

Sunday 29
18/10/2015

Mark the Evangelist

James 5:13-20
Psalm 104
Mark 10:35-45

On Prayer

James writes:

“Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”

These are hard verses to hear although, unlike with some scripture passages which make us uncomfortable, this is not because we don't *want* to hear them. Rather, we *do* want to hear and believe such promises, and yet find them hard to accept. Can the prayers of the elders heal us?

Our general experience is that this is not usually the case.

We have ways, of course, of accounting for the failure to receive what we pray for. One way of reconciling the conflict between what James promises and what we experience would be to conclude that our elders aren't any good! Or perhaps someone else in the whole chain of events doesn't have enough faith – maybe the person who is sick. Or perhaps we conclude that “it is not the will of God” that healing be granted.

In the end, after we have responded as we think the text requires and then find that things don't go the way we'd hoped, we easily end up either disbelieving the scripture, or God, or doubting ourselves, or all three. Why pray, when it seems to make no difference in terms of what we thought we were praying for? And so, finally, prayer ends up being our action of last resort. Antibiotics and surgery are much more reliable, and prayer to God is left to fill in those gaps which we can't fill ourselves with all our marvellous technology.

When we pray in this way, even if the desperation makes the prayer most fervent, we actually defeat the purpose we imagine we are fulfilling. *Resorting* to prayer – prayer as a last resort – is to admit defeat in the matter of prayer. Prayer ought not to be something we “resort” to. Rather, it is a way of experiencing the world in the story of Jesus, whether things seem to be going well or seem to be going badly for us.

It is often said that prayer is “talking-to-God”. More strongly, we could say that in prayer we embody the fact that human life is oriented towards God, whether in praise or thanksgiving, or in confession, petition or intercession. Our prayer should be as fervent on the good days as on the bad. For prayer, properly, reflects the type of relationship which should exist between human beings and God.

Yet, this is not a relationship we are not called to *construct*, a bridge we are to build from ourselves to God through spiritual discipline – as important as such discipline is. The proper relationship between God and the human being is what we see in the experiences of Jesus himself. Jesus stands before God as the human being ought; or, to put it differently: he prays as we should pray.

The gospel is that Jesus' prayers are made our own. When we pray, our prayers arise from the desire that the fullness of relationship Jesus experienced with God should indeed become our own – a fullness, we should keep in mind, which was not without troubles and trials of its own. In our petitions and intercessions, we express the desire that Jesus' experience become increasingly our own – a process we began in our baptism.

This challenges too simplistic a reading of James here, as if he gives us a prayer formula to follow for reliable results. If we assume that the effectiveness of our prayers has something to do with our own holiness, or depends on our using the right kind of words, or the right oil in anointing, or depends on the conviction or 'faith' (so-called) we can summon up in ourselves, we forget that the basic truth given in scripture is that God *desires* that the world be healed. We forget that God *has* acted in Jesus for that healing, and continues to act in Christ's Spirit.

Our prayers have their effect in *God's* continual working towards the renewal of creation through the activity of the Spirit, and not in our being particularly good pray-ers. When we pray – whether in thanksgiving or in petition – we are naming a future which God will bring. We begin to reshape our present by living in anticipation of that future restoration. We refuse to allow what we see or experience to be the final word.

James' promise that prayer will heal the sick is not to be read as a stand-alone promise which is true because it is in the Bible. It is to be understood in the context of what prayer is for Christians who have been baptised in Jesus' own experience of God, and so who have begun to see the world with different eyes. We have heard the story about Jesus, and we begin to live in anticipation of that story becoming our own. With James we *can* say that "the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective". The righteous one, however, is not yet any of us, but Christ. Christ's prayers, Christ's standing before God, are what we depend on. When we pray – in thanks, or praise, or confession, or petition or intercession – we tell the wondrous story of the Christ who died for us, is risen for us, and who prays for us. Within what seems to many to be the clunky old doctrine of the Trinity is the truth of the gospel: the life of the Jesus the Son in the heart of God is a life ever *for us*.

God offers this "for us" as the final "yes" to our prayers, even before we utter them. Not "the prayer of the elders" so much as the prayer which is Christ himself is what we are to offer up to God, for he is the prayer God offers us to pray. To address God with the word "Jesus" is say all that needs to be said, for it is the heart of all our prayers.

Perhaps all this feels like a side-stepping of the issue – a clever theological avoidance of the problem of prayer and God's apparent deafening silence. The answer to this would take more time than we have here, but would start with questions like these: Where do we learn to pray? Do we know how to pray? And if not, do not texts like the one we have from James today teach us what needs to be done? It is usually what we "know" about prayer and the apparent unhelpfulness of James (and others) which causes our crisis about prayer in the first place.

I remember the first time it was suggested to me that it is not our prayers but the prayers of Christ which are central to the Christian practice of prayer. It was a passing remark in a preface to the Lord's Prayer in Queen's chapel, maybe 25 years ago. You hear that particular teaching from me each week as I preface our praying of the Lord's Prayer each week with words to the effect of: "...in confidence, we join our prayers to those of Jesus, praying as he taught us..."

Easily said, but not easily embraced, lived. This ought not to surprise us, and it is why we return here each week, why we gather again and again around the table. It is no small thing to become what we eat – the Body of Christ – and so no simple thing to pray as Jesus once prayed, and continues to pray. We are his Body in a passing, fleeting, promissory way. So too are our prayers passingly Christ's own. Yet we believe that what we *now* see in this fleeting fashion – “as if through a glass darkly” – we *will* see established firmly, and that the way our prayers are *now* indistinct echoes of Christ's own *will* be left behind as they are brought into full harmony with his.

In the meantime we have not theological cleverness to set aside difficult work and questions but the call to live a life which anticipates this fulfilment. We are to work as if this fulfilment depended on us – including the work of prayer – and we are to pray, for its fulfilment does not depend on us. This prayer is the one which, so to speak, reminds God of Jesus and his work and prayer, and of the promise that these will be ours.

This is how we are to pray, and what we are learning as we gather here week after week, or in the quiet of the morning in our homes, or in the midst of a hectic day when God catches our attention again. To repeat my almost-conclusion from a few moments ago: to address God with the word “Jesus” is say all that needs to be said, for this word – given by God as our word to him – is the heart of all our prayers.

May God's people find themselves ever more at peace with this heart, beating for life, through death, to life again – strength and comfort enough in their tribulations and their joys. Amen.
