

Sermon preached at Gisborne – 7 February 2021

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! Help us now to hear and obey what you say to us today. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Mark 1:29-39; Isaiah 40:21-31

Praying God

The Isaiah 40:21 reads, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?”

The first thing we notice here is that God speaks first from the beginning, not the other way around. In this verse, God/a prophet asks four rhetorical questions. They remind the exiles in Babylon about the work of God, which had been known to them through their scriptures, their prophets and their history. The exiles knew that God created the heavens and the earth. They also knew the power of God’s word. For such a powerful God, it may be absurd to say that God also prays to the children of God. We’ll see why it is the case through the reading in Mark. It will also help us understand that our prayer to God is active listening to God. In doing so, we’ll know that proclaiming the good news to the world is a response to this praying God, which will bring healings and salvation in the world.

Praying God in Jesus

We observe the praying God is in Jesus in his preaching and healing ministry. Last week, we heard about Jesus’ exorcism of the man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue. At that time, people in the synagogue failed to recognize who Jesus was as they only paid attention to the exorcism. After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, Jesus went to the home of Simon and Andrew. It was the sabbath, still. But Simon’s mother-in-law was ill. Although any work was prohibited in the sabbath, he always put compassion before the law. When he took her by the hand

and lifted her up, the fever left her, and she began to serve them.¹ As the sabbath ended at sundown, “the whole city” seemed to come to Jesus with their sick and possessed. They encamped at the door until Jesus had exercised his healing power. He must have been exhausted. Yet in the morning, “while it was still very dark”, Jesus slipped out of the house, found a deserted place to pray. A search party was sent to look for Jesus. However, when they eventually found him against their wishes, he decided to go on to the neighbouring towns. For proclaiming the good news there also was what he came out to do.² Here we can see a pause. The praying time gave Jesus a pause between the active work of healing and another preaching tour in Galilee. Jesus’ decision to go on to the neighbouring towns was decided during the prayer as he was listening to God intently. The Gospel stories tell us that as well as healing, casting out demons, and preaching, Jesus was in the habit of going off to a quiet place to pray. He felt this need to be in touch with the Father all the time.

In the New Testament, the word ‘pray’ (*proseuchomai* -προσεύχομαι) exclusively means pray, utter prayers, petition for someone or something.³ In general, prayer in the Bible is the expression of the believer’s experience of God’s presence or the dependence on God. It also constitutes worship in a real sense. Through praise, thanksgiving, lament, and request, believers witness that they live from the goodness of God the Creator and Savior. Their call to God responds to their experience of God’s words and actions. So, prayer is more than an inward, meditative process, and a two-way process. As a response to praying God to us, prayer flows from the human ‘heart,’⁴ expresses itself in speaking, calling, crying, rejoicing, lamenting, and pleading as it involves the entire person. Prayers can be found in other traditions too, but there are fundamental differences between Christian prayers and prayers in other traditions.

¹ Mark 1:31

² Mark 1:38

³ *Proseuche* (προσευχή) is a noun which means prayer, intercession.

⁴ Psalms 33:21; 57:8; Rom 8:27; Gal 4:6; 2 Tim 2:22

In Greek tradition, for example, prayer means supplication to the gods. Nothing should be undertaken without invoking the gods with sacrifice and prayer.⁵ The Greeks believed that true prayer would direct itself toward divine and spiritual things. However, the prayer of the primitive Christian Church was based on the trust in the salvation given by God through Christ. So, prayer supports and strengthens the faith in Christ Jesus. Primitive Christian prayer was modelled on the prayer of Jesus and his salvation work. Just as believers picked up Jesus' cry "Abba", they also learned to pray in the name of Jesus Christ and address God with reference to him.⁶ In so doing, they prayed not from their own power, but rather by the power of God's Spirit dwelling in them.

When we pray to God, we don't need to be anxious concerning the correct language as we sense that the Spirit is at work and inspires within us true prayer.⁷ For the apostle Paul, his primary concern is in intercession, something he does for the churches.⁸ In turn, he also expects the same thing from them.⁹ After all, intercessory prayer is sharing of the struggles that not only the apostle but also all believers have to wage. As seen, the usual widespread goals of prayer, such as attempts to influence the deity or requests for well-being or prosperity have little place in Christian prayer. In short, prayer is an act of intent listening to the praying God who saw everything was very good in the creation and wants us to live in the goodness of life in His love.

Praying God in us

In our story time, we listened to the story titled 'Charlotte's web.' The question was 'How was Wilbur's wish granted?' As heard, Wilbur was lonely, and no one was interested in him. It was nighttime, and Wilbur was too lonely to sleep. He tried to reach others by calling out 'Good night,' but there was just silence. Then a voice answered from the darkness, and it turned out to be Charlotte – a great big spider. Like Wilbur, she was also an outsider in the barn as the other animals didn't like her at all, not to mention becoming her friends. But Wilbur

⁵ Homer Il. vi.308ff.; viii.236ff.; Plato Ti. 27c

⁶ John 14:13; 15:16; Rom 1:8; Col 3:17

⁷ Romans 8:23

⁸ Romans 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:2

⁹ Romans 15:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:25

saw kindness and beauty in her. For Wilbur, Charlotte was gentle and caring. In the end, Wilbur's special care and friendship for Charlotte had influenced all the other animals. They began to care for Charlotte and Wilbur. So, the answer to the question may be, on that night, Wilbur's desperate cry for the friendship was able to activate the eternal love which had been there all the time, and it also helped Charlotte answer to the call. How do I know about the eternal love? In Genesis 1:13, it reads, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." In this goodness of God, that is love, the wish was granted. But it is not only Wilbur who helped Charlotte. In the full version of Charlotte's web, she was able to save Wilbur from being slaughtered by sending special messages to people through her creatively weaved web.

Mark's gospel and Charlotte's web let us think about the essence of the prayer to God. Once we begin to listen to praying God who wants us to live by love and in his goodness, it enables us to work on God's prayer in the world. Mark presents us with a Jesus who chooses to remain remote but also seeks to stay on the move. He prays in an isolated place and eludes the crowds, but then he goes on to other areas because he understands his purpose as 'proclaiming' about God's kingdom. In Mark, 'proclaiming' or 'preaching' for Jesus goes beyond words and messages. It includes his exorcisms, healings, and legal controversies. In doing so, it makes God's reign or God's kingdom known and observable. Proclaiming has real effects as it delivers people, heals people, restores people to the community, forgives people, and speaks truth to power. As if Wilbur's cry - 'Good night!' was able to wake the eternal love in Charlotte's heart, in the end, praying God is also a proclaiming God, and we are God's children who are working on the same thing as the Father is working. Amen.