

Prayer – Getting through the “Tunnel”

I have been thinking a great deal about prayer lately. Our church home group has been working through Philip Yancey’s book, simply titled “Prayer”. This series of studies has led us to re-examine the nature and role of prayer in our lives as Christians.

As I have done so, I have been reminded that I can (and should) involve God more in my daily walk, so that “praying without ceasing” assumes a new dimension. I have been reminded that prayer helps us to embrace God’s perspectives and see the world and life differently, through His lens. His ways are higher than ours. And I have been reminded that prayer is a two-way street; God opens doors, but he expects us to walk through them and keep the conversation with him going, even when the way gets tough, frustrating, or confusing and we feel that we cannot clearly see the path ahead.

Sometimes we don’t feel like praying, as though it is a duty or a ritual we must go through to satisfy God (or others). Conversely, prayer can be a spring of refreshment, giving us new life and hope.

I used to get hung up on written prayers; liturgy and form are important in various denominations. However the more I listen to (high or low church) liturgical prayers and put them side by side with more extemporaneous versions the more I am convinced that it is not the language that is used (most extemporaneous prayers run the same risk of aimlessly reciting familiar phrases; traditions exist in *all* churches), but the attitude of the pray-er. What is in my heart? What is my attitude? Only God and I really know. Prayer is a way that He has designed for us to draw closer to Him, purposefully, (although He is never far from us) and become stronger in our Christian lives.

Sometimes we know what we should pray for: “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:1-4). This passage makes sense; there is a clear rationale.

Jesus taught His disciples that they should pray that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven; for their daily bread; for forgiveness; for deliverance from evil (Matthew 6:9-13). These are all tangible requests with self-evident (and desired) outcomes. We need food; we need to confess sin and we crave forgiveness; we want to be kept free from the power of evil. We want to live in peace. Those in authority are important because a calm society is preferable to living in chaos or persecution. Social order makes it easier for us to live and share our faith. When it comes to knowing what to pray for and making decisions, some issues are no-brainers.

We also know that God wants us to experience and worship Him. “My heart says of you, ‘Seek his face.’ Your face, Lord, I will seek” (Psalm 27:8). “Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations” (Psalm 100). “for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever” (Matthew 6:13). Prayer consolidates our sense of relationship with God, and our partnership with Him in accomplishing his purposes.

However, there is a very real sense that prayer also goes way beyond asking or giving thanks for specific things and events, or even worshipping God. Prayer enters the complexities of our day-to-day lives and the unknown scenarios that we face.

There are times when a lot is at stake and we simply do not know what or how to pray about personal circumstances or situations. Either we do not know all the facts, are at our wits end because of situations in which we find ourselves and understand all too clearly what is going on, or need guidance through complex mazes. Some decisions are hard: how should I proceed in this relationship? is it the right time for a career change in a shrinking job market? should I go ahead with this large financial investment? who else is going to be affected if I make the wrong choice? which of the doors in front of me is the right one; what if I go the wrong way? how should I relate to my son or daughter who is living in rebellion?

The Holy Spirit, who lives inside of us, is able to help us in unexpected ways. Paul reminds us that, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God” (Romans 8:26, 27). We do not need to faint or stress when the way forward is not clear and the options are not cut and dry, because God does know, and the Bible promises that He will help us get there. He “knows the end from the beginning” (Isaiah 46:10 – note that this promise was made in the context of a difficult time in the life of ancient Israel, but proved to be true nonetheless).

All this is positive, Biblical and helpful, but from time to time we feel that we are stuck in a fog, or in a tunnel, with only a glimmer of light at the other end. We sense that we are on the right path, but the way forward seems fraught and we are only able to see part of the pathway. Let me give an example.

I recently went walking through the hills above Ballarat in the state of Victoria. The path through the forest was clear and there were markers to prevent the uninitiated (like me) from becoming hopelessly lost. However, I had been warned to take a torch because the route included a tunnel deep beneath a highway and there were dangers of encountering cyclists in the dark. In my experience, not all cyclists have lights mounted on their bikes, and I did not want to be the victim of an accident.

In the event, I forgot the torch and entered the cave hoping that rays of light entering the tunnel from each end would reveal my silhouette to rogue cyclists. What I did not count on was that the further I walked through the tunnel the more difficult it became to see anything at all, except the beckoning (teasing?) light at the far end. I could not see my hands or feet, I barely made out hints of the curved base of the tunnel. I walked on in the dark, hoping against hope that there were no obstacles on the floor of the tunnel and that the surface was not slippery. Otherwise I would be sure to fall and possibly injure myself (and be run over by a cyclist!). Walking through the tunnel became a matter of trust. If I did not fall over a hidden obstacle, or a bike did not enter my narrow space, I would reach the other end in safety.

Do you ever feel like that? In such circumstances, it does not pay simply to stand still, or baulk at moving forward “just in case”. There is little alternative but to keep going. There is no question of giving up, regretting that we have no torch, and expecting the worst. As we gingerly negotiate challenges and tests in our lives as Christians there is no question of giving up; after all, who wants to be stuck in the tunnel? Even if we think we can see the other end, getting from here to there remains a matter of trust. Going back is not an option.

There have been moments in my life when all my pat answers have not been enough to quell my concern about the future and all I have been able to do is pray, “Lord, I don’t know what is going on, but I trust you, even in this dark place”. Our Heavenly Father is wanting to teach us to pray, believing that we are safe in His hands and that He will accomplish His purpose in our lives.

From time to time we encounter detractors, negative people who do not understand what we are going through but who have opinions and agendas of their own. I recently took a cruise in the Caribbean. One evening as we set out from Thomastown in the US Virgin Islands on a journey to Barbados that would take us across the open sea for a day and a half, the crew on a nearby P&O ship loudly played the theme music from the movie *Titanic* and pointed the speakers in our direction. (We all know what happened to the Titanic!) As we face the unknown, the opinions and prejudices of others can sometimes impact us; but taking all our needs, fears and hopes to God in an ongoing prayer-based relationship with the Holy Spirit can keep us from becoming infected by doubt or negativity.

Do you pray when you find yourself in a dark place? Remember, God loves you. He is with you. He knows the plans that He has for you (Jeremiah 29:11). Your Heavenly Father is not capricious, but wants to be involved in your experience. He will give you wisdom, peace that surpasses human understanding to face life as you know it, and practical solutions. Cultivate a habit of reading the Bible and praying every day, and allowing God to speak to your situation. Listen to Him. Make a note of what He tells you.

If you do this, you will not be overwhelmed by spiritual claustrophobia as you enter the tunnels of your life, but find the inner strength to affirm, “I trust you”.