

UP, Prayer, Sunday before Lent, Luke 9:28-45

Introduction (mini overview)

UP(Prayer)

It is the Sunday before Lent. And we have heard an extraordinary story, perhaps one we find hard to imagine.

Before Lent, the recommended gospel is the Transfiguration. In those passages, we not only see the glory that Jesus will have in the revealed consummated kingdom, but in the gospel, we hear Jesus own words, how he prophesies, predicts, his coming death, suffering, being raised. The glorious one will suffer.

And the words spoken from heaven – ‘this is my Son, whom I have chosen, listen to him.’ The glorious one is declared to be God’s Son, the words ‘chosen’ points to the servant songs in Isaiah (which includes the suffering servant words in Isaiah 53), and ‘listen’, points to Moses promise of a true prophet to come who must be listened to. The one who will suffer – the Son of God, the Chosen Servant, and the True Prophet.

One approach to studying the gospels, can be compare the parallel versions of the passage. Often Mark, Matthew and Luke are very similar – they are called the synoptic gospels, synoptic meaning ‘seen together’. So it can be helpful to compare where there are insertions or exclusions and wonder – what is Luke trying to teach us by excluding that, or including that.

Luke says Jesus went up a mountain. But unlike Matthew and Mark, he says *why* he went up: to pray. A deliberate teaching point for us to see... So as we focus upon our Core Values, of Up, In, Out, the transfiguration points us to UP.

Jesus and Prayer.

It has been said, 'that a religious person is most truly himself in his private prayers' (mentioned in Dunn, Spirit, p.15).

For Jesus, it is clear from his own teaching and his own practice, that prayer was important to Jesus. We see the value he placed on prayer placed across all four gospels.

Let's do a brief overview...

Mark 11 – the temple is valued and declared to be a house of prayer.

Later in the same chapter, his disciples are encouraged in an amazing way to be bold in prayer – 'whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it and you will.'

In Matthew 7 – Sermon on the Mount – and also in Luke 11 – we are exhorted to ask, seek, know, with the confidence of children before their loving Father.

The gift of the Lord's prayer – encouragement how to pray, what to pray for...

In Matthew – again in sermon on the mount – we hear Jesus denounce the abuse of prayer.

In Luke 11, we heard about the friend visiting at night – the invitation to be unashamed, upfront about our prayers. To

be persistent in our praying – as Jesus shares the story of the persistent widow.

Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, as the greatest dangers were about to be faced, Jesus told his followers: ‘pray that you will not fall into temptation.’

**“Since Jesus encouraged his disciples so emphatically to avail themselves of prayer, it can hardly be doubted that prayer was at the basis of his own relationship with God.”
(James Dunn).**

But he didn’t only teach it. He practiced it. He did it, Luke shares. In his gospel, there are 9 references.

Luke 3 – he is praying after his baptism, as he does so, heaven is opened, the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and the heavenly voice is heard: this is my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.’

Luke 5 – as Jesus ministry becomes increasingly busy, what did he do, he prioritized prayer: “The news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed... but Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed’.

When he comes to choose his 12 apostles, Luke 6 – Jesus went up to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.”

In Luke 9 – just before this reading, it says, ‘Jesus was praying in private, and his disciples were with him. He asked them, Who do the crowds say I am?’

Luke 11 – it says: one day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When one of his disciples said to him. 'Lord teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'

Luke 22 – in the Last Supper, Jesus tells Peter: 'Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you Simon that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.'

Later in Luke 22, we read, the prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane.

When we consider Jesus teaching and encouragement on prayer, and his own practice of it, 'we can be confident that Jesus turning to prayer in Gethsemane was an action born of habit as much as anything. It was not the despairing cry for help of a man unaccustomed to prayer, clutching at any straw. It was rather the action of one whom had always found strength in prayer, now desperately searching for that same strength through the usual channel.' Dunn, p20.

And on the cross, we hear Jesus prayers for the ones mocking him
'Father, forgive them they know not what they are doing.'

And his final prayer 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.;

To these prayers on the cross, Matthew and Mark record an extra prayer – the prayer of desolation, My God My God why have you forsaken. Unlike his baptism and unlike the

Transfiguration, there is no voice in response, heaven is silent...

