

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
TIME TO PRAY
WK 4: PRAYING FOR OTHERS

Today is the fourth in our series on prayer, and marks a shift in the methods of prayer we have been using. So far, we have been focusing on our own relationship with God in prayer – by looking at our past experience of God, by praying with the church, and by setting aside time to listen to God by meditating on Scripture. Today we turn outward and consider what it means to pray for other people. The prayer of intercession. This too is part of our relationship with God, and a recognition of the fact that we can only relate to God if we also relate to one another.

I'm going to spend a fair bit of time today talking you through the method of prayer set out on the card, but before I do, let's think more generally about what we think we're doing when we pray for other people.

Intercession is where prayer starts for most people. We have a long collective memory of children kneeling at the bedside praying for mummy and daddy and Fluffy and Spot. We are taught to pray for people in trouble – victims of earthquakes and floods, wars and famine – asking God to make things better, to set things right.

And all of that is a good and necessary part of Christian living – but there is a danger that lurks behind these childhood prayers. What happens when you pray night after night and nothing seems to change? What happens when you do all that you can to trust God and to beg for his help, but you are still faced with a broken relationship, an illness that won't go away, or a death that comes too soon and too painfully? It is easy to assume that our prayers

are pointless, that God is not listening, or that God simply does not care. And thoughts like that have the power to destroy our faith and our understanding of God – they can leave us feeling alone and isolated and without hope. So it might seem safer not to bother to pray at all. Don't ask, so that you won't be disappointed. Or else ask tentatively, hedging your bets by asking only for God's will, and therefore letting God off the hook if nothing happens.

Now, I am going to try to walk a fine line here. It is right to know the limits of prayer, to know our own limits, to know that we cannot always get what we want, and that God's ways may remain a mystery to us. BUT, it is fatal if give up wanting all together -- if we never name what it is that we long for from God. Jesus taught his disciples to pray – to ask for what they needed – and to have faith in what God would do for them. God wants us to keep asking, to be like the persistent widow who won't rest till she sees justice, or to be like Jacob, who wrestles with God till dawn. And sometimes, we will walk away from our prayers feeling bruised and battered. Sometimes, God will break us on the stone of our own desires. But every once in a while, when we least expect it, we will find like Jacob, that God is there – fulfilling our desire. That the whole world has suddenly changed – for us, and for those we have been praying for.

So we enter into the work of intercession knowing that it is risky business. Knowing that we may not get what we want. But we pray anyway, because that is all we can do – trusting God to work in us, to work through us, and to find a way to redeem even the most difficult situations people find themselves in.

(Turn to card)

- ◆ 2 sides of intercession – committing the person to God's care, and offering ourselves in God's service.

- ◆ Need to know that this is as much as we can ever do for someone: to bring them to God, to hold them in God's love.
- ◆ Therefore, offering a method of prayer that moves away from the endless list of things we'd like God to do, to a way of praying that simply acknowledges God's involvement – a way of offering the person we're praying for into God's care.
- ◆ Importance of letting go, trusting God.
- ◆ Stories of this sort of prayer – experience of 'seeing' how others respond to God. Those who are eager to reach out, healed by God's touch. Those who are too afraid – unwilling to face God's love.

TIME TO PRAY

WEEK 4: PRAYING FOR OTHERS

Praying for other people is one of the most natural and familiar aspects of prayer. We pray for those we love and for those who are in need as readily as we call to God for help in our own lives. But beyond the urgent prayers for a friend's safety or well-being, there are more deliberate prayers of intercession that arise not from particular need, but from the conviction that other people matter and our lives are bound with theirs.

When we pray for other people we are doing two things. First, we are committing the other person to God's care. Second, we are offering ourselves for God's service. It may be that God can use us in quite practical ways to 'help' the person we are praying for. But just as often, God will use us in ways we can't anticipate, ways that don't seem directly related to our prayers. When this happens, we have to trust that God knows what he is doing. Part of the offering of prayer is this basic trust in God's involvement – even, and especially, when it might seem that God is doing nothing at all.

PRAYING FOR OTHERS

There are two 'tasks' this week. The first is a reflection on one of Jesus' healing miracles. The second is a way of praying for specific people you know. One does not depend on the other, but you may find that taking time to think about one of the healing miracles may give you confidence in committing others to God's care.

I. Jesus as Healer

1. Choose a time and place to pray, and decide how long you can spend. When it comes time, begin by stilling your mind and body – let go of any tension or anxiety you may feel... take hold of each distracting thought and drop it in an imaginary box you can come back to later... Do whatever helps you to find stillness so that you can offer this time to God.
2. Turn to Mark 5.25-34. Read it through very slowly. Think about what it would have been like for that woman to reach out to Jesus, to touch his cloak, to feel God's power flowing from him to her. Take your time over this – perhaps trying the method of *lectio divina* that was discussed last week, or simply picturing the scene and imagining what it must have felt like to experience healing
3. How do you feel about this story? 'Talk' with God about any emotions it stirs – any memories of healing in your own life, or frustration at times when healing did not come. Or simply sit in silence listening for God's word.

II. Reaching out to Jesus

Before you pray – think about whom you would like to pray for this week. Make a short list of names: no more than 5 or 10. Bring this list with you when it is time to pray.

1. Begin by finding a quiet place and settling down. Offer this time to God, and offer yourself – your time, your skill, your love and commitment – to be used by God for the sake of other people.

2. Turn to your list. Focus your attention on the first person on the list. Imagine that you are with this person now: picture him/her in your mind, get a sense of what it is like to be with her.
3. When we pray for someone we commit them to God's care. Your task now is to bring this person to Jesus. Imagine walking with her down a path, talking with her about your hopes and concerns for her, or simply walking in silence, glad that you are together.
4. Imagine seeing Jesus standing before you on the path. He is reaching out to you, reaching out to the person you are praying for. Walk with the person towards Jesus, and encourage her to take his hand.
5. Once you are close to Jesus, imagine your friend reaching out to him. See Jesus welcome her, embrace her, hold her in his love.
6. Leave your friend there, knowing that she is safe with God. Your task is done. Turn and walk back along the path, giving thanks for God's loving care.
7. If time permits, begin again with the next person on the list. Bring them to God and leave them there. Trust God to take it from there.
8. Spend a few minutes at the end of your prayer becoming aware of any thoughts or emotions this process has stirred in you. 'Talk' about them with God, or simply sit with them. Close your time of prayer by saying the Lord's prayer or by reading through a favourite psalm.

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