

What About Prayer?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 July 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Dr Val Webb

Pentecost 10C

**Psalm 139: 7-12; Luke 11: 1-13; Contemporary Reading: *Out of the Depths*
by Kathy Galloway in *Celebrating Women***

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Today's lectionary reading from the gospel is the Lord's Prayer, the most common public prayer in the Christian tradition. Interestingly, however, it arose from a discussion against praying in public. Jewish men were expected to pray three times daily, but here, Jesus is portrayed as encouraging his disciples to pray in private. "*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them,*" the chapter begins, and goes on to condemn both those who give charity in a very public way and those who "*love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at street corners, so that they may be seen by others*" (Matthew 6: 5).

Jesus also criticizes long-winded public prayers - "*heaping up empty phrases*" to be "*heard because of their many words*" (6: 7) - a caution not always heeded by some who pray in public today! Author Frankie Schaeffer described the lengthy informational family prayers in his childhood home (many of us can probably remember such prayers!): "*Praying out loud was ... a way of advancing one's case, the advantage being that no one dared interrupt you or argue back ... it was a way to tell God to behave ... to remind God of his or her "many promises" so God wouldn't do anything odd or theologically inconsistent, or let the Divine attention wander for a minute or forget what was expected of him or her.*" Since Schaeffer's very devout mother had the stamina to literally "*pray without ceasing,*" Schaeffer often wondered "*if God ever tried to duck out of the room*" on seeing his mother coming ... "

Instead, Jesus said, when you pray, "*go into your room and shut the door and pray to [God] who is in secret; and [God] who sees in secret will reward you*" (6: 6). The Lord's Prayer, with its parallels in Jewish worship in Jesus' time¹, answered the disciples' request, "*Lord, teach us to pray*".

What is prayer and what does it mean for you? There are thousands of books written on this, as if there can be a definitive answer – prayer as penitence, praise, petition, meditation, contemplation, liturgy, stream of thought, audible words or silence. It is as slippery as finding the lost soap in a bathtub of water.

Prayer usually assumes, however, two things - one - access to God and - two the expectation of a response. And, here I use God as a human three letter symbol to talk about whatever we see as the mystery. But this invites a previous question – who or what is God, and how do you think God responds? Our understanding of prayer, and our expectations from it, depend on how we imagine God. As I have said many times, our images of God matter because they determine how we live our lives and whether we can believe in a God at all.

Much of our inherited religious art, hymns and liturgy describe God as an ancient male in high heaven receiving billions of prayers a minute, like operating a telephone exchange – you know the old ones that you plugged in? Requests to send rain on some; to punish others with plagues; to help one side win a war; to destroy the other side; to save one person from an illness from which most people die; to make some rich and allow others to be poor – you can add to this shopping list. And we certainly can find such a God in scripture – God delivering the Israelites from their enemies in one instance and delivering them to their enemies in the next instance; people miraculously healed or delivered from death; seemingly open-ended promises such as one we heard this morning: “*Ask and you shall receive*” and “*Take delight in the Lord, and God will give you the desires of your heart*”. (Ps. 37: 3-5).

Many Christians today claim these promises as literal guarantees, but is this what really happens in life? Is this the way God has worked in every instance in response to prayers - changing the natural laws of the universe to benefit some and not others? Some people will do theological gymnastics to explain why some prayers are answered and others not, but is this theology more about us putting our new wine into old wineskins – trying to make our contemporary knowledge of the cosmos and the universe fit into ancient images of a God up there in a three tiered universe intervening at whim in the world?

The difficulty with claiming a direct cause-and-effect between prayer and a Divine answer is that it is almost impossible to isolate any event so completely that only prayer could have been responsible. Other things are always in play. People attribute dramatic cancer cures to the volume of faithful prayers, overlooking the physician who accurately diagnosed the problem, the skilled surgeon who operated, the chemotherapist who balanced the amount of drugs and the nursing team who negotiated the pitfalls to recovery. In a stereotypical Irish joke, Paddy was working up a sweat because he had an important meeting and couldn't find a parking space. Looking to heaven, he said, “*Lord, pity me. If you find me a parking place, I will go to Mass every Sunday for the rest of my life and give up my whisky.*” A parking space miraculously appeared. Paddy looked up to heaven again and said, “*Never mind, I've found one.*”

If such prayers are not answered as requested, people have to explain this away - God answered but said no, not yet, or not appropriate, or God saw a bigger picture unavailable on our local channel, or God is testing our faith, or, as the mystic Julian of Norwich explained, *we have not become enough like God to ask what God wills*. Such theology always requires a win-win situation for the God they imagine.

The God that intervenes in the world in response to specific prayers also assumes that God is both all-powerful and all-loving, which raises a big theological question in the face of tragedy. If God is all-powerful and does nothing, is God all-loving; and, if God is all-loving and does nothing, is God all-powerful? I am not going to get into a full theological discussion of theodicy, which is what this dilemma is called and has filled many books over the centuries, but the problem lies with an image of God that no longer fits with current scientific understanding of the universe. This is not to say that science determines everything, but our descriptions of God can no longer fly in the face of what we can know through science.

So, is this the only way to think about God and thus about prayer? I think not, which is why I wrote my latest book “*Testing Tradition and Liberating Theology*”, about which I spoke yesterday, showing how theology – or “*Thinking about God*” - has changed over the centuries and continues to change with new knowledge, contexts and experience. Since anything ever said about God is a metaphor – we choose our words to talk about that mystery.