Jesus in Mark and Luke, share how Jesus consistently liked to get away, to be alone in his prayer, either in the desert regions, or on a mountain, away from the crowds. Sometimes he went off very early in the morning, sometimes he spent much or all of the night in prayer.

Luke shows Jesus praying at important times – moments of great importance or decision. His baptism, the choosing of the 12, the right time to ask ‘who do the crowds and who do you say I am’, the transfiguration, and in the garden of Gethsemane. We can say ‘prayer was Jesus regular response to situations of crisis and decision.’ Dunn, p.21

He went up the mountain to pray, and on this occasion he deliberately took James, John, Peter with him.

Unanswered Prayer

Did Jesus know all that would take place. Did he expect the meeting with Moses and Elijah? Did he expect the voice and cloud, which spoke to Peter, James, John?

When Peter and the others saw Moses and Elijah. What did they think?

Was it about Moses – the giver of the Law – and Elijah – one of the great prophets – so how the law and prophets pointed to Jesus.

Could it be location – both Elijah and Moses had significantly encounters with God again and here they met the Messiah.

Moses and Elijah both had strange departures from this world – Elijah taken to heaven; Moses died but was buried by the Lord, and no one knew where his body was buried.

But as we are focusing on prayer, Moses and Elijah. Men of prayer. Moses a model of intercession, pleading for Hebrews as they have turned to create and worship the golden calf. God listened. Responded. The nation was not wiped out. Elijah described as an example prayer person – the prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective.

Yet interesting, both these men of prayer also experienced unanswered prayer. Moses asks God that he could enter the land, but God said no. Elijah prayed he would die – and that prayer, was not answered as the angel provided food for him and he continued to Mt Sinai. Ultimately, actually as someone said to me, that prayer was never answered – he did not die but was taken to heaven. We may see and understand the reasons why God said no to these requests. But not everything they prayed, God said yes to...

All of us have experienced unanswered prayer. Some times we have worked through it. Maybe later we are glad that prayer was not answered. Maybe we were praying with wrong motives etc. But for other matters, it can be part of our walk with the Lord that we have not really sorted out yet. We kind of keep ourselves spiritually busy and try not to think about it.

Over Lent, on Sundays, we are going to focus on the topic of Unanswered Prayer. We will begin on the second Sunday of Lent and go right up to Easter. The main ideas will follow

some teaching material called 'Prayer Course II – God on Mute.' A book by Pete Greig and resources developed by the 24-7 prayer movement. Our life groups from mid March will be covering these 5 sessions, over the following two months or so. And for us as a church, to prayerfully engage with this material, I would like to suggest we follow a daily devotional which begins on March 2nd – Ash Wednesday. It will go out by mail on Tuesday. Across the coming 40 days, a devotional, and a model of prayer, to help us reflect upon, and if need be, to move forward in healing on this topic.

For some of us, unanswered prayer may have become a blockage in our relationship with God... for some of us, to focus on unanswered prayer will help us, as we seek to be along side friends loved ones who struggle; for others, this focus on unanswered prayer, will help us as we talk with non-believers, for this topic of unanswered prayer and the connected question of suffering often turns up.

Hearing God's voice.

A cloud envelops them and God speaks.

This was the first time, Peter, James and John heard God speak. Years later, Peter shares this experience 'we were eye witnesses of his majesty, for he received honour and glory, from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory... we ourselves heard this voice when we were with him on the sacred mountain.'

To hear God's voice. Soren Kierkegaard said once: " a man prayed and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until he realized that prayer is listening.' What an experience. They go up the mountain.

They see and hear Jesus pray, and they catch a vision of the heavenly realm – Moses and Elijah – a vision like the days of old, such as Ezekiel or Daniel may have had in their eyes. And there is more – they heard from God, words they remembered years later.

Pete Grieg says: “ Prayer is a living conversation with a loving God, which means we must listen as well as talk.” So briefly – in what ways can God speak.

