

Sermon text: Prayer (part 2) Helplessness and Faith

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Last week we looked at prayer as a matter of the heart. Before all the other things which characterise prayer, prayer is intimacy with God – it draws us into God's heart, and it draws God into our hearts. Where does this prayer of the heart take us? Today I'd like to look at two more aspects of this prayer of the heart.

Prayer = helplessness.

Prayer starts with helplessness. I will not come to God in prayer until I realise I have nothing to offer God or others.

These are startling words, aren't they? Challenging words, in a world which even in regard to our prayer life exhorts us to try harder, pray more earnestly, make sure you are getting through!

1. Prayer is helplessness. *'Prayer and helplessness are inseparable. Only he who is helpless can truly pray.'* (Hallesby, *Prayer* p13). The idea of prayer as helplessness is very foreign to our self-confident, self-sufficient culture. We buck against it. Come on, I'm not helpless! I've got a good job, a decent income, an intelligent brain, getting a uni degree, a good marriage, my kids are ok. I'm not desperate!

My ego, my self-focussed self, doesn't want to acknowledge that in reality I have nothing to offer God, that I am helpless and desperate.

If we won't enter into helplessness, true prayer remains deeply foreign to us, to our old sinful selves.

Chapter 11 of Luke contains some of Jesus' best-known teaching on prayer. Let's see what Jesus says just after he gives his disciples the Lord's prayer.

Luke 11:5-10: Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'

Then the one inside answers: 'Don't bother me! The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

This passage has often been used to teach us persistence in prayer. You'd better keep on knocking, or that selfish beggar inside won't get up and give you what you need.

But where does this passage begin? It begins with *helplessness*.

What is the friend's request? 'I have *nothing to give*.' I am helpless, I am desperate, my friend is here and I have nothing to give him. Someone who had a loaf of bread to give to his latecoming friend, would not make this kind of request. Until we are willing to recognise our own emptiness and helplessness before God, we cannot pray. Until we recognise that we are not self-sufficient, and that we cannot help those who come to us, or even change our own situations, we cannot truly pray.

Olle Hallesby said, *'Your helplessness is your best prayer. It calls from your heart to the heart of God with greater effect than all your uttered pleas.'* (*Prayer* p14)

There are only a couple of places in the New Testament where people come to Jesus in prayer for

some other motive than helplessness. One of them is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). The other is the request of James and John to Jesus, asking him to grant that they may sit at his right and left in glory (Matthew 20:20-28).

And if you don't already know, I will leave it to your own research to find out how Jesus responded to *those* prayers.

This understanding (that prayer begins in helplessness) is sheer gospel - good news for us. It releases us from the terrible burden of doing things in our own power.

Personally, it's in my parenting that I often find myself helpless. I'm powerless to change my children. It even seems I'm powerless to change my own reactions to things, my own sudden anger, and I'm left wondering 'Where did that come from?' after a destructive reaction to some button pushing.

So, I pray. So, I seek. So, I ask. So, I knock.

Not because God's asleep and reluctant to get out of bed and give me

anything. But because he *has got* what I *need*. God has that loaf of bread. God has that gift of self-control. God has that love and compassion for those around me that I sometimes find myself helpless to show.

Hallesby writes, *Prayer therefore simply consists in telling God day by day in what ways we feel that we are helpless. We are moved to pray every time the Spirit of God, which is the spirit of prayer, emphasizes anew to us our helplessness, and we realize by nature how impotent we are by nature to believe, to love, to hope, to serve, to sacrifice, to suffer, to read the Bible, to pray, and to struggle against our sinful desires. (Prayer p19)*

What are *your* areas of helplessness? Where have you come to the end of your own resources? What resources does God have that you do not have?

2. Prayer as *faith* (Mark 9)

The prayer of the heart begins in the place of helplessness. But helplessness by itself is not yet prayer. For instance, the man who came at midnight could have stayed at home, never coming to ask his friend for bread.

So our equation is not quite complete.

For prayer to happen, our helplessness must be united with *faith in Christ*.

Prayer = Helplessness + faith

Last week I said that prayer is to invite Jesus into our hearts. The essence of faith is to come to Jesus. Prayer means simply to let Jesus have access to our situations through faith.

Let's look at wonderful example of a prayer of faith and read Mark 9:17-27.

A man in the crowd answered, 'Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.'

(from verse 21)

Jesus asked the boy's father, 'How long has he been like this?'

'From childhood,' he answered. It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.'

'"If you can?"' said Jesus. 'Everything is possible for the one who believes.'

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again!"

The father's prayer begins in helplessness and ends in *faith*. Why faith? Because he came to Jesus with his problem. This faith in Jesus is not some kind of quality in us which we work up to the right level through willpower and gritted teeth. Faith simply sees its own need,

acknowledges its own helplessness, tells Jesus just how bad things are, and leaves everything with him. (Prayer p23)

Faith simply means to come to Jesus in our need, to give him access to the place of our helplessness, and to trust the situation into his hands.

Notice here that there is a difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt exists mingled with faith, as an *emotion* – 'I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.' That's doubt.

On the other hand, unbelief is an act of the *will*, a *refusal* to believe. Unbelief refuses to see its own need and come to Jesus.

Sometimes we mistakenly think that the stronger our faith, the more likely Jesus is to help us. But that's not true, as this man's prayer clearly shows. It's not how *big* or how *strong* your faith is that matters, but *what you put your faith in*. Your faith is not what counts – but that your faith is placed in Jesus. Jesus doesn't need any help from the strength of your faith; he only needs access.

At such a time it is blessed to know that we have faith enough to bring our

needs to Jesus and leave them with him. And though there be much doubt and but little faith in our hearts, we can do as the father did who came to Jesus. We can begin by telling him about our doubts and our weak faith...we need not be frightened away by our weak faith, but only tell Jesus how weak our faith is. We have let Jesus into our hearts. And he

will fulfil our hearts' desires. (Prayer p27)

Prayer = helplessness + faith.

There's a beautiful paradox here. Prayer begins with our helplessness, but united with faith in Jesus, prayer is also a source of power, because it gives Jesus access to our needs.

In John 7:37-39, Jesus says, **"Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.'" (When he said 'living water,' he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him. But the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet entered into his glory.)**

When we come to God with our heartfelt prayer of helplessness, we come thirsty. Then God makes *us* the source of nourishment and life for *others*. Springs of living water. A loaf of bread. The bread of life, the love and compassion and transformation offered by the God of life.

My hope and prayer for you is that understanding this simple equation will transform your prayer life, and encourage you to come to our Lord in prayer – not because you have something to offer but because Jesus has, not because you are powerful but because Jesus is.

Amen.