

Good Friday Meditations 2010, by the Right Reverend Paul Butler Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham

Prayers at the Cross

St Peter's Church, Nottingham

THE PRAYER OF SUBMISSION

Luke 22.39-46 & Hebrews 5.7-10

Jesus encourages his disciples to pray that they might not fall into temptation which is exactly what he himself also has to pray. He is faced with the temptation to give up, to not go through with the suffering and the cross.

Even in this darkest and hardest of hours Jesus' prayer begins, '*Father*'. This intimacy and confidence of relationship has marked Jesus' prayer life throughout his ministry; '*Father, I thank you that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.*' (Matt 11.25)

As he stood outside Lazarus' tomb, '*Father, I thank you that you have heard me.*' (John 11.41)

It was with the same intimacy and confidence that he taught his disciples to pray, '*Our Father in heaven ...*'

Here in Gethsemane the intimacy remains. Jesus has throughout his ministry sought to do the Father's will - Early in John's gospel Jesus says to the disciples, '*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work*' (Jn 4.34). Later he says, '*The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing ...*' (Jn 5.36). So here in Gethsemane Jesus continues to seek to line himself up with the Father's will. He is wrestling with the pain and suffering that he knows lies ahead, and yet recognises that this is the way which he must go to fulfil the Father's will, to complete his calling; to finish the work.

Prayer here then is about God's will and our will; it is about who is ultimately in charge and whose word will prevail. Prayer is about learning to submit to doing the Father's will; knowing and recognising that the Father is the one who loves us and holds us in his love whatever happens.

This prayer is very costly. It is emotionally and physically costly.

Now as Jesus prays this way so the Father meets him and strengthens him. But the strengthening is not to make it easier or to take the anguish away; it is rather to strengthen Jesus to be able to go forward into and through the agony and the pain.

Prayer is then about learning to submit to God's will; it is about finding the wisdom and the strength to align ourselves with doing the Father's will and discovering his strength as we do so.

THE PRAYER OF SILENCE

Matthew 27.32-44 & 1 Peter 2.21-25

The jeering, taunting and cursing goes on for hours. Jesus refuses to respond. He makes no comment at all. He had been the same with Herod, the chief priests and Pilate. Silence from Jesus filled many of his final hours. Whilst all around him were full of words, accusing him, mocking him, taunting him Jesus chose to remain largely completely silent.

Yet every word must have been heard; his mind must have been active. So what was Jesus doing in this silent response?

I think we can rightly think of his silence as a way of absorbing all the abuse. In a real sense Jesus just soaks up all the anger and vitriol and takes it into and upon himself. Any response would be to enter into the debate, the game. Yet he had come to accept that this way the Father's way so he walks it silently.

I think too it is right to think in terms of Jesus praying through all this abuse. In the silence he holds it all before the Father; in the silence he finds the strength he has sought from the Father to accept the suffering he must undergo.

Silently he is entrusting himself to the Father's judgement rather than that being made by human beings.

In the silence I tend to think he also meditated on Scriptures that he knew well, and on which he based his ministry. Isaiah's words were perhaps central, *'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.'* (Isaiah 53.7) But then the Psalmists *'All who see me mock me, they hurl insults, shaking their heads; "He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him."* (Psalm 22.7f) were probably there as well.

Silence can be enormously powerful. It can speak far more, and far louder than words. It can be the prayer of companionship - silence together in sadness and suffering.

We need to learn from our Lord the prayer of silence. This is not the prayer of inaction or disinterest; it is not the prayer of no thought or reflection. It is the prayer of stillness; of resolution; of meditation on scripture and reflection on the Father's will.

THE PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS

Luke 23.32-38

Jesus is continually seen throughout his ordeal as concerned for others rather than himself. He heals Malchus' ear in Gethsemane. As he carries the cross through Jerusalem's streets he talks with the women who are weeping for him - Lk 23.27-31

Now as he hangs on the Cross being mocked and abused he prays for forgiveness for others. We note that there is no prayer for his own forgiveness - he knows he is innocent and needs none. He remains confident that he is in the Father's will, even as he hangs here.

So for whom is he praying here?

Well it could be for the soldiers who have whipped him, mocked him and nailed him to the cross. They were, after all, just doing their job; they were under orders from above.

He could be praying for Pilate who ordered the execution; or for Herod, or both.

Then he could be praying for the chief priests who had falsely tried him and pressed for his execution.

Then he could be praying for those around him now mocking him, spitting at him.

Or perhaps he notices the male disciples complete absence; he knows they have run away, scared for their lives; he knows Peter had denied him. So perhaps he is praying for them.

Or perhaps it is deliberately not specific because in one way or another Jesus is praying for them all. He seeks the forgiveness of those who are directly responsible for his death. But he also thinks of those who are indirectly responsible and for those who have simply become caught up in it all.

Jesus recognises that none of them know or recognise exactly what they are doing.

Then also we hear him praying for us; for it is our sins also that take him, and hold him to the cross.

Then we must reflect as forgiven people that we also have to learn how to pray 'Father forgive them' as Stephen did when he was being stoned (Acts 7.60). In the light of the Cross Jesus teaching us to pray 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us' takes on a whole new depth.

