

Sermon series: Prayer (Part 1) – a matter of the heart

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Prayer draws us into the heartbeat of God. Prayer is a matter of the heart:

God's heart for his beloved people, and the heart of people for God. Today we're beginning a four week sermon series on prayer, and the image I want to leave embedded in your mind is that of a beating heart.

As you know, there are two movements in a heartbeat – the movement *in*, as the blood is drawn through the veins from all around the body, drawn into the first of the heart's chambers. And the movement *out* – when the blood is pumped and impelled to the lungs and then the other organs of the body, bringing life-giving oxygen. Without a heartbeat, a body will quickly die.

Without prayer, our Christian faith will quickly die.

What is prayer? Prayer is being drawn into the heartbeat of God. Prayer is inviting Jesus into our hearts. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

I believe all the other things we associate with prayer – asking God for things, requests, praise, thanksgiving, communication – are all *results* of being connected with the heartbeat of God through prayer. Prayer draws us into the heartbeat of God *and also* draws Jesus into our hearts. It's a two-way street; there is a mutuality and an interpenetration in prayer where God comes to us and we come to God, until our hearts begin to share the same heartbeat, the same rhythm, the same concerns and passions and desires.

The Lutheran lay theologian, Ole Hallesby, said very profoundly and simply, '*To pray is to let Jesus come into our hearts*' (Hallesby, *Prayer* p9).

What does God's word have to say about this aspect of prayer? Let's turn in our pew bibles to **Revelation 3:20**. (Get someone to read out the verse) What does Jesus say in this verse?

'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.'

That verse has often been used as an evangelistic verse, asking people who don't yet believe in Jesus to let him into their hearts. But the context shows that *Jesus is speaking to people who are already Christians, yet have become lukewarm*. And this is the essence of prayer. Jesus is speaking to people who have let their prayer and faith life lapse, people whose relationship with God is not as intimate as it could be. This verse is not about salvation – it's about *intimacy with God!*

Jesus is talking to *us* here! I know there are so many times in my life when my intimacy with God slips away in the busyness, the temptation, the daily grind and humdrum of everyday life.

Hallesby wrote '*It is not our prayer which draws Jesus into our hearts. Nor is it our prayer which moves Jesus to come to us. All he needs is access. He enters in of his own accord, because he desires to come in. And he enters in wherever he is not denied admittance.*' (Hallesby, *Prayer* p10)

How does this happen? How is it that Jesus comes into our heart? Let's look at Ephesians 3:14-20. Paul writes to beloved friends in Ephesus,

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family ^[a] in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts

through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory and power in the church and in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

Wow! Paul is praying here! He speaks of 'God's glorious riches!' He speaks of God's immeasurable power and unlimited resources! And then what does he pray for out of these unlimited resources? Money enough never to have to work again? All the people of the world to be converted? Healing of physical pain and suffering?

No! Paul prays that 'Christ may make his home in your hearts as you trust in him.' With all the resources of God available, the creator of the universe, Paul prays for *intimacy with God*. He prays for *Christ to dwell in their hearts through faith*. He prays for their roots to go down deep into God's love.

Prayer is a matter of the heart. It's only in the wake of this gracious coming of Jesus, this loving and generous living of Jesus in our hearts, only in the wake of this knowledge of the depth of God's love, that prayers – requests – for anything else make any sense. Prayer is not about asking God for things. Prayer is about inviting the gracious, forgiving, loving and healing presence of Jesus into our hearts. This same Jesus who lived and suffered and bled and died for us, this same Jesus who was resurrected by God's power, is the one who comes to us, graciously, tenderly, knocking on the door of our hearts today and each day.

Jesus has promised to come and make his home in the heart of each one of us who's experienced God's grace in baptism! Sometimes, though, life happens. And Jesus seems to get pushed out of the centre of our hearts. He longs to come back and live where he belongs. For his heart and our hearts to beat as one.

It's *vulnerable*, isn't it, this heart stuff. And talking about prayer like this might hit too close to home. It's heart stuff. Which makes it *hard* stuff. It's intimate, it's risky. For many of us, the way life has treated us, our hearts have been broken once too often to easily trust. Our hearts, the deepest part of our being, the part that makes me me and you you, is a fragile and precious and delicate thing.

And sometimes my heart hasn't been treated that way. It's been hurt. Or crushed. Or trashed. Trust has been broken. So we put up walls, often, to keep others out of the centre of our hearts. And those walls can stop Jesus too. Good thick defenses, to stop us from being hurt ever again.

Jesus, though, is the trustworthy one. He is the one who knows us more intimately than any other person in the world. How? Jesus has carried your sin, your guilt, your shame on the cross. He knows you from the inside out. He has experienced what has troubled you, first hand, in a way that is closer than heartbeat and deeper than breathing. Your broken heart breaks his heart. And yet he loves you unconditionally. He knows your heart – he wants to hold it and heal its wounds and forgive its guilt and remove its shame and restore it to its pristine beauty.

'So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.' And primarily, that's what prayer is. Prayer

is nothing more than letting Jesus into your heart. It's not even about saying words. There can be a silent, timid, 'yes' to Jesus which is never spoken aloud. There can be a silent release of defence, an opening up of the door which no-one else ever needs to know about. This is prayer at its deepest and most powerful. Intimacy with God through giving Jesus access to your heart.

Psalm 37:4

There is a bible verse which troubled me for quite a time, because it seemed seriously too good to be true. Let's turn to Psalm 37:4, another verse which speaks of prayer as a matter of the heart without ever mentioning the word 'prayer.'

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Wow! What a promise! It surely sounds too good to be true. Aren't there many times when we have prayed and not received what we wanted? How can God promise such a thing? But this verse is not giving us carte blanche, is it? It's not saying 'Ask God for whatever you want and you'll get it.' What comes first?

'Take delight in the Lord.' Let your heart become as one with God's heart. Let Jesus into your heart in faith and trust. What happens when Jesus comes into our heart through prayer? What happens when we enter into God's heartbeat through prayer?

When your heart beats to the rhythm of God's heart, *you* desire what *God*

desires! Down in the sanctified depths of your being, the place where Christ dwells in your heart through faith, your deepest and most authentic desires match God's heart for you. I know there's ambiguity and false desire and even sin down there. But Jesus forgives and deals with and removes even that. Down in your heart of hearts, when you delight yourself in the Lord, your desires match his desires. That's why God can make such promises. You want what he wants. For yourself, for the world, for the people around you. This is where prayer begins.

I'd like you to take some time now to think of what are *your* deepest desires?

Down in the sanctified depths of your heart, what is it that you really want?

Isn't that a dangerous question? Because what if you don't get it?

Not words or techniques or formulas or requests or thanksgivings, but a matter of the heart.

In the coming weeks, we will look at some more aspects of where this prayer of the heart takes us.

Prayer draws us into the heartbeat of God.

Prayer is letting Jesus into our hearts.

Let us pray.

(Silent pause)

Lord Jesus, you are standing at the door of my heart, knocking. You want to come in with all your love and forgiveness and grace and healing. (pause) Lord Jesus, sometimes I've been hurt, deep in my heart, and I don't want to let anyone in. (pause) Jesus, please come into my heart, heal the hurts, bandage the wounds, forgive the messy bits of my life, come and live in me. Jesus, teach me to pray. Amen.