We need to draw our metaphors from current understandings, rather than leaving God operating in an outdated three tiered universe. Our ever expanding universe with over one hundred billion galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars, is the setting in which we now must talk about God – or mystery.

Consequently, many people today are talking about God within everything, Mind of the universe, Ground of Being, Creativity, Life itself – that which undergirds everything, with us, in us and in the universe. This imagery has beautiful biblical precedents – as was beautifully read from the Psalms. “*Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I go ... to the futherest limits of the sea – even there your hand shall lead me*”. (Ps 139). Paul spoke of God “*in whom we live and move and have our being*”. John’s gospel talks of “*a Comforter who will be with us and a Kingdom of God within us*” (Luke 17: 20-21). A persuasive loving Presence working within everything, rather than an all-powerful God controlling every event from elsewhere. This other image makes us co-creators and is limited by the choices we make. Thus the earlier theological problem – how can God be both all-powerful and all-loving – becomes “*How do our choices limit this empowering, loving Presence – within us and the world?*”

This God imagery also sits better with people who call themselves spiritual not religious, and with many who have left churches but still seek a spiritual dimension or connection. And it changes prayer. Rather than praying to an all-powerful provider to do our will and change the inevitable - which is how the idea of prayer developed in a world where violent weather, illness and tragedy were seen as God’s intervention. In this new imagery, people are turning to meditation and contemplation, seeking union with that deep within us and our planet. As mystic Simone Weil (1909-1943) said, “*Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer ... Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.*” ⁱⁱ

Such prayer is not contrived moments when we sign on: “*Dear God*” and sign off: “*In Jesus’ Name*” to contact the elsewhere God. It is the very breathing of every breath in the knowledge that we are one with the beautiful beating Life of the Cosmos itself. It is simply being alive! This is why many people say they feel most in contact with God in nature, in music and in relational experiences, rather than in a church constricted by someone else’s God language. Frederick Buechner says: “*Everybody prays whether [they think] of it as praying or not. The odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or very bad ... The stammer of pain at somebody else’s pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else’s joy. Whatever words or sounds you use for sighing over your own life. These are all prayers in their way*”. ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, I am not saying you have to think of God in this way that I have described. You will have your own way of imaging the Divine. How we pray and find meaning is very personal. It is not about the right words, the right posture, the right liturgy, the right ritual. It is about being in touch with whatever we see as sacred in life, the sighing over our own lives, of others and our threatened planet. It happens whenever we take breath.

What then of public community prayer? The Lord’s Prayer suggests community with its “*Our Father*” and “*Give us this day our daily bread*” and there is precedence for corporate prayer in both Hebrew and Christian traditions. Praying together binds a community with its past and present and encourages solidarity by expressing the longings of the people - together. Rev. Chris Udy, in a sermon after the 2009 Victorian bushfires, spoke of thousands of emails from across the world offering prayers:

[These people] didn't expect their prayers to put the flames out; they didn't expect their prayers to change the wind; they didn't expect their prayers to save a particular life or to spare a specific building - they were praying to make a connection, to weave a kind of fabric of compassion - they were building a network of attention and concern, and shared sadness -- they also offered an affirmation that even this would pass, and there was hope, and there would be healing, and people would bring good things out of the bad - and if we're looking for God, that's where God was. ^{iv}

If we image God with us and within everything, however - the meaning of Emmanuel – we have to be careful to structure the language and theology of public prayer in ways that celebrate our connectedness, rather than little mini-sermons or doctrinal claims about God that can distract and lead some hearers into uncomfortable territory. This is why some communal silence is helpful, allowing people to be together, yet meditate in their own images. This is a big challenge for churches so traditionally shaped by how public prayer and liturgy should be. You are fortunate in this place to enjoy such inclusivity, openness and invitation in the liturgy and imagery.

Religion scholar Karen Armstrong wrote of her pain as a nun in a convent when she could not pray as was expected of her:

The silence of our days had been designed to enable us to listen to [God]. But [God] had never spoken to me ... Every morning I resolved that this time I would crack it. This time there would be no distractions. I would kneel as intent upon God as my sisters, none of whom seemed to have any difficulties But to my intense distress, I found that I could not keep my mind on God for two minutes Throughout my seven years, I hugged to myself the shameful secret that, unlike the other sisters, I could not pray. And, we were told, without prayer our religious lives were a complete sham ... How could I possibly be a nun? ^v

Karen Armstrong is not alone in this, which is why we need fresh and more open-ended ways to talk about prayer, just as we are developing fresh ways to imagine God. This is the challenge for all of us. I leave you with the both provocative and liberating words of Rev. Felicia Urbanski:

You do not need to "believe in" God, [whatever that means to you] in order to pray. We can all stand in awe before the grandeur and wonder of Life and the mystery of our existence. Just standing there looking at it all is a kind of prayer! ^{vi}

ⁱ Paul J. Achtemeier, gen. ed., *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 575

ⁱⁱ Simone Weil, in Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality: our global quest for a spiritual life* (New York: BlueBridge, 2008), 13

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, quoted in Chandler W. Gilbert, *Seed Pods and Periscopes: stories and reflections about living deeply and living well.* (Jeffrey, NH: Charred Pencil Press, 2008), 63

^{iv} Rev. Chris Udy, Killara Fiveways UCA, Killara, Sydney, from email

^v Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: a memoir* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 58-61

^{vi} Felicia Urbanski, "Prayer: Engaging the Sacred," Unitarian Fellowship in London, Sept. 28, 2008,

<http://www.unitarianfellowshipoflondon.org/FUSept28,2008.pdf>