

Sermon: 26 July (Daniel Walker, Curate)

Romans 8.26-end

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

“We do not know how to pray as we ought” are ten words that have offered me relief from great anxiety over the years. Prayer is not something I’ve found easy over the course of my 2½ decades as a Christian. As a child, my prayers always consisted of lists: a list of sorry ’s and thank-you ’s, but mostly a list of things I wanted (a trip to Toys ’R Us, or for P.E. at school to be cancelled). During my adolescence my prayer life lapsed until I found I hardly spoke to God at all. My years as an undergraduate saw a slow but gradual return to prayer; and I realised that, despite having been raised a Christian, I was so hopelessly inadequate at praying. I’d been taught to pray, but not how to.

And yet St Paul tells us in this morning’s passage that none of us really do. “We do not know how to pray as we ought.” From an early age, I had the image of the “perfect Christian man” projected onto me; this man was strong, sporty, fearless, unyielding: I knew I was none of the above. He was also a “prayer warrior”. For those of you who aren’t familiar with this label, a prayer warrior is a man or woman of God who has the unwavering ability to pray at least two hours a day prayers that come out of their own head (liturgy and praying the office don’t count).

Now, I don’t want to in any way denigrate or downplay Christians who have this extraordinary ability. It is a spiritual gift, and all gifts are indispensable to the Church of Christ. However, I did for many years feel an immense amount of guilt and dis-ease about not being a “prayer warrior”; at how lacking my own prayer life was. But I soon found I was far from alone. Christian friends at university remarked to me how, despite loving church worship and Bible study, they really struggled with prayer. Feelings of inadequacy and guilt at not praying properly (or enough) put them off doing it altogether. C.S. Lewis even remarked on finding private prayer exhausting and at being so relieved when it was over.

And yet these few verses in Romans 8 offer a wholly different perspective. “We do not know how to pray as we ought”; for the Holy Spirit intercedes in our weakness. Weakness is nothing to do with being sporty, fearless, unyielding; or a warrior. It is the ground on which we properly begin to pray in the Spirit. So, “We do not know how to pray as we ought” are words that reassure me for two reasons; it gives no one grounds to say: “I’m amazing at praying!” (thus, freeing us of the need to compare ourselves to so-called “prayer warriors”), and, more importantly, it means that acknowledging our helplessness in prayer is an essential part of life in the Spirit.

Last week in our New Testament reading from earlier in Romans 8, we heard how the Spirit of God does not make us slaves to fear, but rather is a Spirit of adoption whereby we are enabled to cry out

“Abba! Father” to God. To pray with utter confidence. Timothy Keller writes: “The Spirit gives believers an existential, inward certainty that their relationship with God does not now depend on their performance as it does in the relationship between an [employer and employee]. You know that God responds to your cry with the intense love and care of a parent ... You can go to God with the confidence of receiving that kind of attention and love. Put another way, the Holy Spirit gives us a confident faith that turns naturally into prayer.” (Keller, Prayer, 71)

But what about today’s reading? As well as adoption, St Paul offers the image of Spirit as “intercessor”: “we do not know how to pray as we ought, but [the] Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” This reality of the Spirit “sighing” (or in other translations, “groaning”) on our behalf evokes a God who is very much alongside us, in all our despondency and defeats. In this era of pandemic there has been a great deal of sighing, groaning and tears. We have perhaps never, as a population, been weaker or more vulnerable than we are now. Even during the War there was morale, a tangible community, the ability to travel freely. And communal gatherings in actual church buildings. But since the early months of this year, one of the most basic aspects of our nature – fellowship and communion – have been so cruelly snatched from us. Yet in this weakness and despondency, the Spirit is interceding for us.

Given these mad times we’re living in, prayer has perhaps never seemed more immediate and essential. That doesn’t automatically make us better at it. The horrors and frustrations of a global pandemic don’t necessarily equip us with the wherewithal to pray more dutifully, fervently, and regularly. If anything, I’ve found the opposite to be the case. The monotony and disappointments of lockdown, how quickly the days pass by, has often made prayer more difficult – despite the greater need for it. Over the past few months I’ve encountered moments of near panic at how I’ve forgotten that day to pray for: the sick, the NHS, grieving friends, the economy, those furloughed or in abusive houses. And then I remember that this panic and guilt is fruitless. “We do not know how to pray as we ought”; but the Spirit is interceding.

The weaker we are, the more we have to let God carry us. The frailer we are, the more we must lean on him and allow his strength to be at work in us. This is a resounding theme throughout the whole Bible. Psalm 73 says: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever”; and Isaiah 40, “He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.” In 2 Corinthians 12, St Paul says: “I will boast the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” We may not all be “prayer warriors” (if any of us really are) or know how to pray as we ought, even at a time when it feels most important to do it right, but this isn’t something to punish ourselves over. The Apostles had to ask the Lord how to pray.

As our faith rests on God’s goodness and grace alone, so must our prayer life. We have faith in God that this period of loneliness and frustration, distance and anxiety, will come to an end. So let us allow our prayer life in this time to reflect that faith; in our communal weakness and fragility, let us humbly accept the intercessions of the Son and the Spirit as we pray, knowing that the more we

embrace our lack of power to pray as we ought, the more powerfully God will be at work in us.
Amen.