

"JESUS ON PRAYER"

INTRODUCTION

The sermons on the Sunday mornings in Lent this year are attempting to explore the mind of Christ on a variety of subjects. Two weeks ago, on the First Sunday of Lent, we thought about Jesus and people, and what it means to be human. Last Sunday, on the Second Sunday of Lent, we turned again to Jesus, to his example of selfless service and what it means to be of service to others in His name. Today, we turn to Jesus and the subject of prayer.

DEVELOPMENT

I sometimes have the feeling that the truly forgotten man in our society is the "inner man". Action is the order of the day as one problem after another "out there" claims our attention and commands our energies. Quiet times and seasons of reflection seem almost treasonable in a crisis-ridden world. Yesterday, yes. Tomorrow, maybe. But today, no.

It seems to me that increasingly we live from the outside in rather than from the inside out. The causes to which we give ourselves are considered more important than the selves we give. We're uneasy when it comes to something like prayer. Even in the church, commitment to prayer is half-hearted and unsteady.

It is not my intention this morning to attempt an apologetic for prayer. I believe that Samuel Johnson was right when he turned to Boswell and said, "Sir, there are no arguments for prayer". Rather, before my own heart and hopefully before yours, I should like to place two truths. First, prayer was a vital part of the life of Jesus. Second, Jesus intended that it be a vital part of our life.

VITAL TO JESUS

Let's consider the first truth for a few minutes: prayer was a vital part of Jesus' life. His life cannot be fully understood apart from his reliance on prayer. A fair amount of literature is being written now-a-days about Jesus as a revolutionary. Attention is being called to his alleged power tactics, his knack for setting up confrontations, his relentless crusade against the establishment. Out of all of this I suspect that we will eventually have to revise our picture of Jesus. I think we'll come to see that he was not entirely the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" with the Mona Lisa smile that tradition has so often pictured him to be. Recall the scene: bottoms up, table tops.

And yet, in concentrating on those rugged qualities of leadership that Jesus doubtless possessed we should not forget that from the first to the last Jesus was a man of prayer. We dare not, by the process of selective recall, come up with a distorted picture of Jesus that would ignore the devotional side of his life.

It was all in a day's work for him. In Capernaum he taught in the synagogue and cast out an unclean spirit. He went from there to the house of Simon and Andrew where he healed Peter's mother-in-law. That very evening after the sun went down they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by devils, so that the gospel writer could say, "and the whole town was there gathered at the door". The Scriptures go on to report that "very early the next morning Jesus got up and went out". He went to a lonely spot and remained there in prayer....renewing inner life.

Parents brought their children to Jesus that he might lay his hands upon them and pray for them. He prayed before he worked his mighty miracles. He prayed before he chose his disciples. He prayed in the garden. He prayed on the cross. So obvious and so appealing was Jesus' reliance on prayer as a source of power that his disciples sought to emulate him in this above all else. They did not turn to him and say, "Lord, teach us to preach". Nor did they turn to him and

say, "Lord, teach us to teach". Nor did they turn to him and say, "Lord, teach us how to work miracles". But they did turn to him and say, "Lord, teach us how to pray!"

VITAL TO US Consider the second truth: he also intended that it be vital to our lives, too. To Jesus, prayer was simply conversation with God and he wanted us to talk with God as he did. He told us some things about prayer. He said that when we pray we ought to go into a closet. Not literally, perhaps, but suggesting here that prayer requires concentration and freedom from distraction. He said that prayer was not a matter of quantity, but of quality, and that we should not become involved in vain repetitions, gabblings or babblings.

And you'll remember that it was in answer to the request of his disciples, "Lord, teach us how to pray" that he gave us what we now refer to as the Lord's Prayer. It's a prayer that is without rival in the devotional literature of the world. ~~It stands as a model for all who would learn to pray.~~ It is instructive to us that in this prayer there is very little mention of material things and this, I fear, is where most of us start and where most of us stop. The only petition in that prayer for anything material is the prayer for bread. But before that we pray that a name might be hallowed, that a kingdom may come, that a will may be done. For the true object of Christian prayer is not that God's will may be changed, but that his will may be done by us in our lives.

