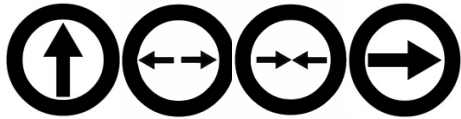


School of Prayer Week 2.



The experience of Grace.

Last week we spent time in simple exercise of prayer. The intention was to strip away as much of the performance as possible, and reduce prayer to its essence.

It began with stillness, reflecting on the Fatherhood of God. Moved to a simple act of worship and then brought our worries, concerns and hopes before God by praying 'your kingdom come'.

Exercise. Recap.

Now one thing which might seem unusual about these lessons in prayer is the emphasis on silence. The reason for that is rooted in a theology of Grace. Grace is the recognition that we are loved by God not because of what we do, or what we say, but because of the unconditional love of God. We can't earn love, it is a gift. And the only appropriate response is to receive it gratefully. And Silence is the place where we simply receive.

Furthermore, there has never in the history of the human race been a culture more hyperactive than we are. We believe we are defined by what we do, and as a result are terrified by silence and inaction. And too much modern christianity is infected by this manic behaviour.

Prayer grounds us in our identity in God and reminds us who we are and where we fit in God's plans (rather than vice versa). And it allows us to face our fears and failures without condemnation.

Prayer is a remarkable discipline - it is the training of the heart and the mind. The Bible is full of internal imperatives.

Trust in the Lord

Be still my soul.

Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart

Prayerful discipline. Uniting head and heart.

Find peace in the silence.

Give us this day our daily bread.

It is beautifully simple, but for those of us who like to feel secure it is also quite uncomfortable.

The picture would have been very familiar to the first hearers, a story that they had grown up with. The Ancient Israelites, wandering in the desert, without any source of food. Each morning, without fail, God provided for them in the form of manna - the bread of heaven. But they were only allowed to gather enough for that day, and if they tried to store it up to give them greater security it would go bad.

We are taught to pray for God's provision day by day.

Exercise

Count your blessings

Say thank you for where God has provided

The things that worry you.

Say 'Give us this day our daily bread'

Trust - where I am worried. God will provide.

Humility - This is enough for me.

Let all our strivings cease. Till all our strivings cease; Take from

our souls the strain and stress, And let our ordered lives confess.

The beauty of Thy peace



Confession

*Forgive us our sins,
as we also have forgiven
those who sin against us.*

The great privilege of the christian life is forgiveness. It is striking how simple this is, particularly for people from a religious tradition that required a lengthy and expensive process for the forgiveness of sins. Perhaps we would find that easier to believe, we feel like we should have to try harder to believe ourselves acquitted - particularly when we are conscious of serious wrong. But it is as simple as this.

We confess, we are forgiven.

*Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the
LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit
is no deceit.*

Psalm 32

There is however one condition. And it is an uncomfortable one.

*'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything
against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive
you your trespasses' Mark 11:26*

Now forgiving others is hard, and for some of us it may seem impossible. But this imperative is not simply for God's sake, it is for ours. There are few things that do as much damage to a human being as bitterness. It eats us up from the inside, robs us of life and joy.

Exercise

5 mins Silence

*Ask God to show me what needs to be confessed, or who needs to
be forgiven.*

Simply offer it to God.

Believe that you are known as you truly are, you are forgiven.



This next movement in Jesus prayer is inwards. It is an expression of trust and dependence on God our Father.



Onwards

The final lines of the prayer (the familiar ending is a doxology - a traditional ending rather than part of the prayer as Jesus taught us) are forward looking.

*Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.*

God Leading us into his future. May we resist evil, be courageous in the face of the temptations of world and live courageously as the people of God.

For the early church, faith was a stark choice. To belong to the people of God meant to risk everything else. It was therefore a radical, subversive, loving community. And it was deeply attractive to the poor.

Our faith costs us much less, and we are tempted to think we can have it all; wealth, career, success, popularity, respect.

Now it is not for a minute that any of these things are bad in themselves. However each one of them offers a significant temptation, to invest our trust, our faith in them. And so every one of them has the potential to become a rival to God. And they are very poor rivals indeed; Instead of grace, they offer drudgery.

This prayer is a faith filled view of the future where the priority is fidelity to our Heavenly Father.

Exercise 4

Paper and pen.

What is taking up your energy.

What temptations will it bring.

Where is your heart invested.



Amen - derived from the Hebrew word which means firm, confirmed, reliable, faithful, have faith, believe. It means 'may it be so' not an vague hope but a muscular statement of conviction or intent.

When we pray together we say Amen.