

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Epiphany 6

1 February 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Jeremiah 17.5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15.12-20; Luke 6.17-26

Lot's of blessings and woes in those readings today especially the O.T. and Gospel passages. However you may be pleased to know that I am not going to focus on them, especially as we might be counted amongst those who are satisfied and filled now and so might be the ones to whom Jesus is directing some warnings with the challenge to live justly and generously. Rather I want to focus on the whole issue of prayer and how specific our prayers need to be prompted in part by the healing ministry of Jesus so clearly depicted in today's Gospel but mainly sparked off by the most recent addition to the Web-Blog of my friend Ted Witham. Ted and I were at school, University and Theological College together. You also need to know that Ted has a chronic back problem and is almost always in quite severe pain. Ted's Blog was so helpful that I have decided to share it with you today. What follows is mostly Ted with some minor amendments and comments from me.

He writes:

"What shall I pray for you?" Jill, a friend and priest, had rung to ask what prayer request should be printed in her parish prayer list. "Just put, 'Pray that Ted may be upheld in God'," I replied. I had decided that this was the best prayer: God already knew my health needs. "Oh no," said Jill, "We need something specific to focus our praying." "Well I'm not asking people to pray necessarily for a cure," I replied, "Nice as that would be. I feel I can ask God only for healing." "That's you in praying for yourself. We need a specific outcome to pray for," Jill insisted, "otherwise our prayers are like jelly. No spine and not much substance." I laughed. "OK," I said, and thought for a moment. "Please ask people to pray for 'Relief from pain and peace of mind'. That'll be like ice cream. Sweet and solid until you bite into it." I think I know why Jill wants to pray "something specific" for me. She wants to help the people praying for the names on a list to have something distinguishable about each prayer. Otherwise, the list becomes just words, and those praying forget the actual people whose needs are represented on the list. Just holding me in the presence of God is fine if you have a clear picture of which "me".

A SMART WAY TO PRAY?

*But I feel uncomfortable with a specific prayer. Others with less theological insight than Jill think of prayer as seeking outcomes as in management practice. You may know the acronym. Smart managers have **SMART** outcomes: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant and **T**ime-framed. If our prayers are likewise **SMART**, we will know if our prayers for healing were effective. If my levels of pain are measurably less at the end of the month, then our prayer has been efficiently framed.*

*In the world of management, **SMART** outcomes imply accountability for complex tasks. **SMART** outcomes indicate higher productivity. It seems completely out of place to apply them to prayer and people's needs. Who is held accountable by these specific prayers? Is it God? Has God performed outcomes in line with objectives? What if God has not succeeded in rising to the occasion? Is God responsible for higher productivity through prayer? Is the idea that the more often, the more intensely, the more sincerely – the more people pray, the more God is able to act and produce healings and responses?*

*Or maybe it is the person being prayed for who is to be held accountable. If, at the end of the month, he/she have not achieved the **SMART** outcomes, it means they have insufficient faith in, or have not "prayed hard enough" for God's power to heal. This is especially true when praying for people with chronic illnesses. Recently I met two intercession warriors in the local Centrelink*

Office. "Oh, hello, Ted," they greeted me, "Are you better yet?" I feel like sinking down so low that I can drown in the "yet". I have failed. I have not been **SMART**. I confess my obduracy.

Or maybe, the people who are accountable to the **SMART** prayer are those doing the praying. The results are a measure of their efficacy at praying. The caricature of this position is in the Southern Pentecostal preacher who boasts that at the meeting in the last town, he healed 23 people, 4 of them from serious cancer, 7 from drug addiction, 1 from a cleft palate, and the rest from sundry illnesses and ailments. He boasts to boost your confidence in him to heal you, but has forgotten that he most certainly has not achieved the healing. If any of it is true, then God should receive their credit for the healings. But not only Southern preachers fall into this trap. It is natural to want the needs of people who are being prayed for to prevail. We like that success. We need that encouragement to go on praying. But the moment we begin to suspect that our prayers have brought about a good result, we boast about an achievement which is not ours, but God's alone.

