

Lent Sermon Series 2014

3rd Sunday in Lent, 23rd March

St Mary's Kidlington, 10am

Revd Jennifer Brown on *Prayer and Scripture*

Exodus 17.1-7; Romans 5.1-11; John 4.5-42

It seems natural to suggest that prayer and scripture go hand in hand. But what exactly is the relationship between scripture and prayer? The second letter to Timothy tells us that, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." But is it any good for prayer?

Scripture does have much to teach us about prayer. The first letter to Timothy, for example, says that prayers and intercessions should be made for everyone, including "kings and all who are in high positions." The letter of James instructs that those who are suffering should pray, those who are sick should be prayed for, and those who are cheerful should give thanks. Scripture also gives us examples of how often to pray. In Psalm 119, for example, the psalmist says that he prays seven times a day, and Daniel prayed three times per day. The Gospels tell us that Jesus went out early in the morning to pray, and they also give us the words that Jesus taught his disciples, when they asked how they should pray. And the Lord's Prayer remains part of our shared worship and part of the private prayers of many. Indeed, many of the words that we use in the shared and enacted prayer that we call 'liturgy' are drawn directly from scripture. Jesus himself used well-known words from scripture for his own prayer at his greatest hour of need: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

That moment, and many other episodes recorded in the scriptures remind us that prayer is to be honest – a dialogue with God in which we can be open about what we are thinking and feeling, in which we can share our fears and our doubts, as well as our hopes and our praise. Prayer does not need to be a space in which we have to pretend that all is well when it isn't, or that we are happy with our lot whatever it may be. Our reading from Exodus is proof of this. Things aren't going well for the Israelites and they aren't happy. Many fear that they will die out in the wilderness, and wonder why they ever left Egypt. Moses is confident enough to vent his frustration at God: "What shall I do with these people?" There is no pretence. Moses is exasperated. He's at the end of his tether, afraid for his life and let's God know it. Our own prayer should have that level of honesty about it.

That is a brief overview of what scripture can teach us about prayer. One of the things that scripture teaches us is words that can be used in prayer. But, beyond incorporating the words of scripture, how can the Bible inform and enhance our prayer life?

Using the Bible when we pray can, certainly, enhance our prayer life. But in order for it to do so, we have to let the scriptures speak to us. We need to allow a passage to challenge us; we need to be alert to

the ways in which it resonates with us and our situation, the ways in which it calls to mind issues current in the world today; we need to hear what God may be telling us, about ourselves or about God. In other words, we have to be open to scripture, to letting the words say something fresh and new, rather than coming to what might be a familiar passage with the attitude of, “Oh, yes, this bit. I know this story.”

There are different ways to approach scripture so as to allow it to work in this way. The two methods that are possibly the most widely used are *Lectio Divina* and Ignatian imaginative reading.

According to David Foster, whose book *Reading with God* is a guide to practicing *Lectio Divina*, this way of approaching scripture is one of reading prayerfully, with mind and heart open to God. There are four stages to a *lectio divina* reading of a Bible passage. The first, *lectio*, is the reading of the passage. In the second, *meditatio*, one mulls over the passage, taking note of a word or phrase that stands out, or seems to be speaking to you in a particular way. The third stage is *oratio*, responding with prayer to what the reading is saying. The final, fourth, stage is *contemplatio*, in which one moves to prayer beyond words, an unhindered adoration of God. In other words, allowing an emotional response to the reading and one’s reflections on it. As David Foster points out, although this type of prayer is, by necessity, individual, it is not isolated. Our prayer is part of our relationship with the rest of the Body of Christ to which we belong, and part of our shared relationship with God.

Talking about a method of prayer like *lectio divina* is all well and good. But the best way to learn about it is to do it, and our reading from Romans is an excellent passage for it. For the first part, the *lectio*, I’ll read the first half of the passage and I encourage you to really listen to it. Then we’ll have a few moments’ silence in which you can mull the passage over, paying particular attention to any words or a phrase that stands out for you. At the end, I’ll read the passage again, and invite you to respond with a moment’s silent prayer.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Ignatian imaginative reading is another way to approach the scriptures prayerfully. In this method, one reads the passage slowly, and imagines oneself within the story. Although this method of reading can work with several different parts of the Bible, it is most effective with the Gospels, so we’re going to do this with part of today’s Gospel passage. I will read it, and I’d like you to imagine the action happening around you. You may choose to be one of the characters in the story, speaking to Jesus. Or you may wish to imagine yourself there as an observer. You can, in your imagination, talk to the other characters in the story, find out what they think and feel about what is happening, and tell them your thoughts and feelings. As the story unfolds, try to focus on what Jesus is saying and doing. What is your response to

Jesus? What would you like to say to him? As we do this, your imagination can allow you to see things in yourself that you may not otherwise have known were there, and it can open up a new way for God to speak in surprising ways.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Scripture can feed our prayers, and prayer can help us to approach the scriptures in new ways, and should inform our understanding of what we read. Ultimately, both should work together in us to deepen our relationship with God, and to equip us for service in his world.

Books that might be helpful with these kinds of prayer:

David Foster OSB, *Reading with God* (2005) Continuum, London.

Gerard W Hughes, *God of Surprises* (1996) Darton, Longman & Todd, London.

Jen Brown

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