

EPHESIANS 3:14-21
I PRAY...

The story told about a minister who went to visit someone who was sick. She went into the room and noticed an empty chair beside the man's bed, set at a curious angle. She asked what the chair was doing there. The man said that he used to find it difficult to pray because he didn't know what to say to someone he couldn't see. But a friend told him to put an empty chair close by and to imagine that Jesus was sitting on the chair. Then he could speak to Jesus as he would speak to his friend - and then listen to what He said back in return. Had the man found a good way to pray? What do you think he might have said to Jesus in these conversations?

This sermon has the title "*I pray...*" – twice in his prayer in Ephesians 3, Paul says "I pray..." and then tells us what he prays for. We could just as easily have called the sermon "I don't pray..." because lots of people find prayer a difficult thing. We don't pray because we're frightened we get the words wrong and say the wrong thing to God; we don't pray because we prefer to be people up and doing things rather than sitting being quiet; we don't pray because we say "I'm not that kind of a person; I'm not as religious as that!"; we don't pray because find it hard to think of talking to someone we can't see! There are all sorts of reasons in our minds for not praying! The truth is that prayer is as easy as speaking to our friend and maybe the man with the chair had a good idea; the other truth is that we are all learning – none of us ever gets prayer right all of the time; all of us have something new to learn about praying. The challenge for all of us is to be able to say quietly to ourselves "I pray..."

The passage in Ephesians 3 is Paul's second prayer for the church in Ephesus; the first is in chapter 1. When we read the letter we won't find a big issue that needs dealt with; there are no big problems in church in Ephesus in the way that there are, say in Corinth. What you will find is Paul trying to help these Christians grow in their faith, help them go deeper in understanding what they believe and help them be stronger in that faith; that their commitment to Jesus will be stronger and they will put their faith into practice from day-to-day. What Paul also knows is that the key to that going deeper is prayer, both for the Christians as individuals and for the church as a whole community. What difference to us as individuals and to us as a whole church community, will it make when we say "I pray..."?

"I pray..." (Ephesians 3:16f) This is power on the inside, the Spirit of God at work in us to strengthen us with power so that we might be the right kind of people. Christians are connected to Jesus: we live 'in Christ' and Christ lives in us by the Spirit. There are times when that relationship is put under strain and these connections are loosened and weakened. Paul prays that despite all that might put that connection under strain that they continue to live by faith and continue to live 'in Christ'. He prays that they will stand firm in their faith and will grow in their faith; that needs inner strength, strength to be the right kind of people. We can be strong in all sorts of other ways, we can have power in other areas of life, but the kind of strength and power that ultimately matters most is the strength and power to be the right kind of people. Tiger Woods may be a great golfer, witnesses by his performance at the Open at Carnoustie, but lots of people refuse to warm to him because of the kind of person he has shown himself to be. So Paul prays for the Christians in Ephesus that they have this inner-person strength to live by faith and to be the right kind of people. Will you pray that for yourself and for your church?

"I pray..." (Ephesians 3:17bf) This second prayer is about the power to know, to grasp, to understand how much you are loved. Have a look at the image on the screen; it is called *Extravagant* and is painted by an American artist called Anneli Anderson to illustrate these words from Ephesians 3. She says about the picture that: "The woman, in a stance of worship, is planted firmly on a heart representing the love of Christ. To the left a section represents the stars of the cosmos... the highest of heights, down to the deepest of depths with an anchor.

The anchor represents faith...The anchor is green to represent the growth of our faith as we trust God. The woman has her arms spread wide to take in the embrace of the Father of Lights and feel the breadth of his love. The purple in the background represents a holy place... the blue – peace and shalom in the presence of the Prince of Peace.” We are loved by God with a love that is wide enough to embrace everyone; that is long enough to last forever; that is deep enough to reach us in the darkest places; that is high enough to lift us to heaven. This is the extravagant love that God has for us.

This is why we pray; this is why prayer is a core task of the church and not an added extra. Christians, churches are energised with the power of God through prayer. There is an old quote from St Augustine: “pray as though everything depended on God; work as though everything depended on you.” I think we tend to know more the second part of that quote than the first: we put a lot of effort into our work, but not so much into our praying. Jesus teaches us to pray; the Bible shows us the value of prayer. Prayer is a conversation with God as with our friend and opens up a treasure house of good things for us: strength, faith, love, power etc. Prayer connects us to the power of the Spirit of God and connects us to the extravagant love of God for the world; what a difference will it make to our lives to have that prayer connection? What difference will it make to the church community to make that prayer connection and to make that connection stronger?

The reality is that we are all somewhere on that journey. Not many of us in this room never pray, I suspect; but none of us has mastered the art. We all have something to learn about prayer, some way in which we can learn to pray more or better, whatever that means. Be inspired to pray because of the strength and love we find from God. Find a way to help you pray more, be it an empty chair to talk to God as your friend; be it an open Bible that helps as you read the prayers of others; be it a picture that lifts your spirit to see something of God; be it a quiet place where you can be on your own to contemplate God, life, love; be it some music that calms your spirit or lifts your spirit to connect with God; be it a notebook, journal, diary, to reflect your day and reflect on ways in which you have connected with God during the day; be it pray as you walk; be it pray as you sit quietly in church. In some way, at some stage, the challenge for us is to be able to say “I pray...”

A man brought twenty rolls in his bag to the prophet and Elisha told him to give them to the people o eat; “but there’s not enough; there are more than a hundred people here!” But he did what prophet said, gave them his twenty rolls and all these hundred and more people had enough to eat and some left over. A little boy brought his packed lunch to Andrew, five rolls and two fish; Andrew gave it to Jesus just when they had begun to try to work out how to feed the crowd of more than five thousand people; Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish and no-one is really very sure what happened next, but in the end the whole crowd was fed and there were baskets-full left over! Both stories are told to show us God’s power to provide for His people, to show Jesus’ power to help those who are hungry. This is what God is like; this is what Jesus can do!

“Now to...” (*Ephesians 3:20*) This is a bit like the benediction at end of our service; it reminds the Christians of what God is like, taking these two stories and turning them into an idea of what God is like for every situation. When we pray, do we come to God who is weak and who may just be able to help us or maybe asleep? No! We come to God who is able in this extravagant kind of way, to do far more than we ask or imagine. This is what God is like; this is how big God is. We come with our prayers and requests and then wonder if God hears, if God listens, or ultimately if God is actually able to help us. He is able to do far more than we ask or imagine; the language that Paul uses is big language, not big words, but big ideas, notions of God whose power is already at work in us and whose power is able to do far more than we know.

So why doesn't God answer my prayers? He does, but not always in the way we ask! We pray for someone to be healed, but they die; a few years later another family member finds grace from God as a result of their bereavement experience. We pray for someone who is in the darkest of places and seem not to come out of that dark place, but 10 years later, life is better, relationships are healed; it has taken time but God has answered our prayers. We pray for God to guide us in a choice to make, but we don't like the answer so we say God hasn't answered my prayer. God is able to do anything, but wisely He knows us and He knows what will be for our good, what will make us stronger, our faith deeper, our love more generous; that's the way in which He answers our prayers.

"I pray..." says Paul as he writes to his friends. He prays for God's power to make them stronger in their faith; he prays that they will have a better idea of how they are loved by God; he does all of that because he believes God is able to do it all. Prayer must never be a mechanical rote, to say the right words; prayer is a conversation with our friend, to whom we can open our hearts and from whom we receive strength, power and love; a conversation with our friend who loves us more than we will ever know; a conversation with our friend who is able to do far more than we will ever ask. What difference will it make to us individually, to us as a community of faith, when we say "I pray..."?