

Vision 2016: Value: 'Pray Faithfully'. Luke 18: 9-14 and 2 Timothy 4:6-8 and 16-18

23 October 2016. Sarah Thomas

St Peter's has adopted a refreshed vision - 'Lives transformed by following Christ in love and service'. We will 'Worship God, Make Friends, Change the World' and the values we will live by as we do that will be a promise to: 'Pray faithfully', 'Listen well', 'Act boldly', 'Serve generously'.

Today we are looking at 'Pray faithfully'. What I like about this is that we can look at it in a number of ways. It isn't a flat one-dimensional statement.

I have a small glass cube on my mantelpiece at home. Brenda Fearn gave it to me when I was licenced 10 years ago this weekend. It has within it a pair of praying hands, and those hands look different from all six sides. Though it is never anything other than a pair of praying hands it reminds me to pray and reminds me that there are people who are praying for me.

The statement, 'pray faithfully' is always about prayer, but it can be unpacked into many different meanings and applications.

Faithful Prayer can mean that when we pray, we pray to God in faith, with faith.

I've been on a lot of journeys recently and I've been aware of how much faith I have had to put in other people. My safety relied on them. I had to trust those who maintain planes, trains, buses and boats. Those who pilot, drive or sail them. And that is just faith that the people who have responsibility will do their jobs to the best of their ability.

How much more then do I have faith in God? I put my trust in him. I trust that he wants me to pray. I trust that he listens when I pray. I trust, have faith, that he answers prayer.

The evidence I have that he wants me to pray comes from Jesus. I look at the pattern of Jesus' life. We are told, throughout the gospels, that Jesus prayed. He was asked how to pray and he didn't answer 'if you pray', he answered, 'when you pray' and he gave us what we know as the Lord's prayer as a pattern. I don't believe that Jesus would have invested time in an exercise that fell on deaf ears. He gave an example in our gospel reading today of two men who went to the temple to pray. It is Biblical imperative.

And as for answered prayer, I know that I have experienced it. I have also come to see that answers don't come like successful job applications or birthday lists. Answers may often only be seen or experienced in hind sight. Faith enables us to live in the assumption that we will experience goodness even in the middle of suffering. That a state of openness to God's goodness can bring an assurance of love and joy. And that can keep us going and going in the right direction.

But more than expecting answers to prayer, I think the important thing about praying is that builds our relationship with God.

One of our visitors from Uganda, Charles Okello told me about his experience of the power of prayer. He had been captured by the Lord's Resistance Army during the civil war in Northern Uganda and by some miracle he was able to escape. He ran away praising God, even though he wasn't then a believer. It seemed the natural thing for him to do and he believes now that those praises were what led him into faith.

Faithful Prayer can mean that we promise to commit ourselves to pray, to be faithful in prayer.

I know someone who only makes a promise to pray for someone when she remembers to do so. I like the honesty behind that. And sometimes I have found that remembering to pray is really the prompting of the Holy Spirit, for I later discover that the person or situation that I have offered to God, really needed support at that particular moment. Others have an amazing ability to be faithful to pray everyday for all sorts of people and places. A massive underpinning of people's lives with love, blessing and grace.

What might it mean to us as the people of St Peters to say, to promise, to others that we commit ourselves to pray faithfully?

For what and for whom? And indeed, how?

We have said that we will make friends. Joy gave us plenty of examples of the friends St Peters already has. Our promise to pray should include praying for our existing and future friends. An example of that might be our response to our mission partner Miriam Knowles' email received on Friday. After returning to Tanzania refreshed but still recuperating following illness, she sounds as if she is in a state of deep emotional and physical fragility following the impact of the murder of the husband of her assistant. Our response should be to pray for her, to commit her to God's care and that those friends she has in Tanzania will be able to support her.

Or we might pray for the various schools that all our children and young people go to, even if we can't name or know them all.

You will all have examples of the friends we have and the way we can support them through prayer.

Our prayers don't have to be limited to those we know or have some connection to. We can pray as we watch, read or listen to the news. We can rejoice and praise God or we can weep and remind God of the need to overcome injustice. Our prayers can inform our actions. It can prompt us to a humanitarian response and to generosity.

How do we pray? Prayer can be intercessory, asking God for things, or it can be contemplative. It can also be about praising God.

We don't have to find grand phrases or words. We might not know any detail about our friends lives or about the real impact of being a refugee. But we can use our imagination. We can simply picture in our minds eye the person or situation we are committed to pray for and simply place them into God's hands. I sometimes picture a map, say of the UK, and people it with those I know. Or when walking around Henleaze I pray as I pass people's houses. We can simply ask that God will bless.

We can use existing written prayers to prompt our thoughts, they don't have to be simply read and then pass onto the next thing. I particularly like David Adam's book Celtic Daily Prayer, it has a meditative and structured pattern of daily prayer. It is designed to be read out loud. That can help us listen to what we are praying and ground our thoughts. If you are like me, often just thinking means your mind wanders off.

We can use silence. That needs discipline. And I like the words in the Order of Service that Foundation uses to introduce silent prayer:

Lord, teach us the silence of humility, the silence of wisdom, the silence of love, the silence that speaks without words, the silence of faith, the silence of our own hearts and minds, SO THAT we may listen for the movement of your Holy Spirit

I love the words in Philippians, where Paul tells us to pray about everything. It's bringing everything in our lives to God. Thanking him for the good things we see around us helps us to remember and appreciate those things. The mist rising up from the fields and the sunlight turning the leaves on the trees bright orange on the train journey to London made up for the early start on Friday and thanking God for them felt like the right response.

We can turn our worries into prayers. We can ask others what their worries are, and turn them into prayers. When we are asked what our worries are, we can be honest about them and know that others will turn them into prayers.

We can sing our prayers, Taize chants are a really good way of doing that.

Prayer is one of the things that makes our gathering at St Peters different from other social gatherings. There are plenty of books written about it, but the best way to be faithful in prayer is to get on with it! Practice it. Do it. Have faith in it and be faithful in doing it.

Amen