

**Sunday 7th February –
2nd Sunday before Lent**
Led by Sue Nelms, LLM



Opening Words

Let everything be said and done in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God through Jesus Christ.

Sing psalms, hymns and sacred songs:
let us sing to God with thankful hearts.

Open our lips, Lord:
and we shall praise your name.

cf Colossians 3.16,17

**Faithful one, whose word is life:
come with saving power
to free our praise,
inspire our prayer
and shape our lives
for the kingdom of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Hymn – What a Friend We Have in Jesus

1. What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer.

2. Have we trials and
temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
take it to the Lord in prayer.

3. Are we weak and heavy laden,
cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Saviour, still our refuge;

take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do your friends despise,
forsake you?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he'll take and
shield you;
you will find a solace there.

Meditation

Over the past year, we have sometimes taken the opportunity to spend some time in silence in our services. This morning I would like to take some time to share something which might help you during those times when you want to pray, but simply cannot find the words. Please make yourselves comfortable in your seat and then take a few moments to become aware of your breathing; not to control it but to be aware of yourself breathing in and out, in and out.

When you are ready, support one hand in the other and take a moment to focus on what you see.

Look at your thumb - the strongest digit on your hand. Give thanks for the strong things in your life that support and sustain you.

Move to your index finger - the pointing finger. Pray for the people and things in your life who guide and help you.

Look at your middle finger - this is usually the tallest finger. Pray for all the people in positions of authority and influence in the world, people who sometimes make difficult decisions that affect us all.

Now consider your ring finger - the weakest finger on your hand and connected to your middle finger. It can't do much by itself. Pray for people who need help or are finding life difficult.

Finally look at your little finger - the smallest and last finger on your hand. Now pray for yourself.

When you are ready, please open your eyes again.

Confession

Compassion and forgiveness belong to the Lord our God, though we have rebelled against him.

Let us then renounce our wilfulness and ask his mercy by confessing our sins in penitence and faith.

cf Daniel 9.9

**God of mercy,
we acknowledge that we are all sinners.
We turn from the wrong that we have thought
and said and done,
and are mindful of all that we have failed to do.
For the sake of Jesus, who died for us,
forgive us for all that is past,
and help us to live each day
in the light of Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Readings by John Crang

Proverbs 8:32-36

³² 'And now, my children, listen to me:
happy are those who keep my ways.

³³ Hear instruction and be wise,
and do not neglect it.

³⁴ Happy is the one who listens to me,
watching daily at my gates,
waiting beside my doors.

³⁵ For whoever finds me finds life
and obtains favour from the Lord;

³⁶ but those who miss me injure themselves;
all who hate me love death.'

Luke 11.1-4

11 Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' ² He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

Reflection by Rev Alison Walker

When I had my 7th birthday, my social life began with Brownies, violin lessons, junior youth club and junior choir. On the wall of the choir vestry at Sittingbourne Methodist Church was a cartoon style drawing of a man and his dog, the man is singing and the dog is howling and the text read "He who sings, prays twice". I liked that poster partly because whenever I attempted to play the violin our beautiful Cocker Spaniel, Ebony, would huffily take herself to the end of the garden and howl away, in pain I fear. But partly too because singing, especially singing in church, was and remains important to me. I also thought it meant that if you sing you only have to pray half as much – but I realise now that was not the intention! Years later I learnt that the quote is attributed to St Augustine "Bis orat qui cantat", although no one knows if Augustine really did say or write it. Certainly I understand the spiritual engagement that comes with singing – something that goes beyond the deeper breathing, the music or the words alone.

I begin with this anecdote because I think it is better than starting with a confession, which I will now do. I want to talk today about "daily prayer", but I'm not very good at it! Over the years I've followed recommendations to form a habit of daily prayer, Bible notes, prayer cycles, liturgy, quiet times, prayer meetings, quick short prayers, but none of them have ever formed a daily, long term habit. I still do use many of these ways to pray, but just not daily.