Paul was carrying forward Jesus' understanding of prayer when in his Letter to one of the young churches, he said such things as "pray without ceasing", and "be anxious for nothing, but in everything through prayer and supplication let your requests be made known unto God".

TRANSITION Prayer was a vital part of Jesus' life. He intended that prayer should be a vital part of ours. We come then to the question of why do we have this feeling of uneasiness when it comes to prayer. There, I think, two ways of accounting for it.

OUTGROWN IT First, it may be that we have simply outgrown prayer. Perhaps prayer was an interim counsel that Jesus gave that had relevance only for those who lived in a less enlightened time than our own.

In our day we do not pray before an examination, we simply study. We do not pray for rain, we simply seed the clouds. When a friend is ill, we do not indulge in prayers by his bedside, but rather we call in a notable physician. We do not earnestly pray for peace, but rather put most of our stress on training statesmen in the art of conflict resolution. And when there is need to dampen down the friction of personalities, we do not think of prayer, but rather turn to a book dealing with the subject of group dynamics.

Prayer: is it that we have outgrown it? Perhaps our age is so advanced that we have passed beyond the need to pray. In an emergency, we may blurt out a prayer thought or two, but this is a pardonable regression. I wonder - could it be that prayer in the 20th century just doesn't really matter?

OR NEGLECTED IT The other proposition that might help to explain our uneasiness with prayer is this: prayer still matters, but we have neglected it.

I wonder if this has something to do with our uneasiness. A society that so badly mangles its personal relationships, that is so heavily addicted to drugs and

soporifics, so dependent on the skills and insights of psychiatrists, that at times can be so full of violence - such a society, it seems to me, is hardly qualified to pronounce the worthlessness of prayer.

It's the "in" thing now-a-days to talk about the quality of life. When that term is used we are accustomed to thinking about man's physical environment. But what about the atmosphere that a man carries with him and transports into his home, into his social relationships, into his work? We seem to be suffering as a people from the lack of the very things that prayer can help us to achieve. We suffer from a lack of depth in our human associations. A lack of concern. A lack of focus. A lack of direction. Our connections with other human beings are often hard, brittle and without deep satisfaction. /

I confess there are times when I wonder about the powerlessness of the Christian Church. I travel around this city and see the great churches and institutions in all of their majestic beauty for the promotion of the Christian interpretation of life. One thinks of the buildings we've built, the bureaucracies we've set up, the wealth we control, the techniques we've mastered, the brains we have commandeered - one thinks of all of this and wonders: did ever so many labor with so much to produce so little?

Jesus said on one occasion, not to the world, but to his disciples, "without me, ye can do nothing". We can build our buildings, issue our position statements, hold our annual meetings and conferences. But where it really matters, where we require the energizing spirit of God, it is still true when the master said, "Without me ye can do nothing". In other words, we seem to have everything in the Christian Church except the power of God's spirit. We have a form of godliness, but neglect the power thereof. Could it be that we suffer the sterility of neglected, abandoned prayer.

CHALLENGE YOU Now you may be among those who feel that we have outgrown prayer. If you are, I should like to nudge your thinking to consider the other possibility: that prayer still matters, but that we have neglected it.

I should like to appeal to you to try prayer again if you have abandoned it. Don't say that you will wait until the major social problems of the age are solved before you pray. Your soul may be so hardened by that time arrives that you will have lost entirely the will to pray.

And don't say that prayer belongs to the ministers, and to the theological experts, to the professional church workers and holy men. Jesus intended that prayer should be within the reach of all of us. Years ago Thomas Brooks said:

"God looks not at the oratory of your prayers, how elegant they may be; nor at the geometry of your prayers, how long they may be; nor at the arithmetic of your prayers, how many they may be; not at the logic of your prayers, how methodical they may be; but at the sincerity of them he looks at!"

TWO FORMS OF PRAYER If you're willing then to begin again in a serious quest for meaningful prayer, then let me suggest two forms that are good to start with.

The first is the kind of prayer in which at the beginning of the day we pre-live as best we can what the day may bring. God has given us the power of anticipa-

tion. While there will always be surprises and unpredictable intrusions, most of the things that will try us and nettle us we know about in advance. And so, before the first call is made, the first lesson studied, the first letter dictated, try committing the day to God. If you wish a book to guide you, try a page each day of Fosdick's great classic, "The Meaning of Prayer", or Ferris' "Book of Prayers for Everyman". If you can't find time to do it in the morning, next best would be the evening before dropping off to sleep, committing they coming night and day to God. Turn the TV off before the news at eleven. Without the news and with a few quiet moments, you'll sleep much better.

