

Sunday 20th September 2020
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on Romans 8:26 – 27
Theme: “The God who listens”

“Be reassured: God knows your suffering, and He is looking after you”

Introduction:

Quite a few books and articles have been written over the years on prayer.... One book that I looked at recently quoted the example of a Christian worker’s conversation with an old man in El Salvador in Central America. The old man groaned out to him, “Why is God so silent?” (*J. Young, Our God, 105*)

It was the cry from the heart of a man who couldn’t see God at work in his life. All around him was suffering and hardship, and God seemed to be doing nothing.

I guess Elizabeth Urch, the Scottish pastor’s wife who I spoke about last week, felt the same. Her husband, Walter, was dying of a brain tumour, and despite her cries for help, nothing was happening. There was no miraculous healing. God appeared to be silent.....

The apparent silence of God leads us all at times to doubt whether God really cares and whether He really is listening to our cries for help.... Maybe He has bigger problems to deal with, than to be concerned with our heartaches.... Or worse still, maybe God doesn’t really care about you and me....

Part 1: ...to our cries for help

Well, I want to remind you this morning that God *does* care about you and me. God is our dear Father, who cares about us as a loving father cares for his dear children.

One of the most startling things about the way that Jesus spoke to God was the fact that he called God “my Father”. And he didn’t say this in a formal sort of way, he said this using the word that young children used at that time for their dad, the word “*abba*” (e.g., *Mark 14:36; cf. Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6*). He talked to God as a child speaks to his dear Father.

And more than that, he encouraged his followers to call God “Father”. The model prayer that he gave us, which we call “The Lord’s Prayer”, begins with the words, “Our Father in heaven” or simply “Father” depending on which account you read (*Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2*).

Jesus, God’s unique Son, encourages us who listen to him and follow him to call the glorious God of the universe, “dear Father”.

Mind-blowing stuff!! Listen to what Paul writes about this in his letter to the Christians in the area known as Galatia (*Gal. 4:4f; cf. Rom. 8:14f*):

When the right time finally came, God sent his own Son. He came as the son of a human mother and lived under the Jewish Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might become God’s children (*lit. “in order that we might receive adoption”*).

To show that you are his children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who cries out, “Father, my dear Father” (*lit. “Abba, Father”*).

We who are baptised into union with Jesus and who cling to Jesus as our Saviour can call God “dear Father”. He *is* our dear Father, and He wants to be the dear Father of everyone. He wants *everyone* to live in a child-Father relationship with Him (*DNTT 1:620; J. Jeremias, Message, 9-30*).

There is a story which Tony Campolo tells on a video that I’ve seen and in a book of his that I’ve read, which makes it clear *how much it means to know that you are a child of God*.

Tony Campolo’s friend, Fred Craddock, was holidaying one year down the south of America with his wife. Fred and his wife were apparently in a restaurant when an old man in baggy clothes sat down and their table and asked who they were.

Well, Fred and his wife couldn’t very well tell him to leave without creating a scene, so they listened as he talked to them. He told them that he had been born in ‘them-thar-hills’, and he told them that he was born illegitimate and that he never ever knew who his father was. His mother never told him who his father was, and she went to the grave not telling him. To make things worse, people used to call him names: he was known as “Ben, the b..... boy” (*you can fill in the missing word; it’s a slang word for illegitimate*). As a result, he said,

“I used to walk up the street with my head down, because I was ashamed of who I was. I had hardly any friends, and I kept to myself a lot”.

When he was 13 years old, though, a new preacher came to town, and “boy he was good”. The man said to Fred and his wife, “I used to go along to church, and leave early because I was ashamed of who I was, but one day the service was so good that I forgot to leave in time. I couldn’t get out in a hurry, because the people hemmed me in.

And as I got up, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the new preacher. He asked me, ‘Boy, who’s your father?’ No question could have hurt me more”, said the man. “It cut through me like a knife. Pain wracked my body. And then the preacher said to me, ‘Boy, the reason why I asked is because I know who your father is’”.

The man said, “I looked up at him and I wondered if he knew what I had always wanted to know. Then the preacher said to me, ‘I know the name of your father. Boy, your father is God. God’s your Father, and don’t you ever forget it!’” The man said to Fred and his wife, “That simple statement, ‘You are a child of God’ changed my life, because then I knew who I was”.

As the man left Fred’s table, the waitress came up to Tony Campolo’s friend, Fred, and said, “Do you know who you were talking to. That’s Ben Hooper, the governor of Tennessee” (*It’s Friday*, p.42-43).

It is in the light of God’s Fatherhood of us who are His children through our baptism and our faith, *or in the light of God’s desire to be our dear Father*, that we need *I believe* to approach the subject of prayer, and in particular the subject of apparently unanswered prayer.

Prayer, put simply, is talking to God our dear Father. It is telling God that we love Him, it is thanking God for the things that He gives us and does for us, and it is telling Him our problems and asking Him to take care of them for us.

I mentioned recently that when I was in Geelong, I heard Professor James Torrance, a distinguished Christian thinker, speak on the topic of “Prayer and the Triune God”.

He began by speaking about prayer in the context of his memories about

his relationship with his daughter, Heather. He related how one day in church, his daughter passed a note to him, her dad, and he said the note said simply, "Daddy, I love you!". At other times, he said, she used to come up to him and give him a hug and say, "Thank you, daddy!", in regard to something that he had done for her. And at other times, she used to come up to him and say, "Daddy, help me!?", or "Daddy, I'm worried about the person down the road...". *That's what prayer is!! It is talking to our dear Father in heaven....*

Professor James Torrance then went on to put it in a more profound way. Can I read to you from my notes some of the things he said...

