

Prayer: Unanswered Prayer

So far in this short sermon series we've focused on the wonders of prayer. In week one, we looked at *why* we pray – because it's part of our DNA, because Jesus prayed and told us to do likewise, because down the centuries Christians have always prayed, and because it's the pulse of our life in Christ. And last week, we looked at *how* to pray, drawing on Pete Greig's helpful acronym PRAY – pause, rejoice, ask and yield.

And it's wonderful when our prayers are answered. Many of us here today can give testimony to answered prayer. Answered prayer for all sort of situations. And I'm sure that Lily-Grace's safe arrival into the world was preceded by prayer.

But if your deepest, most desperate prayers *aren't* being answered. If life sometimes hurts so much that you secretly wonder whether God exists, and if he does, whether he cares. And if he cares, why on earth he doesn't just *do* something to help, then you're not alone. In Matthew 18, Jesus says in verses 19 and 20: *'Again, I tell you that if two or three of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them'*. If this is the case, you might sometimes want to argue, why is it that despite meeting to pray, sometimes over a long period of time, our prayers remain unanswered?

For three years, the church I was a part of prayed for the healing of a young boy with Ewing's Sarcoma. At the age of twelve, a lump formed in Iain's leg, and several courses of chemotherapy followed. Members of the church gathered in various people's homes to pray for his healing and eighteen months later we rejoiced as he went into remission. Less than a year later, he suffered a fracture from a very light knock, a sign that the cancer was back. Again we prayed, and prayed and prayed. But a week prior to his 16th birthday, Iain died. We were left wondering why those prayers didn't work.

In 2010, a catastrophic earthquake devastated Haiti. Death projections started at 10,000 and quickly went to 50,000. Then they rose to 100,000 and then the estimate doubled again. When the count reached 220,000 the American televangelists said it was God punishing Haiti. One said it was all part of God's plan, even though we can't understand it; another said it was a sign of the end times. When the death toll was still at 50,000 I read in a magazine an email

from a Christian aid worker who had worked in Haiti for many years. These were his words:

I believe in the God who multiplied fish and loaves to feed the hungry. I believe in the God who says I'm always with you. And right now, it's achingly clear – heartbreakingly, angrily clear – isn't it, that we who believe also believe in the God who is hidden sometimes, to whom the Psalmist cried out, 'How long, oh Lord, how long?'

How long?

Too long. There's no other answer right now. People are being rescued, but too many aren't, and 50,000 never will be. There will be other answers in the weeks and months ahead, but right now the only answer is, too long.

And today, some of you in church this morning will also be thinking 'how long'? You may have unanswered prayers relating to physical illness, mental health, fractured relationships, or a spiritual void in which God seems to have abandoned you. Your prayers for healing or reconciliation may be for yourself or for someone close to you. But the reality is they remain unanswered. The healing, the restoration has yet to come. And you might wonder what is the point of prayer, particularly if you've been praying for a long time. 'Pray simply, keep it real and keep it up' you said last week Lynda. 'Well I've been doing all of that but no-one seems to be listening because nothing changes', you may well be thinking.

I think the Bible is way more honest about unanswered prayer than the Church. The gospel writers make no attempt to hush up the fact that Jesus himself experienced huge disappointments in prayer. In the Garden of Gethsemane, from our reading today, we witness Jesus suffering pain at every possible level: physically, psychologically and spiritually. 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death', he said, 'and being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood.' Here, then, is a man suffering unimaginable levels of distress. Whatever your struggle with unanswered prayer relates to, we must surely know that Jesus understands. Because he's gone ahead and shown how to endure disorientation and pain.

So, what can be learned from Jesus in the face of unanswered prayer?

Firstly, we can choose to be vulnerable with our friends. In verse 33 of today's reading, we learn that 'He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled... He said to them, 'Stay here and

keep watch.” Jesus needed his three best friends by his side in his darkest hour. He didn’t try and put on a brave face. He didn’t pretend to be ok. He chose to include them in his distress, and even asked them to watch over him in prayer. There’s a strong temptation for us to hide away alone when something overwhelms us, but Jesus modelled the opposite: actively involving his friends, drawing them into his private grief and engaging their support in prayer. So, today, if there’s something overwhelming you, who can you draw into the situation and gain support from? And if you’re aware of someone really struggling, how can you help?