But I do pray – for me prayer is basically a chat with God. And I'm good at chatting (well not according to my school reports, but that's another confession for another time!). I can natter away to God quite easily. Sometimes I pause in mid thought flow – because these prayers

are rarely actually spoke – and I wonder if this way of praying is just my stream of consciousness, or if God can hear my thoughts – but honestly these more philosophical questions don't bother me. I continue with my chat and at the end I feel that God has heard me, God has helped me get things in perspective or have a better understanding, and I feel ready to get up and do what I can do. I pray like this more often than any other way, but it still isn't daily.

I wonder if at least some of these ways of praying are also your ways of praying? Doesn't matter if you have some other way of praying. The other poster that I remember from the choir vestry said "Pray as you can, not as you can't". This reassures me when I have tried to follow a prayer style recommendation and found it doesn't really suit me. So pray as you can, as you pray; the style of your praying may change, but keep praying. And so I keep trying to find ways to make prayer a daily reality.

Over the next few months I'm going to be leading a group looking at the commitments of "A Methodist Way of Life". Actually, these 12 commitments really aren't exclusively Methodist, so I'm not keen on the name, but I do like the straight-forward ways that the commitments ask us to put our faith into action. The first one is I think for me the most challenging: "As far as we are able, with God's help, we will pray daily." I'm glad that the commitments all say "we" not just "I", because I'm sure we are going to need each other's help as we try to follow this way of living out our faith.

It did make me ask myself if I really think that daily prayer is necessary. I've already told you that I'm very poor at it, but I do recognise that something is lacking. Perhaps along the way I've picked up some negative ideas about the discipline of daily prayer – so that feels like a task that as fast as I cross it off my "to do" list, it reappears again, never finished, or it feels like a daily demand that I rebel a bit against.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray "Give us this day our daily bread". As a social action orientated Methodist, I'm sure that this

is a prayer for our daily needs to be met; not only ours, but those of the whole world's. At the same time, this line in the prayer shows me that prayer itself is also understood as a daily necessity, it is the bread that sustains us, and like manna that must be harvested and eaten every day, little and often. Jesus' own examples of praying show us that he prays every day; when life gets tough, Jesus prays some more. When he needs refreshment for his ministry, he prays; when making difficult decisions, he prays; when mourning his friend, he prays; when facing the cross, he prays. Jesus' own natural reaction is to ask God for help, as we do too, particularly when we need help the most. We can also ask God for help every day – God won't mind! In daily asking prayer, we recognise and articulate our reliance on God, going beyond our times of deeper need, to understand that we always need God.

In the few verses from Proverbs 8, which teaches about Wisdom, which is another understanding about the nature of God, we find a description of prayer as listening, watching, waiting at God's gates and doors, and finding God. This is another aspect of daily prayer. I like this because it isn't full of demands - neither of God, nor of me. I don't need to tick the days from a prayer chart, nor remember to pray for the churches or people. It isn't intercessory prayer, it isn't confessional prayer, it's not giving thanks nor praising. It is simply being attentive to God: listening, seeking and finding God.

Apparently Mother Theresa was asked what she said to God in prayer – she responded “I mainly listen”. Then asked what God said to her, she replied “God mostly listens too.” All ways of praying are useful and important, but just being with God in our daily prayer, is the baseline for prayer, I think. Listening, noticing, waiting, this is the heartbeat of prayer. It underlies all the words that we use, speaking or thinking, even the singing that might count twice.

The Hebrew word “Ruark” means wind, or breath, or spirit. It is used to describe Spirit of God hovering over the waters at creation, or for the breath of life itself, originating from God who gives ruark or breath to all living things. At the start of the first lockdown zoom services my

colleague in Toft church, David Newton, lead us in simple meditative prayers with a focus on breathing and being aware of God's loving presence, guiding us to sense that our breath and the ruark, the Spirit of God, are mysteriously linked. I have found that enormously helpful. Sometimes this last year has felt stressful, overwhelming and a burden. In those moments, I pray in a way that does not ask anything more of me than breathing and realising that God is with me; that has been all I have felt able to do, and I then realised, all I have needed to do.