The other form that prayer can take is readily within our reach and it's what you might call flash prayer. It may be true as William Temple observed that we do not have the leisure of the Middle Ages that would allow us to sit down and engage in prolonged prayer recalling in detail the goodness of God and going on at great length.

But surely, as we move about in the vast caverns of concrete of this mighty city, there is always the possibility of offering up "flash" prayers to God. Prayers for those hanging on the same subway strap with us. Prayers for those who are being jostled on the same bus. Prayers for those standing in line behind us at the super-market. Prayers as you pass a hospital for those who minister healing and for those who are sick. Prayers as you pass a church for those who worship there and for those who serve there. Prayers as you pass a school for those who teach and for those who learn. Prayers as you ride on a train through the ghettos of this city for those who live there in such deplorable and intolerable conditions. Prayers for those who serve society in government or in the United Nations. "Flash" prayers..

Some of this may sound overly simplistic to some of you, but nevertheless I am inclined to agree with something T. S. Eliot once said about

"The end of all our exploring,
Will be to arrive where we started,
And know the place for the first time"

ILLUSTRATION A man whose friendship has come to mean something to me in recent years here in the city is a man by the name of de Seversky - Major Alexander de Seversky - a brilliant man by any measurement, a scientist, a man whose intellectual energies now are being directed entirely to the problems of air-pollution. He's in his late seventies. Some of you may remember him for his role in World War II, remembering how he shaped the strategy of the War through his counsel and his book, Victory Through Air Power. Major de Seversky came out of Russia around the time of the Revolution of 1917, had come to America. ~~He was something of a hero in Russia before the Revolution, having something like fifteen German planes to his credit as a pilot in early World War I. Major de Seversky is a man of science and also a man of faith. I first met him five summers ago when I was called to officiate at his wife's funeral. She had taken her life with a gun.~~

His wife, Evelyn, a Methodist from Louisiana, and to whom he was deeply devoted, had taught him a simple prayer. And although reared in the Eastern Orthodox Church with all of its elaborate ritual, he often has said to me that the simple prayer he learned from his wife has been of deep comfort, great steadiness and inspiration to him at many points of his life. Seldom does a day go by that he does not say this simple prayer. He stopped by here one hot Friday afternoon last August, came in to our church and together we knelt at the altar rail for a prayer. After I finished offering a prayer and reading a psalm, he quietly prayed his prayer:

"Jesus, tender shepherd, hear me;
Bless thy little lamb tonight;
Through the darkness be thou near me,
Watch my sleep till morning light"

childlike prayer..

With deep sincerity in his heart, he offered those simple lines. Maybe, after all, it is that simple. Maybe this is the "end of all our exploring" and our striving - to be able to fall to our knees and say with Jesus, "Our Father, who art in heaven"....."not my will, but thine be done".

CLOSING I've always warmed to the beautiful story of the freckled face lad who was standing along the banks of the Mississippi River. He had on a badly shattered and battered version of one of those broad-brimmed straw hats. Carefully he cast his eye up stream until a certain river boat came into sight. He took off his straw hat and began to wave the boat to shore, over and over again. Presently a man who had been quietly watching from behind him said, "Sonny, don't be silly. That big boat won't stop here for a little lad like you".

But the man had hardly finished when the boat veered sharply and came to the spot where the boy was standing so that he could jump on. He scampered aboard, put his star hat back on his head. He then leaned over the rail and shouted to the amazed man standing there on the river bank, "I ain't so dumb mister, my daddy pilots this boat".

PRAYER Teach us, O God, how to withdraw from the pressures of life, not in self-interest or self-indulgence, but to find the quietness and the strength that we need in order that we may handle life and handle it well. Help us to remember the example of Jesus - of how pray was vital in his life and how he intended for it to be meaningful to us. Help us to remember how in his withdrawing and returning, he fulfilled one of thy laws and made his life great and rich for all others. Amen.