We hear God in the Bible

We hear God in dreams and visions

We hear God in counsel and wise advice of others

We hear God in personal reflection

We hear God when we take action

We hear God in the Bible – the primary source of revelation from God and the ultimate authority by which we weigh all other words. I think to learn about God from the bible needs our study. To listen to God through the bible needs time and prayerful meditation. So as someone said: it is important we see the bible as not only a book to be studied, but also ‘ scripture is God’s way of initiating a conversation ; prayer is our response.’ The bible is a book not just to be read through, but prayed through.

How can this work. Well you come to a portion of the bible, read it slowly, meditatively, not skim reading, notice what is there – the odd bits, the bits you do not often think about. And the verses, words, that catch your attention, bring these thoughts to God – they may be questions, they may be joys... what is going on in your head, may be God speaking. The people who come to mind as you chew on that verse or

paragraph; the situation in your life from years ago, this passage draws out etc...

So we study the word – but we are also to pray through the bible.

We hear God in dreams and visions, the supernatural we could say. My own calling to work as a missionary with OM was – happened, as I walked back into my study bedroom to prepare for a final law exam – and two letters jumped into my brain – OM. I had had a shock that weekend and learned a Christian post I was applying for, I was turned down. Some friends prayed with me, others were praying for me. And that night, OM burst in, and didn't leave. At times, it can be like what Peter etc experienced, it comes out of the blue. But dreams, visions etc are subjective and they need to be tested, especially if directional, via scripture, common sense and also wise counsel. In my own case, I talked to a wise friend, Rob, about those letters; also the organization themselves had an appointment process so it would not hinge on my decision; but when they accepted me as a missionary, I was happy to go immediately; the interview staff could discern God's leading but felt a delay was wise – so I went 4 months later...

Hearing God in counsel and wise advice.

I think Pete Grieg hits the nail on the head: 'I'm convinced that the main gift God wants to give some Christians is common sense. It is no less spiritual to seek godly advice than to receive a supernatural dream or an angelic visitation.' God may speak through the supernatural, or he may remain silent, but he desires to speak through the more ordinary – biblical reflection, conversations with friends, and the counsel of those we trust.

Hearing God through personal reflection.

Do we miss the voice of God not because it is too strange but because it is too familiar? We expect God to speak as Peter experienced it – the feeling – the cloud – the tone, the noise, the words – clear, crystal, no mistaking what he means. I wonder what Elijah would have told Peter if he had hung around - it isn't always like that – let me tell you once. Elijah came to a mountain – he was looking for answers, help. The wind came, the lord was not in it, the fire came, but the lord was not in it, the earthquake came and he was not in it, but then there was a gentle whisper – or 'sheer silence' it can be translated. The quiet. Yet Elijah knew. The gentle whisper of God, can be the idea, the mental impression after or in a time of prayer. Dallas Willard shares that, what helps him listen to God, is after a time of prayer, seeking God's will / direction, he goes off and does something mundane, ordinary, where his mind is on something completely else, a run, walk the dog. And he has found, enough times, that in such times, God speaks.

Two tests for an idea: Is this like Jesus? Would the resulting action – if I did it – reflect Jesus character or purpose. What is the worst that can happen, if I get this wrong? So a person's name comes to mind. You do not know why. What is the worst – you make contact, and well, just a nice chat. Or maybe you were the right person?

Hearing God through action.

Simply, we may want to know the whole plan. But God may be shining only enough light on the first step. And as we take it, then more is shone etc. We move forward – we act – and then we hear again. Think of Paul – Acts 16 – his heart is to bring the gospel across Turkey. He goes north – the answer is

no. So he takes action – then the Spirit speaks. He goes west – and again the Spirit says no. He can only go NW unless he goes back. He arrives at Troas. And there, God breaks in – a dream – the Macedonian man – come across and help us.

Hearing God, we all are different and we are in different seasons.

Conclusion

So from Luke 9

Jesus commitment to prayer

Unanswered prayer.

Hearing from God

Shall we pray...

Holy God,

we see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ:

may we reflect his life in word and deed,

help us to imitate his life of prayer,

help us in those places of our lives where unanswered prayers for us

have become a blockage or barrier or where they hold so much pain for us;

open our ears and teach us to hear your voice,

that we, our church, and all the world may know his power to change and save.

This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord.