

# Prayer in the Spirit

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*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2019 by the vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.*

*Romans 8: 22 – 27; John 16:12-15*

We come to the third in our series of five talks on prayer, falling appropriately today on Trinity Sunday, and one of the recurring themes that's already emerging in this series is the importance of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

Praying without the help of the Holy Spirit is a bit like the incident recorded in Stephen Pile's book of heroic failures, a collection of funny anecdotes about all kinds of failed situations, and under the heading 'The Worst Save' he says, "This honour falls to Signor Isidore Irandir, goalkeeper of the Brazilian team Rio Preto in the 1980s who let in a goal after three seconds from the kick off in the match between Rio Preto and Corinthians in the Bahia Stadium. The ball was passed to Roberto Riverlino, who scored instantly with a left foot drive from the halfway line. The ball sailed past the ear of Signor Irandir while he was still on his knees finishing pre-match prayers in the goal mouth."

Praying without the Holy Spirit is a bit like that. It inevitably means we are inattentive, wrapped up in ourselves, and not noticing what's going on in the world around us. And perhaps this is how the world sees prayer, as a distraction from the real world. Perhaps this is how the church can seem, wrapped up in our own piety, whilst the world cries out for action. Whereas the work of the spirit is to guide us, according to Jesus, into all the truth, as we heard in our Gospel reading. That surely means opening us up to the realities of God, the world, and our own hearts.

Praying in the Spirit will make us more sensitive, more aware, more attentive, and better able to listen to what is really going on and to discern what is really true. For John, in his gospel, truth has to do with the person of Jesus: it's Jesus who says, "I am the way, the truth and the life," and who also says before Pontius Pilot, "Everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice." So it is in the person of Jesus that we encounter God; that

we encounter pure love; that we see what it means to be authentically human. And that, I think, is what it means to say that Jesus is the truth. And the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, pointing us to Jesus, deepening our desire for Jesus, making us more aware of his love, and strengthening and equipping us to live as the followers of Jesus, and that includes our desire to pray to Jesus. And that I think is what our Lord means when he says, "When the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth".

So prayer has this Trinitarian shape: the Spirit points us to Jesus, who in turn points us to the Father. And the Ministry of the Holy Spirit takes a number of different forms, of which prayer is an important part. In the most general sense, it is the Holy Spirit who holds the universe together. He is active in creation. The fact that the world has some pattern and order to it and doesn't collapse into random chaos, is because the Holy Spirit is sustaining it, moment by moment. And the fact that human beings can gain some insight into and knowledge of the wonders of the universe, through reason and scientific knowledge, is because the Holy Spirit makes possible some degree of correspondence between our minds and the mind of the Creator.

It is also the Holy Spirit who gives us a sense of being fully alive, where there is a sense of good and evil, of right and wrong shared across different cultures and communities - that is the work of the Holy Spirit, helping us to discern the things that make for the good life. So wherever people show the fruits of the spirit in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, whatever their religion or cultural background - that's the work of the Holy Spirit. And wherever people experience awe and wonder, when they experience a moment of inspiration or creativity, for example as in beautiful music, when there is a joy that moves us to tears and a sense of connection that makes us forgetful of ourselves and open to others - that's the work of the Holy Spirit as well. And we experience the work of the Spirit most profoundly in prayer, when we are consciously and deliberately seeking to open ourselves up to God.

Our first reading this morning suggests that it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the desire to pray, and who helps us to pray when we do not know how. It's the Spirit who bridges the gap between how we are now and how we want to be, which is also the gap between earth and heaven, and between time and eternity. So prayer isn't separate

from the rest of life, it's part of our universal experience, the glue holding all things together, because it's part of the work of the Holy Spirit. This comes out in the first reading when St. Paul uses the language of 'groaning' to describe the work of the Spirit. There is 'groaning' in the sense of labour pains, that the groans that go with the arrival of new life. And so all of creation groans in labour, longing for freedom from death and decay. That's a kind of prayer, that groaning, and Paul says not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly whilst we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. And so all of humanity groans in the Spirit, longing to be free from suffering; to be free from old age and decay; longing to be free from greed and selfishness; injustice and depression: that groaning, that longing is the experience of prayer. And then Paul says the Spirit helps us in our weakness. If we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints: that is, all the church, according to the will of God. I find that a wonderfully encouraging passage: just as Jesus is seated at the right hand of God interceding for the world, so the Spirit also intercedes on our behalf and in our own hearts.

So when we pray we don't pray in our own strength, but the Spirit prays through us. When we pray, the Spirit is already there ahead of us, so all we're doing is joining in with him. When the whole church prays and offers worship, we're not initiating anything but simply trying to catch up with what the Spirit is doing all the time, which is why prayer, before it's anything else, is about listening. If it's the Spirit who prays in us, we have to listen to the Spirit before we can join in. And the Spirit will draw us to Jesus, and open us to his presence and his will of love, for us and for the world. And because prayer is about listening to the Spirit and joining in, it isn't limited to Sunday mornings or ten minutes before breakfast: I believe it's really important to have a pattern of regular set times for prayer, and if you don't have that personal daily discipline, may I encourage you to try and develop it, because without it our knowledge of God gets thin and superficial. But the aim of a daily discipline of prayer is to make us more sensitive to the Spirit generally throughout our lives: so that we can pray at all times, practising how to live our lives more consciously in the presence of God at every moment: learning how

to become more responsive to the Spirit in every situation with every person we meet, so that the implicit prayers of our hearts can be explicitly directed to God in Christ.

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all the truth, so let us pray for the Holy Spirit: let's listen to the groaning of the Spirit in our hearts, in the church and in the world, so that we can pray according to the truth, guided by the Spirit; let's encourage each other in prayer, in our house groups, in our Sunday worship, in our conversations. Prayer isn't irrelevant to the world, it's the stuff of life, it's what we were made for, it's one of the most rewarding and satisfying things we can do. But the human heart wants to turn away from God as much as it seeks God, and so we're very good at putting off prayer and distracting ourselves with more trivial things. So we need to pray for the help of the Holy Spirit, asking the Spirit to pray for us, with us, to encourage and guide us and draw us towards Jesus. The Spirit of Truth will guide you into all truth. Praying in the Spirit therefore connects us to the wider reality of the world and the God who made it and loves it.

And on this Trinity Sunday we are reminded that the work of the Spirit is to draw us to Jesus and so into the deeper life of the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And an essential part of our response to that, is to pray: attentively; compassionately; hopefully. Pray for the Spirit to help you to pray, and so may your prayer life become more than a daily discipline, and increasingly, a central part of who you are.