after years of seeing God use what we thought were problems for a greater potential, we forget that experience and get caught in judging what God will do in a present situation on the basis of what we thought He should have done previously, but didn't. This, perhaps, was what the church in Jerusalem was facing. "We prayed for James and he was beheaded; what else can we expect for Peter?" I'm sure I'm not the only person here today to have experienced that. 2 examples from my own life:

When Margit was 24 weeks pregnant with our first child, she was taken into hospital with a life threatening case of pre-eclampsia. The situation was so grim that I could hardly even pray for her myself, so I contacted all the Christian friends I could think of and some whom I'd never even met. And they prayed. Persistently and faithfully. After 10 days on the gynecological station Michaela was born by emergency Caesarean section. Her weight soon went down to just under 2lb but she survived - and now she's getting too big to wear her mother's clothes! When one of my aunts was suffering from throat cancer, she wrote and asked us to pray for her. We prayed and that tumour disappeared. When some years later she was suffering from degenerative diseases and manic depression we prayed for her again but God didn't answer the prayers in the way we had expected he would and she died.

Expectation is a crucial part of dynamic prayer. But it must be built on the insight and guidance of prolonged prayer to know how to pray. Building our prayers on unguided, negative expectations is disastrous. We expect far too little, we

ask for it, and then are disappointed that the Lord didn't do better for us.

The formula for creative intercessory prayer is: listen carefully, ask boldly, trust completely, and know that the answer is part of the tapestry of God's greater plan. He uses everything for His glory and our growth, if we allow Him. That's what God did when he called my family and me out of Austria. We have seen and learned things we had never expected in the 6 years since leaving our comfortable, countryside home - and those things have helped us to grow often in unexpected ways. Praying the prayer Jesus taught his disciples is a wonderful way to start praying if we're not sure what to pray. Each of the petitions, each of the mini-prayers reminds us of something vital to pray about from food to forgiveness, temptation and deliverance. But the first one is perhaps the most important and certainly the most comprehensive, so it's one we can always pray even if we're not sure what else to pray for: That's the prayer for God's kingdom to come, for his reign and for his rule to be acknowledged in this world just as it is in heaven. Despite all

rumours to the contrary, God rules the whole of history and he is working his purposes out, at times in the most unexpected ways. His kingdom broke into this world with Jesus and it will come fully when Jesus returns a second time to remake the world into the place it always should have been. God's kingdom has come and God's kingdom will come, so "your kingdom come" is a safe prayer to pray because we know it will take place.

Persisting in prayer. Preparing ourselves for God to answer prayer. Proclaiming what God has done in response to prayer. v14 When [she] Roda recognized Peter's voice, - the answer to her prayers - she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" v17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said... The first thing Peter does is to tell the others to tell others about the answer to their prayers! He tells them to proclaim what God has done in response to prayer. Now we all know that's what we should do but I wonder how many of us have had Roda

experiences when we told others that God had answered prayer? And I wonder if that might have dampened our spirits and perhaps even spoilt our joy at what God had done? If that is so then this reading encourages us to encourage others by telling them what the Lord has done. In the final analysis, it's the others who look more foolish than Roda!

It is so important to share answers to prayer. It encourages and builds faith in the pray-er and in the prayed for and in the church as a whole. So when God does answer your prayers, for example when you feel God's peace in a special way after coming to the front for prayer ministry, or when God sovereignly heals or takes away pain after you've been prayed for, please do tell others about it so that God can be glorified and they might feel able to take it to the Lord in prayer themselves.

Persisting in prayer. Preparing ourselves for God to answer prayer. Proclaiming what God has done in response to prayer. These are some of the challenges our readings set us. Will we persist in prayer? - Even if it is tiring to do so.

Are we prepared for God to answer prayer?
Even if we've felt disappointed in the
past
Will we proclaim what God has done
through prayer? Even if we're worried
about feeling foolish in the eyes.
Let's pray: