

Sunday 23 August 2020
South Yarra Community Baptist Church
Melbourne, Australia
The Right Reverend Te Kitohi Pikaahu
Bishop of Tai Tokerau
7pm (NZ time)

Exodus 19.1-8, 16-25
Psalm 111
Romans 15.14-21
Matthew 7.7-12

"Prayer through a closed door"

Thank you Nathan for your invitation to join with you to share in the magnificent liturgy and worship this evening.

I greet you in all in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

Grace and peace to you from God. May God fill you with truth and joy.

I count this an extreme privilege and joy from my home in the Bay of Islands in the northern part of New Zealand.

I am some distance from Melbourne. But we are only separated by the Tasman Sea. We are joined together albeit by virtual means, in a spirit of unity and fellowship.

In communion with God and with each other, we face together in solidarity the COVID-19 crisis as it continues to impact all of our lives and livelihoods, especially there in Melbourne.

I am imagining that I am sitting or standing in your midst.

May I open with prayer.

Lord God, your steadfast love never ceases and your mercy never comes to an end. With your joy and peace in our hearts and always by your grace, may we serve you in truth and in fidelity, and serve our neighbour with justice, compassion and generosity, living our lives each day in the fullness of your mercy and love which is new every morning. Through Jesus Christ our risen and ascended Lord.

'Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. *Matthew 7.7-8*

Many years ago as a student in the UK, during the Christmas Holiday Break, I went to catch a bus from Harcourt Hill into Oxford.

It happened to be the day before Christmas Eve. It was getting dark and very cold. I wanted to go do my grocery shopping.

I was a bit late. I had to run to catch the bus. As I approached the front of the bus, the driver had already closed the door. He obviously didn't see me approaching the bus. (I could run faster in those days, still not fast enough).

I caught the eye of the driver. He saw me. He looked me up and down. He stared at me through the glass door - the **closed** glass door - and made a gesture to me with his hands. (He did this - clasp his hands together as if he was praying).

I didn't do what he wanted me, to do. I must have given one of my stern Maori looks. He opened the door wide and said, "Your prayer worked!"

"Yes it did," I gleefully remarked back.

"For your information, I pray every day; morning and night.

I prayed that I would come across someone with a fine Christian heart. I prayed that a person with a generous Christian spirit would appear. It's you! Praise God!"

I don't think he appreciated me very much. I didn't know if he was a Christian. I didn't ask. He looked very glum and sped away before I said another word.

I suppose I hit a raw nerve with him. Well my view then was, he started it.

I probably sounded cheeky, which I was, but I was also deadly serious.

Serious, because I know the power of prayer.

I know in my own life what can happen when I pray.

I have seen miracles and wonders happen during and following prayer.

I wanted to tell him about the power of prayer on the Day of Pentecost.

I resisted the temptation to mention St Augustine and his rule of prayer:

“we need not **pray** for what we need because God already knows what we need before we even ask. Instead, we ought to **pray**, to increase our desire for God, and so that we might be able to receive what God is preparing to give us. If God is our greatest love, and if knowing and pleasing God is our highest pleasure, then we’ll be transformed both in what (we pray) and how we pray.

I refrained from telling him about Archbishop Michael Ramsey especially his teaching on prayer at the heart of the life of a Christian.

St Francis and Mother Teresa even came to mind as great examples of a life of prayer.

I could have given him a short theological lesson on the importance of prayer.

I should have said, ‘you hold the power in your hands on this bus to allow my request and permit me to board, but you don’t have the power to grant my prayer.

There’s a big difference it?

In any case I should have just given him an exposition of the words of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and be done with it.

Anyway, I did none of it.

After all it was two days before Christmas, and I should have thankful, praising God that I didn’t have to walk.

That’s where we are today in this evening’s gospel, a portion of the Sermon on the Mount.

It begins with Jesus **seeing the** crowds, **going up** the mountain, and **sitting down** to teach.

Seeing the people, **going** up to be seen, and **sitting** down to be heard.

There is a lot of movement before it all starts.

What a powerful image of Jesus’ procession before the crowd, before he gathers them, and before he imparts his power upon the people.

His power is in his teaching, his power in his words, his power in his instructions, his power is in his wisdom, his power is in his warning to the people.

His power, **now their power** is in his blessing of the people – who like him are sitting down to listen, sitting down to receive, sitting down to be aware of and to respect each other, sitting down to learn, sitting down to be blessed.

And it ends with the crowds being **astounded** with what they had heard, what they had witnessed, what they had seen, what they had felt, saying 'his **teaching** was not like that of the scribes, but as one with **authority**.'

At the very centre of the Sermon on the Mount are Jesus' words on how we are to pray:

'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. *Matthew 6.5-6*

For the last 18 days, I have been sitting and praying at the bedside of an elderly priest.

He was not expected to live beyond the 6th of August, to see the Feast of the Transfiguration. I anointed him that day in preparation for death.

His sons, daughters-in-law, his grandchildren and extended family (when I say that for a Maori that is around a hundred people – a relatively average family).

They have all been sitting and praying, watching and praying, waiting and praying, talking and praying, singing and praying.

Sitting, watching, waiting, talking, singing, and praying.

As you will note: mostly praying. That praying has been fervent prayer - earnest prayer.

I said a mass with them today at the hospital.

Some are praying for recovery from the illness.

Some have accepted that death may be inevitable.

Some have recognised that death might be imminent.

Some are praying for relief from pain and anxiety.

Some are praying for God's will to be done.

Everyone though, at the same time, are united in giving thanks for God's goodness, for God's mercy, for God's grace and for God's love, not just for our brother in the priesthood, but for the whole family.

Prayer at the moment for them is in the moment.

Prayer for strength, for comfort, for peace, for relief, for hope.

Each member is fully aware of Jesus' words:

'Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

Ask, ask, and keep asking, don't give up.

Seek, seek and keep seeking, don't give in.

Knock, knock and keep knocking, don't stop.

Of course, no one believes that we will be given everything we ask for.

No one expects that we will find everything we seek.

No one presumes that every door we knock on will be opened when we want it.

That is why we must never give up, asking, seeking, knocking.

That is why we must never give in, asking, seeking, knocking.

That is why we must never stop from asking, seeking, knocking.

What we ask for will only be given when ask knowing first that we are close enough to the heart of God before we ask.

What we seek can only be found when we are aware that we are close enough to the mind of God before we seek for anything.

When we knock it will only be answered when we are assured that we are close enough to the will of God before we knock on anything.

This is a clear message from Jesus to the crowd to persevere - to persevere for what is right and what is good.

This is the strongest possible message from Jesus to the crowd to never give up - never give up on our quest for the promise of life - life in all its abundance.

This is the most powerful message from Jesus to the crowd to always hold on to hope - to hope for the fulfilment of God's will and purpose for our lives, for the people of God.

The hope in knowing and the assurance of anticipated joy.

What this means is that we ought to know what is right, fair and proper that we ought to ask for.

We should know what is right, fair and proper that we should seek.

We must know what is right, fair and proper to know when and where to knock. Even before we knock on the doors of the bus.

May I conclude with a Maori blessing.

Kia hora te marino.

Kia whakapapa pounamu te moana.

Kia tere te karohirohi i mua i to huarahi.

May peace be widespread.

May the sea glisten like the greenstone.

May the shimmer of light dance before your path.

And to add the words of the psalmist:

May God bless your coming in, and your going out,
from this day forth and forever more.

Amen.