

Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Christ Church 9.00 am

Prayer – working with the purposes of God. Colossians 1:1-14 (Nehemiah 1)

It was Sunday morning, and mum had taken her little boy to church for the first time. It was all very new to him, and being quite inquisitive, he wanted to know what was happening and why. So, right at the start, 2 people dressed in unusual clothes came out to the front of the church, 'Mummy, why are they doing that?' Because the service is now starting.

Next — everyone stood up and began to sing. Mummy, why are they doing that? Because we are praising God together.

A bit later everyone knelt down. Mummy, why are they doing that? Because we are praying to God.

Finally, one of the people at the front went up into the pulpit, and bowed his head, and everyone was quiet. Mummy, why is he doing that? He's asking God to help him to do a good sermon.

And then, as the preacher began to drone on, the little boy was heard to say to his mum, 'Well — why doesn't God help him then?'

What comes into your mind when you hear the word 'prayer'? For some people, prayer is just a way of getting God to do what we want him to do.

For some people, prayer is a way of getting us out of a difficult situation — like the boy coming out of the geography exam, who was heard to pray 'Dear Lord, please let Oslo be the capital of Sweden'!

I guess that most of us would recognise that that isn't a great example to follow when it comes to prayer. But all the same, we pray because we want God to act — we want him to do something. That is the primary meaning of the words used in the Bible for prayer — it is about asking.

Last Sunday we started a series on prayer. And we saw that the first foundation we need to get right is to know who it is we are speaking to. First – he is the sovereign God – there is nothing outside his control. That is why we pray – there wouldn't be much point in praying to a God who was unable to do things. But as Paul wrote to the Ephesians *God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine*. Ephesians 3:20.

And we pray to a God who is our Father. He loves us and cares for us. That is a privilege that only those who come to him through Jesus have, but when we do that, we can know that he loves us absolutely and unconditionally.

Those 2 things should really encourage us to pray. But when Jesus was teaching his disciples to pray, he didn't say anything about the Father doing whatever they asked – in fact, his emphasis was in the other direction: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. Matthew 6:9-10.

Your will be done. If we are honest, most of our prayers seek for our will to be done. But Jesus' emphasis was 180 degrees different to that.

But why on earth should we pray that God's will be done? If he is sovereign, surely he will work out his purposes whatever happens – in Ephesians again Paul writes that *God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will*. Ephesians 1:11.

Real prayer – biblical prayer, isn't first and foremost about God conforming to my will, but about me sharing in his purposes for the world. The sovereign God, our heavenly Father, has in some way linked his good purposes for his people with our prayers. To see that sort of prayer in practice, let's turn to the Bible, and to our NT reading from Colossians 1.

Our prayers are so often for emergencies. Some situation arises in someone else's life or maybe even our own life, and it forces to get down on our knees. As long as the problem is still there, we stay down on our knees. But as soon as the situation is resolved, we check that off on our list, stop praying for that person and start praying for someone else who is in an emergency situation. So we move from emergency to emergency.

And of course, it is right to pray about those issues. But Paul here prays not for a problem situation, but for a church where things are going well. Just look at the good things he says about it in the first part of that reading. They were characterised by faith, love and hope, and through them others were coming to know Jesus.

But Paul doesn't think – hey, things are going well there – no need for me to spend time praying for them! In fact, it is because God is at work there, that he does pray for them – *for this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. Colossians 1:9*

So let's look at what Paul prays

1. That they might live lives worthy of the Lord. If we bear the name of Jesus, if people know that we are his, then we need to live lives that will honour him. It is sad but true that many people are turned away from Jesus by the behaviour of his followers — and that means we need to be praying for one another that the way we act day by day next week will not do that, but instead will draw people towards Jesus. So we need to pray that the Lord will help his people to live in a way which will draw other people to him

2. That they may please him in every way. It's great on a Sunday morning to meet together as God's people — to come here and to praise God. And as we meet, of course, we want to make sure that what we do here pleases God. But the time we spend here is just a tiny part of our whole week.

Depending on how long the speaker goes on for, I guess we might be here for an hour and a half maybe. Out of 168 hours in the week. What about the other 166 ½?

