

Out of the depths

Fifth in a Lenten series on prayer

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Fifth Sunday in Lent — 6 April 2014

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Ezekiel 37.1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45

In this series of Lenten reflections we have been looking at prayer and how certain prayers are powerful and transformative. At their heart they are about getting closer to the heart of God, closer to our true home and destination. We have reflected on the prayer of acknowledging our sin, what separates us from God. We have spent time thinking about the need to begin from nothing, knowing nothing, so we can be open to what God is trying to reveal to us. We have spoken about prayer as a conversation between us and God that generates insight and a deepening of connection, and we have considered prayer as a way we come into God's light and are slowly transformed. Today I want to talk briefly about a type of prayer we all do, sometimes without even thinking about it. It is a prayer that just rises up within us and sometimes it is the only prayer we can do. It is the prayer that comes out of the depths.

During my time as a nurse and then as a minister I have journeyed with people as they have suffered the loss of a partner or child. I have sat with people as they have dealt with the fact that they have cancer and within a year will be dead. I have been with patients in the last weeks of life, suffering dreadfully and begging me to kill them. I have sat with people as they have died, held their hand and kissed them and said goodbye at the last. Many of you have done similar things; you have journeyed with people through their suffering.

In our media and other places we are confronted with the immense unjust pain and suffering of the innocent all over the world. On our own doorstep here at St Philip's we have refugees who have suffered terrible pain and loss. We have all had our own suffering to contend with—emotional and physical pain and loss and grief, and the suffering of the world around us.

And out of the depths we cry, "God, why, O why?"

Couldn't God have prevented all these tragedy in the first place? If God is all-powerful, all-present and all-good, then what on earth was God doing? Out of the depths we cry, "Where are you God? Help us God, have mercy on me, I cannot take any more. Help. Have mercy on us." In confusion and despair, in pain and doubt, we cry from the depths.

When her brother Lazarus took sick, Mary asked Jesus for help. But Jesus purposely delayed intervening, so by the time they finally arrived back home in Bethany, Lazarus had been dead and buried for at least four days. "Lord," Martha cried, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary, her sister, said the exact same thing: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Amidst all the grief and tears, the neighbours mumbled their own aside: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" "Could he not have prevented all this horrible pain and heartache?"

Jesus didn't answer their question. Instead, in the shortest verse in the entire Bible, he revealed one of the most important characteristics we can ever learn about the heart of God: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). When Jesus experienced the sisters Mary and Martha weeping for their dead brother Lazarus, and their distraught neighbours, John writes that he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (John 11:33).

The God whom Christians worship is not a remote and aloof "sky god" somewhere way out there. God is deeply moved, even grieved, by anything and everything that threatens our

human well being. This compassionate and empathetic nature of God is the reason why the Scriptures encourage us to bring to God every anguish, confusion, anger, perplexity, and anxiety. The psalm for this week demonstrates this sort of primal entreaty to God (Psalm 130:1-2): “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.” We can pray to God like this because we know that God weeps when we weep. We place our hope in God because, as the Psalmist continues, He is a God of “unfailing love” and “full redemption” (Psalm 130:7).

Our Gospel story reveals this unfailing love of God in Jesus, who weeps when we weep, suffers as we suffer but it also reveals that Jesus is more powerful than death and suffering. I don't know how it happens, I haven't got a clue about the mechanics of it and the detail but I know and have seen that when we cry from the depths to God our prayer is answered. The dead may not come back to life. Our suffering and the suffering of others may still remain, but something shifts, something changes. We have reached out, we have opened the door, we have asked for help and then somehow, love and comfort and grace rush in.

Perhaps, when we cry out from the depths, we die a little. Our illusions about how the world should be crumble. Our hopes and dreams disappear. Our fantasies about a perfect world and a perfect self disintegrate. We are left bereft in an existential wilderness. And in the wilderness we find that God finds us. In our suffering, we die to a smaller self and then discover a larger self that has somehow found room for God. The key verse in the passage is the line, “I am the resurrection and the life”. As we have highlighted before, eternal life begins not at the end of time, or at the time of death, but right now in this moment. Jesus did not say, “I will be the resurrection,” or “It is coming soon.” He said simply, “I am the resurrection.” Here and now. I am with you here and now. You are part my eternal life here and now. Your being and my being are one and I am with you always, in the depths of despair, in the pain of life, till the end of your days. As Rossiter Raymond said: Life is eternal and love is immortal; and death is only a horizon; and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight.

You know we pray for many reasons but, whatever our doubts or questions and our circumstances, the most important thing is that we do pray and that we support and encourage one another as we walk the journey of prayer. As our Lenten season draws to a close, I hope you have been able to orientate your being to God's love and are open for the wonder for Holy Week and Easter. If you are in Canberra for Easter, I encourage you to attend the Easter services. It is a wonderful journey to take: full of meaning, beauty, humanity and joy. May the next few weeks be truly holy weeks for you and may your prayer life grow ever deeper and fuller. Amen.