Having enlisted the help of his friends, the second thing Jesus did was to pray even more deeply. In Luke’s version of the same passage, we read, *‘And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly.’* The temptation to isolate ourselves from others in time of trouble can also apply to our relationship with God. Our friends are essential but our relationship with God is even more so. The reason why I included Psalm 23 in the readings today is because those seven sentences have given more hope to more people than any other seven sentences ever written. Seven sentences that have lasted through thousands of years. Seven sentences that even in the time of Jesus were part of the ancient scriptures. That everybody knew off by heart. Seven sentences that have enabled people to experience God’s presence in the darkest of times. And there’s much more in the Bible from which to draw comfort and support, particularly from ancient literature such as the Psalms. So don’t be afraid to turn to scripture or to ask others what passages have helped them, because they might also help you. It is also remarkable that the gospels let us listen in on the actual prayer that Jesus prayed in his darkest hour: *‘Abba Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not your will, but what you will.’* Unsurprisingly, these words have a great deal to teach us about how to pray in difficult times.

The third thing Jesus does when his soul was overwhelmed in the Garden of Gethsemane is to hold onto God’s love. When the situation was at its darkest, he resolutely anchors himself in the Father’s love. His starting point in prayer is *‘Abba, Father’*. He didn’t say, *‘If you really loved me, you wouldn’t make me go through this’*. The father’s love was never in doubt. It was non-negotiable. When life hurts like hell and we find ourselves struggling to make sense of unanswered prayer, we may wonder why God doesn’t just click his fingers and make everything better. At such times of unknowing, it can be tempting to

doubt God's kindness and to pull away, but this is the very time when we need his comfort most.

It's important to remember that we are able to trust that which we cannot understand. In Isaiah 55:8 we read, "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,*" declares the Lord.' We may not be able to understand why God seemingly allows a situation to continue, but we can still choose to trust in the love of our Abba Father. His comfort comes to us through the support of others; through the words of reassurance and hope in the Bible; and through the solace of prayer. But that doesn't mean that it is easy.

The fourth thing Jesus does is to be absolutely honest. Having affirmed God's love for him, Jesus prays five of the most surprising words in the whole of the Bible. He asks God for an alternative to the cross. This is Jesus at his most vulnerable praying '*take this cup from me*'. And who wouldn't? What he's saying in effect is, '*Abba Father, I'm scared. Help me! I don't want to suffer.*' So, if you're tempted to put on a brave face when you're suffering, then please don't. Don't pretend everything is fine when in fact it's anything but. Choose instead to be honest as Jesus was honest. If these five words from Jesus have done nothing else, they've given permission for *all* of us to pray imperfectly, honestly and even improperly when we're in times of deep distress.

And the fifth and final thing Jesus does during his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is to relinquish control. He prays, '*yet not what I will, but what you will.*' In the extremes of agony and sweating blood, Jesus gives the situation over to his Father. There is an invitation here to a darker kind of trust. To surrender ourselves to the will of God when it makes sense and feels good is one thing, but to surrender ourselves when it makes no sense at all and even hurts us deeply is quite another. But often, in the face of senseless pain and suffering, there's nothing else for us to do.

We read the Gethsemane Prayer with the benefit of hindsight, understanding exactly why Jesus' prayers were unanswered. And the Bible assures us that one day we will look back on our own lives, just as we look back on Christ's now, and at last we will understand why it was that that some of our heartfelt requests were not granted. But we're not there yet.

But in many situations, there are simply no answers and it would be trite of me to pretend that there are. I don't believe for one moment that it is God's will that we suffer, but I do believe that he is there alongside us in our suffering.

Some good words to therefore finish with are those of John Newton, the former slave trader and author of the hymn 'Amazing Grace', which we will sing later:

'Some Christians are called to endure a disproportionate amount of suffering. Such Christians are a spectacle of grace to the church. The strength and stability of these believers can be explained only by the miracle of God's sustaining grace. The God who sustains Christians in unceasing pain is the same God – with the same grace – who sustains me in my smaller sufferings. We marvel at God's persevering grace and grow in our confidence in him as he governs our lives.'

Let us pray.

Abba Father, there are times we do not know what to ask of you; only *you* know what it is we need. Help us to come to you with open hearts, with no other desire than to accomplish your will. Give us the perseverance to trust in you when our hearts and minds are overwhelmed by situations we don't understand. And give us your peace we pray. In Jesus' name, amen.