So I invite you to journey with me to re-discover or deepen our practice of daily prayer – however you can, not however you can't. Perhaps start with the simplicity of breathing, and allow each breath to guide you into the realisation that God is with you. Picture yourself standing at God's gates and windows, listening, waiting and watching for God who is about to appear. And then pray as Jesus taught us, and showed us, knowing that our Father is not far away, but close with us. Pray to ask, pray to praise, and pray just to breathe and be close to God. Amen.

Affirmation

Let us affirm our faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

**Though he was divine,
he did not cling to equality with God,
but made himself nothing.
Taking the form of a slave,
he was born in human likeness.
He humbled himself
and was obedient to death,
even the death of the cross.
Therefore God has raised him on high,
and given him the name above every name:
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow,
and every voice proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession led by Michaela McNeill

The response to the intercessions will be Lord, hear us. Lord, graciously hear us.

Let us pray

Gracious God, we've come to you again this day to praise your name and with people we care for. This winter Sunday doesn't feel all that special but we thank you for it anyway. We pray for our churches although they are empty at the moment are places that we love and respect and that given time we can all return to. Normally we would pray in them, but we are faced with the challenge of finding somewhere different. Please allow us the strength and courage to find these places wherever we are, be it in person or online. We pray for the stones, the wood, the decoration, the architecture of our buildings where we have bought our joys and sorrows. We thank you for the people with whom we share these places.

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Winter weather has us in its grip, and we try hard to keep warm and to minimize the discomfort. We pray for those who are especially vulnerable in cold weather, the elderly, the housebound and the sick. We pray for some who are known to us, and for many who are not known to us ... (pause). And in particular we pray that everyone in our various communities will be good neighbours, alert and thoughtful, actively aware of vulnerable people around us.

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Winter has its compensations – evenings in, hot drinks, football on the television, the pleasure of warming up, the joy of a snug home. Give us, Father, quiet pleasure in simple things, so that out of the ordinary experiences of life we may have a growing confidence in your kindly presence in every place and at every time. We pray for those who especially need that assurance at the moment, the 'knowledge within knowledge' that you are present, and in your presence is comfort, hope and peace. So we name in our hearts some people in particular

need of that assurance – people who are ill, or anxious, or lonely, or afraid particularly with regard to COVID ... (pause).

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Winter is normally a time of looking back and looking forward. We pray that with 2020 behind us we can look forward to the new year with hope as the vaccines are rolled out and that everyone is vaccinated and that COVID can become a distant memory. We look forward to the warm summer days, the opportunity to be out in the garden, perhaps a chance to get away once we are able to. We also watch for the first stirrings of nature, the lengthening of the days, the first time that the sun feels warm again, the sight of snowdrops and daffodils. In the meantime, Creator God of every season of the year, enable us to wait patiently and enjoy the particular gifts of every time and season. Keep us present to each present moment.

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Gracious God of every season and every mood,
in spring, we shall know your faithfulness,
in summer we shall know your abundance,
in autumn we shall know your completeness,
in winter we shall know your rest,
and all in the blessed company of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Collect

Almighty God,
you have created the heavens and the earth
and made us in your own image:
teach us to discern your hand in all your works
and your likeness in all your children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns supreme over all things,
now and forever. Amen

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.**

Blessing

May God the Father bring us to the home
which his Son prepares for all who love him.

Amen.

May God the Son give us the will
to live for him each day in life eternal.

Amen.

May God the Holy Spirit give us the assurance
that our citizenship is in heaven
with the blessed and beloved,
and the whole company of the redeemed.

Amen.

And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always. **Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

In the name of Christ. Amen