

The first prayer – O God, have mercy on me, a sinner

The first in a Lenten series on prayer

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5.12-19; Matthew 4.1-11

As you know, all through the season of Epiphany we looked at who and what Jesus is for us. Now we are stepping into Lent where by the time we get to the other side of Easter the picture of Jesus would have become even clearer. The primary task of Jesus was to reconcile humanity to God and human beings to each other. So our theme for Lent this year is about coming back to God, back to centre, as Bede Griffith called it. On Ash Wednesday I spoke about the call to repentance we hear from the prophets and from Jesus. If sin, as the Eastern Orthodox say, is chaotic disorientation from God then the opposite is also true. Holiness is being oriented to God, the divine, the loving source of all life.

It seemed then to be an opportune time to have cycle of preaching about prayer. Prayer is fundamentally about being oriented to God. It is in being oriented to God that our souls, our flesh, our very being is nurtured. So over the next five Sundays of Lent we will be looking at prayer. Now that is a fairly big topic and we cannot possibly cover it all in five ten-minute sermons. I know, too, that many people here are very faithful in prayer. But I hope by the time we get to the end of the five weeks we will all feel more encouraged, more inspired to pray. I hope we will gain some fresh insights into the journey of prayer and maybe have some questions answered. Above all, I hope that we can get closer to Jesus and live more and more through the power of his love.

Regina Sara Ryan, a woman who has devoted her whole life to prayer and its study, says that we are spiritually hungry for God. Some of us are starving, if the nearly four hundred books written on the subject of prayer each year are anything to go by. She likens prayer to the food cycle—the planting, the watering, the waiting, the pruning, the harvesting, the cooking and the eating and ultimately the communion with, the joining with, that which will complete us, God.

I like this way of talking about prayer, because it names how earthy, how mysterious, how fascinating the whole journey is. It names the times when prayer seems like it is not 'working'. It names the dry times, the wilderness times, the testing times. Jesus' temptations in the desert occurred in the context of prayer and his amazingly wise responses came out of that same prayer.

So where do we start in prayer? Well, we can actually start anywhere. There is no right or wrong. It is more important to start, even if we are unsure or doubtful, than to wait until we think we have the words or formula right. Having said that, I'd like to suggest one possible starting place and the text to take us there is our psalm set for today, Psalm 32.

The psalm tells of a person whose body wasted away through groaning all day long—that is, until they confessed their sin to God. If you look at verses 3 to 4 you find the psalmist somehow trapped in their imperfection, in their wrongdoing, in their fear and guilt. So trapped that life is ebbing away from them, their strength is dried up as by the heat of summer. It's a great image for us Australians. You can just feel that energy-sapping heat that means you can't do anything—we just have to find a cool place to lie down, at the same time of course feeling grumpy because it's

so hot: that listless, oppressive feeling of summer heat. That is the effect that undeclared sin has on the psalmist—dried up and lifeless. However once the psalmist confesses their sin life returns, God is known and his steadfast love felt.

The notion of sin is out of vogue today and perhaps for a good reason. Awful tyranny has been wrought on the human spirit by those who have preached a gospel of sin as a means to keep the masses in line. What a perversion to turn a loving God into a punishing parent who never allows for pleasure or spontaneity!

Yet the paradox remains that some of the greatest spiritual writers, of all faiths and religions, have spoken seriously of sin. One that comes to mind is the late Yogi Ramasurat Kumar. His Western followers were very confounded and uncomfortable with his teaching about sin. Sin for him was as close to him as his name. His followers would say, “Oh, how humble he is” but, as one of them said, they hated to face the possibility that he was telling them a truth that they needed to take to heart. It seems to be an unpalatable truth that recognition of sin is central to the journey of prayer and communion with God.

The original Greek meaning of sin means to miss the mark, like an archer whose arrow sails past its target and embeds in something else. Not because we choose to hit something that is not the target, but because most of the time we are simply too disoriented from our own centre, wherein God dwells, to aim true and straight. We seem to live in world that is seriously misaligned with God and the life to which God calls us. In that sense we are all sinners before the absolute centre of God. Regardless of our situation we all find ourselves consciously or unconsciously contributing to racism and war and poverty. We all know how difficult it is to live an ethical life in a global village where our computer components are made in sweatshops in India. When we think of sin it is not just individual sin—it’s corporate and real and bloody.

Our dilemma is that, unless we have a reference point that guides us to the source of love itself, we are sad and sorry bunch, trapped in our limited view of ourselves and the world around us. Trapped in the way things just are with no other compelling vision. We are like the psalmist—fading away under the weight of our dark reality.

The prayer of acknowledging our sin is actually a powerful and transformative step. It’s a painful process if we do it honestly. It’s depressing and confronting and creates in us a struggle. But if we do this, if we stay with the process, we reach a point where we simply give up the fight and lay down our weapons. Then we need to sit with the pain of our sin as well and not move too quickly into the process of reconciliation. That other great penitential psalm, Psalm 51, does this beautifully and some of us may find its dark obsession with sin disturbing.

However, we’ve actually got to get down into the misery of the situation, our situation and the situation of poor humanity if we ever want to know genuine compassion as opposed to some warm cuddly sense of being-OK-ness.

Sitting down there in the ashes and the dust we come to a great paradox. If we really go to that place, we will begin to pray at last from the cells of our whole body, “*O God be merciful to me a sinner.*” One of the great prayers of the Orthodox Church is the prayer of the heart, “*Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*” A prayer like that is a cry that triggers genuine transformation. As Regina Sara Ryan puts it, only in acknowledging our utter helplessness can we be done with our own interference. Genuine desperation draws the divine like nothing else. There, at the bottom of your life, feeling at the edge of desolation you begin to see things very

clearly. We finally know what is separating us from God and we can let go of it all. We can put it all at the foot of the cross.

Confessing our sin is like peeling back the layers of an onion to reveal the core of our being. We get rid of all that separates us from God and we can then begin to live from a centre grounded in love. But it needs to be a process that is carefully and consciously done. I know that we say a confession every liturgy, but I sometimes wonder if it is just another set of words we are in the habit of saying.

True confession is never easy and our ego will fight it every step of the way. But the fruits are extraordinary. Our psalmist says, "Let all who are faithful offer prayer to God, the prayer of acknowledging their sin." Then, where once there was depression and life-sapping weariness, there will be joy and gladness and energy for life. Where once there was fear and uncertainty, there will be the steadfast love of God.

Amen.