

Jesus, man of prayer – personal prayer

Mark 1:35-39

John 17:1-5

Introduction

Today we are going to think about prayer, and particularly, personal prayer. It is important to us because it was important to Jesus. Personal prayer was part of Jesus' story; it is intended to be part of our story too.

For Jesus, personal prayer nourished his existing relationship with his Father in heaven. For Jesus, God's presence was never fluctuating, apart from the horror at the cross where *'the father turned his face away'* (Stuart Townend).

Our relationship with God is similar to what Jesus enjoyed, but not exactly. Jesus is described in John's gospel (3:16 NKJV) as the **'only begotten Son'**. We cannot claim that for ourselves; rather, we are God's beloved, but fallen humanity, which his **'only begotten son'** came into the world to save, by forgiving us our sins and restoring our relationship with the father. Today I want to reflect on personal prayer within this relationship, looking firstly at Jesus' then ours.

Jesus and prayer

What would have been some of the influences on Jesus' prayer life? His personal prayer would have been formed, in part, by his participation within the Jewish community. This included prayers in the local synagogue, family home, and even at the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus's parents were profoundly committed to God, so he would have had a prayerful beginning to his life.

Yet prayer wasn't just a homely practice that put Jesus at peace, ready for tomorrow. It was something deep, something that required space, and at times was a place of battle. In prayer he'd fight to remain utterly committed to his father's will, despite the temptation to do otherwise. In Mark we learnt,

³⁵ Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. (NIV)

³⁵ Very early the next morning, long before daylight, Jesus got up and left the house. He went out of town to a lonely place, where he prayed. (GNB)

At times, Jesus left the crowd, the familiar, and found a lonely place. A place that others avoided, too spooked by the silence to linger long. That's why it's described as 'solitary' in the NIV and 'lonely' in the GNB. Jesus went there to pray. It wasn't the only time that Jesus had been to such a place, Ian taught us about Jesus' forty days in the desert, where he prayed through the Devils temptations.

In the desert, through personal prayer, Jesus gave himself to the father and fled from comfort. Feeling the heat of the day, and chill of night, he gave himself to prayer.

Toward the end of John's gospel as Jesus prays before his death, he abandons himself to God, the desert had prepared him well.

'Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. (NIV)

Just as Jesus went out to the solitary uncomfortable place to pray, he also prayed through the discomfort of his looming suffering. Giving himself to the father in personal prayer, helped Jesus give himself to the coming suffering at Calvary. At both the beginning and the end, in the joy and sorrow Jesus prays.

Prayer is a place and time where Jesus finds strength and connection from his father, it is essential to his story. For Jesus' followers its essential too.

Us and prayer

Jesus' personal prayer was about connection and strength with the father. Ours is too, but also includes times of confession and forgiveness, which lead to transformation, the latter (confession, forgiveness and transformation) Jesus didn't require, but we do.

The Apostle Paul, a man like us, after his long reflection on the human inability to choose what is right, and do what is good, says. **Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.** (Rom 7:24-25 NLT)

Our personal prayer is the time and place, where we do business with God, concerning all the above. For most of us, a local desert for a time of solitary prayer isn't readily available. Fortunately, we don't need a literal desert, not even a sand dune; any place can become and sometimes must become our place of personal prayer. Jesus said, and I quote the KJV for descriptive purpose,

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:6)

I like the King James' word choice, **closet**, which perfectly fits the Greek. It's a small space, **'a place of retirement and privacy'** large enough for you, but only you. Nobody to impress in the closet, its only you and God.

You needn't clamber into the cereal cupboard for a proper time of personal prayer. You can be in the middle of the Sahara, no difference, but you need to know that it's about you and God; no one else ought to be involved. This is your time to be with God, and God's time to be with you.

In this space called personal prayer we'll want to speak to God, to pour out our hearts but we will also need to learn to be still, to do nothing; doing nothing before God teaches us an important lesson.

Sister Margaret Magdalen writing in the 1980's

'We need to learn, possibly painfully, the value of doing nothing. 'Sometimes I sits and thinks' said the old peasant 'and sometimes I just sits'. (pg 42)

Within personal prayer, it is valuable to strip it right back at times, 'I am, God is and that is sufficient'. To our surprise the world still turns without us. Jesus demonstrates the life he calls us into, by practicing personal prayer himself. Again, Sister Margaret Magdalen comments,

'He sought solitude as an active resistance to all that would dehumanise people by reducing them to unreflecting functionaries' (pg 55)

The utter radicalness of Jesus' personal prayer can seem disconcerting, but moments of human being rather than human doing are very important. We are people created in the image of God, redeemed by the Son of God, doubly precious and God wants us to know our worth in his eyes. We are not called to live as simply instinctive, 'unreflecting functionaries', we are called to follow, to be disciples, to reflect on the love of God and reflect that love to the world. Yet we must bathe in God's loving summoning and one important way is through personal prayer.

There is a prayer attributed to the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier, for me it's a deeply moving prayer that strips away all but longing and love for God. It is loving God for God's sake. In this prayer, perfectly prepared for our closet, wherever that might be, Xavier prays

***Not because of your promised heaven
Do I wish to devote my love to you;
Nor from dread of a much-feared hell
Do I wish to cease from offending you.
You touch me, Lord, when I see you nailed –
Nailed to a cross – when I see you mocked;
I am stirred by the site of your body bruised,
By your sufferings too and by your death.
I am stirred by your love in such a way
That even without heaven I shall love you
And without any fear of hell I shall fear you.
Nought you need give me that I may love you
for even without hoping for the hope that is mine
I shall love you as love you I do. (1506-1552)***

Conclusion

Personal prayer is a gift from God, Jesus did it and was nourished by it. We are also called to do it. It reminds us that we are not at the centre of everything, God is. It is

God's job to maintain the universe. What God wants from us, is us, and personal prayer provides the space and time where that happens.

Questions for connect groups

1. How does it make you feel, knowing that, at times, God wants nothing more or less than our presence.
2. Personal prayer is simple, all you need is you and the will to be still before God. Does that make it easy or hard to do?
3. Take some time to pray through Francis Xavier's prayer, do it slowly and meditatively, making it your own (for group purpose assign someone to lead the prayer).
4. Afterward, discuss how the prayer made you feel toward God.