

Sermon for Proper 24, Year B

The text: Hebrews 5:5-10

None of us likes having our requests refused. We don't like being told 'no'. We like to think we know what's best for ourselves. As children, it was a hard lesson to learn that many of the things we asked for were not good for us. That's why our parents often had to say 'no' to our requests. Looking back on our life now, we can be grateful our parents said 'no' to many of our requests. And we can be thankful that God did not answer all our prayers as we wanted them answered at the time. God's purposes are bigger and better than anything we can ask for in this present moment. In His infinite wisdom and mercy, God won't settle for the little solutions we want.

In prayer, God either gives us what we ask for or something better. Deeper blessings can flow from prayer that isn't answered when we would like it to be, or in the way we wish. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus too learned how true this is. Hebrews 5:7-9 refers to our Lord's Prayer there on Maundy Thursday and gives us information not contained in the Gospels. This account heightens the intensity, passion, and drama of what happened there: "Jesus pleaded with God, praying with tears and agony of soul (v7)."

The people of the Bible were not ashamed of their tears. Many of the prayers in the Psalms are passionate, tearful pleas for help. Psalm 42:3 says: "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" Isaiah tells King Hezekiah in Isaiah 38:5 that God has heard his prayer and seen his tears. And Psalm 56 tells us that God notices and records all the tears we shed when no one else is around to see them.

St. Paul tells us he wrote 2 Corinthians with many tears, and he lets his young friend Timothy know that he remembers Timothy's tears. Our Lord, who wept at the death of Lazarus and over Jerusalem, now pours forth the most earth-shattering tearful plea to be spared the most terrible of deaths: "Father, if you are willing, remove this suffering from me."

This scene of Jesus, kneeling and lying face-down on the ground in passionate prayer, is one of the most moving and haunting scenes in the New Testament. There's no parallel to this description of anguish and distress in the face of death in any Christian or Jewish account of martyrdom. The great Greek philosopher, Socrates, went calmly to his death. Jesus, however, didn't initially face death calmly, but rather in agony.

Our Lord experienced something He could not have encountered in heaven: "My soul is crushed by sorrow to the point of death." Until now, Jesus had lived in the closest communion and fellowship with God. But now, for the first time, He experiences God's silence, God's distance. His whole world seems to be collapsing around Him.

But so complete was His identification with us, Jesus wasn't given exemption from any human fear or agony. In sheer desperation, Jesus pleads with His heavenly Father to find another way to save us, if that were at all possible. Here we have no comfortable prayer, but a cry of anguish. Anyone embittered with grief is encouraged to "go to dark Gethsemane / to learn of Jesus Christ to pray".

Jesus uses a resource available to us all, a resource especially precious to those who are suffering and tempted: the resource of prayer. Stripped of every other source of help, our Lord prays the most passionate prayer of His life. Three times, Jesus prayed for escape from death. Three times, our Lord repeated the same prayer: "Is there no other way?" Jesus pleaded. He faces yet another temptation from Satan; to avoid the Cross. Here we have no super-man superior to human negative emotions, or a martyr who is above fear. That awesome night, Jesus knew what it was like to be crushed emotionally and to be overwhelmed by the weight of depression. No wonder men and women suffering from depression have found help from this account. Prayer is often the only thing that helps us when we're suffering from depression.

We're constantly in danger of underestimating the power of prayer. Tennyson once said: "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." No prayer is ever spoken in vain. We pray each day, not just to receive answers to our petitions, but primarily and chiefly to keep the lines of communication open with God, and to receive from God the strength for each new day. Our Lord's prayer in Gethsemane helped Him face His trial and crucifixion calmly, with His fear of death and dying conquered. He was strengthened to pray the toughest prayer of all: "Father, your will be done, not mine."

Having wrestled with God's will, Jesus now prayerfully submits to it. Jesus begs for His life, and yet this prayer is an offering of His life to God for our salvation. Here we see the immense cost of His saving love for us. To love our Father in heaven means, above all things, that we want His saving will to be done, no matter how many tears it may cost us.

Who of us finds obedience to God easy? Jesus didn't either. Obedience isn't a popular virtue in today's world. We see the terrible cost of people going ahead and doing "their own thing", seemingly accountable only to themselves. To obey means first to listen - to listen so we can act on what we hear.

Obedience is worthy of praise and commendation wherever it occurs. Jesus was obedient to Mary and Joseph, as well as to His Father in heaven. In place of our lack of obedience to God, Jesus offers us His perfect, but hard won, obedience. "He learned obedience through what He suffered." Such obedience is gained through many small acts of obedience, week by week; acts of obedience that often go against our natural inclinations and desires. The New Testament gratefully announces that we're put right with God by the obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ. "For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous (Romans 5:19)."

Our Lord shows that obedience is a divine attribute. We are God-like when we too obey God's will. Jesus asks us to pray as He does: "Father, your will be done." To add that to our petitions is to risk something glorious. That's a prayer you can be sure God will answer.

His desire to be obedient made Jesus' hearing so acute, that He recognised His heavenly Father's answer in silence, devoid of signs and miracles. He prays to God even when God seems absent. What amazing trust! Who else but Jesus will take our agonising cries to His heart? Where else can we go, except to the God who passionately loves us, whether we feel it or not?

No matter how great our pain and heartache, the safest thing to do is to place it in God's hands, trusting in His greater wisdom. Without prayer, nothing is safe and certain. Prayer makes our future safe and certain.

We would expect the New Testament's greatest missionary to have all his prayers answered. But after praying three times for the removal of his "thorn in the flesh" Jesus allowed St. Paul's thorn to remain and replied: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in your weakness." Who can calculate the comfort and help these words have given to countless Christians? St. Paul came to understand that he had received the most loving answer of all. He was freed from fear, for life. Now he was certain that nothing could separate him from the love of Christ, and that outer circumstances could never remove the grace his Saviour had given him.

May God bless your prayers in ways you never dreamed of or anticipated, as you too, discover that His answers are wiser than some of our requests. Amen.