The view that we should approach God as a Father who will supply the things we ask for can turn God into Father Christmas and not the Father of Jesus Christ. Some take the words of Jesus in the New Testament and twist them to mean God responds to requests in the style of a mail order company. The story of the man who knocks on the door for bread in the middle of the night is not to instruct us what we should do when we want bread. This friend is a model of persistence in prayer: the "take-home" message of Jesus is not to request bread, but to keep praying. (Luke 9:5-8). The story of the father who gives his son fish rather than a snake or an egg rather than a scorpion is not an example of the type of requests sons should make. It depicts God whose nature is giving regardless of the requests God's children might make. (Luke 9:9-13). I take great encouragement from this picture of God. It doesn't matter in the end what I think I need or even what I think others need. I can hardly distinguish between my wants and needs. Thankfully, I can relax because God is consistent in providing. The problem for us may be that our prime metaphor for God is "father". We give content to that metaphor: we believe that God provides as a father should provide. People have taught so often that we should make all our requests and intercessions known to God because God will provide.

TELLING MY FATHER STORIES

A father-child relationship, however, in which all the child does is ask for things is immature or sick. In a healthy and mature relationship, a child's most frequent communication to an earthly father is in the form of stories: whether six or sixty, we share with our father the story of our lives.

Ted writes, "I went away from home to boarding school when I was 12 years old. I saw my parents twice a term from then on. I always looked forward to seeing my parents. In my first years at school, I longed to get home and tell Dad how much I missed the farm, the dogs and the sheep, that is, how much I missed him and Mum. In later years, I couldn't wait to alight onto the neat gravel platform at Tambellup Train Station and tell Dad how well I had done in English or debating, or sometimes even sport. I used to tell Dad what I had done, what others had done to me, and the feelings that these events caused me because I knew that he would listen and love me for them. We all tell our fathers stories as a way of saying, "This is the life you have given me. This is my way of thanking you."

How much richer our relationship with God would be if we paid more attention to offering our life's story to him and less to asking him to do things. God and us: the central relationship of our lives as people of faith. If our prime metaphor for God is "Father", then we better be mature and healthy children, and treat him as the One who gave us life, not as Father Christmas, the provider!

LOVER BETTER THAN FATHER

A more life-giving metaphor for God than even "Father" is to think of God as our "Lover". We communicate with our Lovers with unspoken gestures, most powerfully with the gesture of sex, with silence, and with speech that is simple. The poet and mystic John of the Cross likened the entire life of prayer to seduction moving into sexual union, though never quite reaching that goal. His

beautiful poems resound with the language of the Song of Solomon. They sing of constant seeking the loved one and inviting her to merge with the lover.

The language of love is not the rhetorical language of public speech. It can be hesitant and fragmented. Lovers' speech often consists of banal words rising from the heart, because we stammer in the presence of one who brings us to awe. Lovers' speech is like the way mothers speak to babies. The sense of the mother's words is not important, but their flow of language bathes the baby in love. There is nothing more lovely to watch than the silent communication of mother and babe-in-arms, or of lover and lover sitting quietly. In silence, we breathe the same air as the beloved. In silence, we listen to the totality of our lover's existence. Silence surrounds the lovers with its own intimacy. Gesture, silence and stammered speech can enrich our prayer life. We fool ourselves that we communicate at depth when we communicate in sophisticated ways. We make our soul more clearly seen and heard when we speak in the vulnerability of lover to lover."

I agree with Ted -that is why in Connections (newsletter) under St Mark's community in Devotions for the week you will see, "Please hold the following people before God in your prayers and then most usually a list of names without any detail – God knows their situation and need better than we do –it may well be quite different to what we think – we just need to bring the person/situation to God in thought/image and ask that God's love and grace be at work – a love and grace that is always seeking wholeness – best summed up in the Hebrew word Shalom I mentioned 2 weeks ago.

Just as I encouraged you a few weeks ago to read the Bible uncommonly often, so I encourage you with this understanding of prayer to pray uncommonly often. Prayer is of the essence of our relationship with God – it is holding ourselves and others in the presence of God – words/song/silence/gestures all play their part – there is nothing better we can do – it is sustaining, transforming life giving.