- * **"Prayer is communion with God our Father"**

- * **"Prayer is the gift of sharing in the Son's communion with the Father"**

- * **"The Father loves the Son
in the communion of the Spirit.
The Son loves the Father
in the communion of the Spirit.
We love the Father and the Son, and one another
in the communion of the Spirit"**

- * **"Prayer flows out of our love for God
and communion with God.
If it doesn't, it is simply a law and a duty, and it leads to
'prayerlistness'"**

They're some of the things that Professor James Torrance had to say about "prayer". But his central point was that prayer is talking with our dear Father.

When Jesus spoke about prayer, in his Sermon on the Mount, he talked about prayer in the context of a child asking his or her father for things. He said to his disciples:

Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks will receive, and anyone who seeks will find, and the door will be opened to him who knocks.

Would any of you who are fathers give your son a stone when he asks for bread? Or would you give him a snake when he asks for a fish?

Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (*Matt. 7:7-11*).

Why don't we always receive what we ask for?

The answer is simple: like all good fathers, God gives us not always *what we ask for*, but rather He gives us *what is best for us* (*cf. Rom. 8:28*).

"No" is an answer to our prayers, just as "Yes" is, and "Hold on! Wait for a while!". You don't have to read very far in the New Testament books and letters to realise this. Both Jesus himself and Paul, for example, received the answer "No" from God in regard to their requests: Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, in regard to his request that "the cup of suffering" on the cross be taken from him (*Matt. 26:36-46*); and Paul in regard to his "thorn in the flesh" (*2 Cor. 12:7-10*).

The key factor in the answer that we receive from God, our dear Father, is: "What is God's will for us?" (*e.g., Matt. 26:42; 1 John 5:14*). You know, prayer is not so much us trying to twist God's arm, as it is attuning ourselves to God, our Father's, will for us.

Listen to what Dr. Jo Strelan says in one of his commentaries:

In true prayer, the will of the one who prays is always subordinated to the will of the one to whom the prayers are directed, that is, to God. Every true prayer is prayed in the spirit – if not in the words – of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done" (*Strelan, Epistles of John, 88; Small, 1 John, 295*).

Transition:

We've talked quite a bit about prayer in general... Let's get back to one specific example: that of Elizabeth Urch as she prayed for her husband's recovery from a tumour of the brain. She writes:

I got quite beyond struggling in prayer with God about healing. I was quite beyond asking any longer for recovery. All I asked was that Walter should be released from his sufferings which already had been too great....

My surrender was complete. For the first time I told God that if it were His will to take my husband to Himself, then in willingness I would give him up. I would fully trust Him to care for myself and the children. I would believe that He would help me to bring them up without the

strong support I had always enjoyed from a loved partner.

For many days previously, when I had knelt to pray for healing, there had often come to me Christ's question, 'Lovest thou Me more than these?'. Now, for the first time, I felt that I could answer truthfully, "Yes". All bitterness and protest were gone, and I felt that God had swept my own self-will up into His higher and better will...

I was once more enveloped in peace. I did not doubt God's power to heal Walter if He still willed it, but I was able to say something like the three Hebrew boys in Daniel, "Our God is able to deliver; but if He chooses not to, yet I will trust Him" (*E. Urch, Be still my soul, 18-19: cf. Daniel 3:17-18*).

Part 2: ...to the Spirit's groans on our behalf

And what happens when we are so weakened by our suffering or by the trauma of what is happening to us that we can't pray any more, or don't know what to pray for? Well, as Paul tells us in our reading from his letter to the Christians at Rome, the Spirit of God within us prays for us "in groans that words cannot express" (*Rom. 8:26*).

Don't ever despair that God doesn't understand what you are going through. He is our dear Father, and he passionately loves us, so much so that he sent His Son Jesus to suffer and to die for us (*John 3:16*). Jesus, himself, is at God's right hand side interceding for us (*Rom. 8:34*). And the Spirit of God is within us, and He's ever pleading to God on our behalf.

Professor James Torrance also told the story of an encounter that he had with an old man on a beach in California. He was there at Newport, in Orange County in California, lecturing. On this particular day he went for a walk along the beach. He started talking with this old man and when he explained that he was a Presbyterian minister out from Scotland, the man opened up to him and began sharing with him about his life.

The man told Professor Torrance that his father had been a Presbyterian minister, and that he had drifted in his faith.... His wife had cancer, he said, and he told Professor Torrance that he longed to be able to pray as his father had.

Professor Torrance reassured him and stressed to him that none of us know how to pray as we ought. Yet God is there and He hears even our half cries to him. And our Lord Jesus is at God's side interceding for us.

They met on the beach the following day, and the man asked Professor Torrance to speak to his wife. Professor Torrance told us: "I talked to her about the Trinity, though not in those terms. Later he wrote to me in New Zealand, and said, 'My wife has died, *safe in the arms of Jesus*'".

Professor Torrance finished by saying:

We are all dying men and women. What will we do when we are too weak to pray? Look to Jesus, who is our brother and our High Priest, and he will lead us home".

And I would add:

Remember that even if you can't pray or don't know how to pray or what to pray for, the Spirit of God is still there within you pleading with God on your behalf (Rom. 8:26-27).

Remember always that we who are baptised and who trust in Jesus as our Saviour are part of the communion of the Father and the Son and all of God's people *in the Spirit*. We are special and precious to God. We are His children, and in all things He is working for good in our life, and nothing, *not anything*, can separate us from His Fatherly love for us (Rom. 8:28, 37-38).

Conclusion:

Praise God that He is our dear Father, *and that He wants to be the dear Father of everyone.*

Praise Him that He is the God who listens to our cries, and who is caring for us, and looking after us, *even when it seems that He is silent.*

May you and I live out our life knowing that we don't struggle on alone, but we live in the communion with the Father and Son, through the Spirit who lives in us....