

Exploring Prayer - Reflection

Joel 2:23-27

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

One really important question to consider is the question of what we are doing when we pray. Following in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, in the Uniting Church we have particular elements that need to be included in our church services. Unlike the more formal end of that tradition, there is nothing that tells us what we need to say or even that we need to use words, we simply have to include those elements. This allows for great variation, all whilst worshiping and praying in the tradition of the Uniting Church.

However, although we are allowed a wide variety of ways of worship, what is inevitably modelled for the vast majority of us is a very verbal form of prayer. Even prayer that is slow and reflective, seemingly still ends up being expressed as words. Of course, our biblical stories also model this, for the practical reason that it tells us part of the story. Whilst we can read gospel stories that tell us something like "Jesus went up the mountain to pray," when there are more details, they inevitably use words.

It's not just the use of words that can be problematic. During my theological studies, I spent long hours reflecting on prayer. You see, the problem for me was that I cannot worship an egotistical god who needs to be told how amazing "he" is, so what is the purpose of the thanksgiving and praise? Nor can I worship a god who is so whimsical that "he" only will only fix things if enough of the right people ask for it. Yet all too frequently this is how people approach a prayer of intercession. Confession, at least, made sense to me.

Jesus' disciples also had their questions about prayer. We see this in the gospels wherein Jesus is not only asked by the disciples to teach them to pray, but we also see stories like the ones we heard today that teach us something about prayer. Now, if you were observant, you will have noticed the start of the second story, which is today's Gospel reading, tells us that story was told to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." That is true, so why also call this about prayer rather than simply saying it uses prayer as a motif.

Well, prayer is about building our relationship with God. When we think about the Pharisee and the tax collector, which one is working at building the relationship? We probably all know people like each of these characters, or at least have encountered them at some stage in our lives. Which character do you find it easier to build a relationship with? I'm fairly sure that for most of us, it would be the person who admits their mistakes.

At a very basic level, we can remember the only reason for the Pharisee to be recounting his own deeds is to tell the people around about them. God certainly does not need reminding! So this is the action of someone seeking human approval, and therefore

misusing prayer as a way of achieving this. Here we get a connection to last week's reading (other than the focus on prayer).

One commentator suggests:

The Pharisee's fault is a simple one: He submits to the Roman colonial scheme by fracturing the people of God. He only sees the separation between himself and the tax collector, which is precisely what the divide-and-conquer regime needs him to see (Swanson, p. 218).

Similarly, in the story of the widow and the unjust judge, the judge does not want to see the fellow human behind the request, but the widow, by her persistence, has her need, and with it, her humanity, acknowledged. In this, I think we get to the core of what prayer is about.

Yes, prayer is about building our relationship with God, but it is also more than that. It changes us by opening us to the relationship we have with other people, with the whole of the family of God regardless of who they are or what they look like. The sense of how to pray is less important than finding ways to listen to God and God's call to love as we have been loved.

However, I do think our rhythm of worship is an important tool to do this. When I taught lay worship leaders, I would often remind them that although we have ordered liberty in worship – there is no required shape to the service – the “usual” outline does take people on a particular journey, so change that deliberately to take people on a different journey, never just because you simply feel like it.

And what is that journey? We come into this space, we acknowledge who we are and whose we are (with our thanksgiving and confession), we prepare to hear what God has to say to us in our context, then respond to that word (which includes our prayers of intercession), and get sent out to live God's love for the world.

It does not matter how you pray – well, it does if you are always going to fill the space with words and not listen for a reply – but in general it does not matter if you use words, silence, music, art, or any other medium. What matters is how the time spent in prayer opens us to knowing who we are, whose we are, and how we join in partnership with God to share love with the whole world.