

“Prayer” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday evening, 13 March, by Kerry Enright, to accompany the final study in a series of four in which the congregation was involved, based on Rowan William’s book “Being Christian”.

You may be surprised to know that preachers sometimes remember their own sermons.

Over thirty years ago, when I was a student for the ministry, I preached a series of sermons in Waiuku, my town of birth, and one was on prayer.

I remember it, among other things, because my former teacher of English and a few other of my former teachers were in the congregation.

I remember him specifically, because he commented on the sermon on prayer.

I also remember it because it was one of the few times the Westminster Confession helped me understand my faith in a different way.

It was the first time, really, that it dawned on me that prayer is less getting God to do what we want and more God getting us to do what God wants.

It is more that God has a particular destination in mind for creation, and prayer is a means of stepping into the river that takes us to that destination, and prayer also is seeking to draw others into that flow.

It is not prompting God to do something God had not thought of, and more God prompting us to something God had thought of.

From the Shorter Catechism:

Q: What is prayer?

A: Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to God’s will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of God’s mercies.

Prayer is an offering up of our desires to God, for things agreeable to God’s will.

It is offering to be part of what God is doing in the world.

This week is the final week of our study groups and it focuses on prayer.

I love this book of Rowan Williams and I love this chapter.

I find it really helpful and what Williams says is very consistent with what the Confession upholds.

Williams makes the point that Jesus enables us to talk to God in a new way, as a father or mother, in the manner of Jesus who prays to God in this way.

So for the Christian to pray is to let Jesus' prayer happen in you.

We begin by expressing the confidence that we stand where Jesus stands and we say what Jesus says.

Williams says that it used to be said "put yourself in the presence of God" but he says it might be more useful to say "put yourself in the place of Jesus."

Which sounds wrong, arrogant, presumptuous, but it emphasises that we speak to God in Christ.

"As you understand Jesus better, as you grow up a little in your faith, then what you want to say gradually shifts a bit more into alignment with what he is saying to the Father ..."

That, says Williams, is prayer - letting Jesus pray in you and beginning that lengthy and often very tough process by which our selfish thoughts and ideals and hopes are gradually aligned with his eternal action.

So it comes as no surprise that Jesus affirms that we stand where he stands "our father" and that the Lord's Prayer begins with a vision of the world, with the light of God coming through in our world.

"May your kingdom come, your will be done."

Williams then refers to three ancient writers, Origen who lived in the 200s, Gregory of Nyssa in the earliest 300s, and John Cassian in the later 300s.

The mere fact that Williams takes us back to these early years, I find heartening.

We are not thereby being subjected to just modernist or postmodernist thinking but digging deeper to something beyond our frameworks.

Origen's little book on prayer is the first systematic treatment of the topic by a Christian.

I liked this bit ...

"God has decided that God will work out the purposes of God through what we decide to say and do. So if it is God's will to bring something about, some act of healing or reconciliation, some change for better in the world, God has chosen that your prayer is going to be part of a set of causes that makes it happen. So you had better get on with it,

as you and your prayer are part of God's overall purpose for the situation in which God is going to work."

As Williams says, each brings into focus three things that are essential to what Christians have thought about prayer ...

1. Prayer is God's work in us. It is not us trying to persuade God to be nice to us or to get God interested in us or to do certain things we want God to do. It is opening our minds and hearts and saying to God ... "Here is your child, praying in me through the Holy Spirit. Please listen to him because I want him to be working, acting and loving in me."
2. There is a deep connection between praying and living justly in the world. Prayer heals relations. We want to be human beings who are not trapped by selfishness, fear of others, anxiety about the future or the desire to succeed at other's expense. Prayer is the life of Jesus coming alive in us. And that means it is bound up with a certain way of being human, about reconciliation, mercy and freely extending the welcome and the love of God to others.
3. Prayer is about sticking at it, continuing to grow into it. As prayer deepens in me, I will be affected, and I will be dealing with things inside of me. It is possible such praying will agitate me, baffle me, depress me, lead me to feel alone or lost or powerless. It will face me with my reactivity. There will be times I imagine that nothing is happening. Prayer, in other words, is not a panacea, because it leads me into deep places in myself. But says Williams, don't give up at that point. Just stay there, and offer up the prayer of John Cassian, "O God, make speed to save me." For prayer is your promise and pledge to be there for God who is there for you.

This is a very good little book.

I have found it immensely helpful and I will come back to it.

In our congregation, there is a small group of people who are learning together how to pray. They have this covenant ...

We want to covenant together to support one another in developing a daily rhythm of prayer and bible reading.

We do not think we are anything special. On the contrary, it's because we can't make it on our own, and need God's grace and the encouragement of others that we are embarking on a prayer covenant. We know that prayer is a "velvet bridge" (Czeslaw Milosz) which can open us up as individuals and as a congregation to another world of awareness and action.

We know our voices and patterns will form different sorts of prayers. Sometimes we might have a shape for them already; other times we might:

- give thanks for what God is doing now in the world;
- confess our weakness and seek God's grace, and strength;
- sit in silence and breathe deeply and fully, and listen;
- bring honest questions to God and ourselves, expecting that a discovery awaits;
- long for justice, change and healing where people are hurting.

We have faith across the differences that our prayers together will build something greater than the sum of its parts, pull us into God's purpose for us in the world, and give us grace and strength in the places to which we are led.

And so we promise, to ourselves and to one another:

I will have a go. I will develop a modest, daily, pattern of prayer and bible reading;

I will be honest about how it's going for me.

And we promise together:

We will support each other as we walk together.

We will review this covenant in the light of experience.



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