The aim of the Christian life isn't just to please God when we are in church. It is to please God when we are at home with the family and some big argument breaks out, when we are at work and the boss wants us to do something we know is shady, when we are out with friends and the drink is flowing freely, when we are playing golf and that seemingly perfect tee-shot has just sliced off into a bunker, when we are watching T.V. and something obscene comes on, when we are ..... whatever. ....

Christian discipleship is a 24/7 thing, and pleasing God while we are in church should be the easy bit!

And if we are going to please the Lord in all we do — we will need help. We need to be praying for that for one another.

3. And thirdly — as we live this life that honours the Lord and pleases him, we should be bearing fruit in every good work. We need to be praying for one another that this fruit will be growing in our lives.

4. But it isn't just about living the right kind of lives. Paul prayed that these Christians would grow in the knowledge of God. I wonder — can you say today that you know God better than you did 5 years ago? You should be able to. It is actually what God wants. For so many people God is just a shadowy figure - someone or something up there somewhere. But that's not what God wants — he wants us to know him. And he wants us to know him as he really is — to know the truth about him.

But again, we can only get to know God better as he reveals himself to us, and the main time that happens is when we are reading the Bible. So we need to pray that God will remind us to do that.

5. We should pray that each other will have power. But look at why Paul says we need power. Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that .... You may have great endurance and patience. Does that seem a bit of an anti-climax? Surely having power is all about being able to do spectacular things for God. And we do need power to serve God. But actually, we need power just to keep going in the Christian life.

It might be that you know someone is going through a rough time — maybe ill, maybe worrying about something, maybe having just had a big disappointment. Those things that the devil so often tries to use to lever us away from the Lord. And when we know someone in that position, we will pray about their health, pray for healing, pray for peace, of course we will. But we also need to pray, 'Lord, give them your strength to hold on to you through this. Don't let this situation turn him from you.'

But actually, we all need that prayer. Often it isn't trouble that turns people away from the Lord — it is blessing. We have so many good things to enjoy, that we subtly end up forgetting the God who has given us all of them. We need to be praying for each other, 'Lord, thank you for all the good things you have given us. Please don't let them get in the way of our relationship with you. Give us the power to hold firm to you.'

6. And finally — joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light: We need to pray for each other that we will remember what Jesus has done for us. He has rescued us. This morning, if you are a Christian, God has picked you up, he has rescued you from being separated from him, he has forgiven your sins, he has made you his child, he has given you eternal life.

That is fabulous. But tomorrow, all sorts of things will happen to drive that from your mind. So we need to pray that the Lord will keep those things alive in our minds, and that as we remember those things, he will fill our hearts with thanks and joy.

6 things to pray for. And they are not things which we need to persuade God to do, try to twist his arm — because they are all things that God wants to be doing in the lives of his people. But even so — he also wants us to be praying these things for one another. Because in prayer we are working with his purposes. And what a privilege that is.

In John 15 — the passage we will look at next Sunday, Jesus told his disciples : *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you.* John 15:7. But that isn't an invitation to ask for a big win on the lottery, with a guarantee that it will happen if we ask! It is that if our prayers are shaped by our relationship with Jesus and our faithfulness to his word — God will give us what we ask. If we pray the sort of prayer that Paul prayed here for the Colossians, God will do it.

Of course, to pray in line with God's purposes, we have to know what those purposes are. And that is why prayer and the Bible belong together. I've been in prayer meetings where you maybe have a Bible reading, and everyone has their Bible open, and then when we come to prayer, everyone closes their Bible. But much much better is to keep your Bible

open when you pray – so that you can turn what you have been reading into prayer. So that what you've seen of God's purposes for his people can shape what you pray for his people.

And, of course, God's purposes for his people are always good – he is the loving Father. So praying in line with his purposes is praying for what really is best. That is true when you are praying for someone going through a tough time – it is what the Prayer Ministry Team do when they pray for someone. Praying for God's good and perfect will to be worked out in this situation.

So here is our second foundation for prayer. Prayer isn't about getting God to do what I want, it is about me sharing in his purposes for the world, praying into that. How does my prayer fit into God's sovereign purposes? To be honest – I don't know. What I do know is that the Bible shows me that my prayer does make a difference.

We have a wonderful God. There is nothing he can't do. And he loves us with a perfect Father's love. He has made it possible for us to come to him through Jesus. And he gives us the privilege of sharing in his purposes – not just practically, but in prayer. The big question is – are we willing to align ourselves with God's will, and then to give ourselves to prayer?