THE PRAYER OF FAITH

Luke 23.39-43

Now our reflections on prayer take a surprising shift. Our first three have all been observing and reflecting on Jesus at prayer.

When the disciples asked Jesus, 'Lord teach us to pray' it was because they had observed and listened to him praying and knew that here was the master prayer from whom they could learn so much. This is what we have been seeking to do as we observe Jesus praying in his final hours.

But in the midst of it comes a prayer addressed to Jesus, by one of the criminals being executed with him. '*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*'

The criminal, it appears, has reflected on his own guilt and concluded that he deserves death; so he says to his fellow criminal, '*Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.*' Matthew tells us that initially this criminal shared in the reviling and mockery of Jesus (Matt 27.44); but as time passes; perhaps as he sees the silent Jesus; as he hears Jesus praying for forgiveness of those who crucify and revile him; as he hangs in agony and reflects he finds himself thinking differently. He finds himself praying to this dying man next to him.

This incident reminds us that life really can change radically in a person's closing hours.

The prayer of faith he prays is quite remarkable. It implies a conviction that there really is a kingdom to come, and that Jesus is the King of this kingdom.

It implies a real conviction that this death is not the end for Jesus and that this death need not be the end for himself.

In this prayer the dying man recognises his own guilt and need of forgiveness - and he recognises in Jesus one who is not simply innocent, but one who can offer the forgiveness and hope that he needs.

Oh how much we need to learn this simple prayer of faith for ourselves; the prayer for forgiveness, for hope, for life beyond, for entering into the kingdom, and for its coming. It is no surprise that this simple prayer has become so well loved and used in, for example, the Taize chant.

This prayer teaches us that prayer does not need many words; it consists more in the cry of the heart; the throwing of ourselves onto God's loving mercy and grace.

Prayer is abandoning ourselves onto Jesus knowing that in him alone is our hope.

THE PRAYER OF PAIN

Matthew 27.45-49

'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani:- My God, my God why have you forsaken me?'

This prayer cried out at the end of three hours of darkness is Jesus praying with scripture. These are the opening words of Psalm 22. It tells us just how much he had absorbed, learned and meditated on the scriptures throughout his life. Here in the final moments he draws on this reservoir of scripture.

Yet as we reflect on this prayer we find ourselves facing a few questions. Is he just using these words of abandonment? Or does he have in mind the words of the entire Psalm? Has he been reflecting in the silence on these words some of the time - and does this lead to him crying out?

I strongly suspect that the latter is the case; the Psalm is so full of images and language that connect with Jesus' experience of crucifixion. Certainly the New Testament writers find it a resource for reflecting on Jesus' death, and resurrection. Listen to the Psalm and hear these echoes.

Read Psalm 22.1-31

But whether Jesus was just crying out in utter abandonment, or whether we are meant to hear echoes of the whole Psalm this is Jesus at prayer again on the Cross. It tells us therefore more about Jesus and ourselves at prayer.

Prayer must be honest. In it we express our pain, our frustration, our anguish, and our questions; in prayer we can tell God how we feel, even when it is awful.

Prayer is about asking God questions.

Prayer happens in the agony and anguishes of life.

We can and should pray in our pain. As we do so, if we have allowed the scriptures to soak into our being we will discover that our prayer language will be given to us in the words of the Scriptures. Praying with the scriptures is a key way of praying at all times; but perhaps especially in times of pain when our own words may struggle to come.

THE PRAYER OF COMMITMENT

Luke 23.44-49

We began in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus praying, 'Abba, Father ...' This intimacy and confidence of talking with Father returns here in Jesus' final prayer.

Even in these final seconds of this earthly life Jesus has confidence in and intimacy with God his Father.

He may well again be echoing the words of a Psalm; this time Psalm 31.5, '*Into your hands I commit my spirit.*'

This is a simple prayer of trust and commitment

It is connected to the final cry recorded only by John, 'It is finished'. Jesus knew that his work was done; he knew the final battle had been fought and that his future lay in his Father's hands.

It is a prayer therefore looking to the future and not seeing this cruel and horrible death as the end of the story. Jesus had taught his disciples that he would be betrayed, suffer, die and then be raised from death. This prayer expresses his faith that this will be so.

Prayer for all of us is about placing ourselves into God's hands; it involves us abandoning ourselves into his care.

For prayer ultimately recognises our own limitations, weaknesses and restrictions; it also recognises God's much greater knowledge and ability - in prayer we place ourselves into God's care and keeping, trusting him to determine the outcomes and the future - knowing they really are out of our hands and control, but not out of his.

Prayer is on Jesus' lips as he dies; it would appear that it was Jesus' prayer that shaped Stephen's as he was stoned to death as he prayed, '*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*' (Acts 7.59); may it also be on ours.

Prayer lay at the heart of Jesus' whole ministry. As we have seen prayer still lay at the heart of his being in the final hours of his life, as he offered himself to the Father for us. If prayer so shaped our Lord; it must surely shape us too. 'Lord, teach us to pray'.