Talk for 21st February Psalm 25:1-9 Mark 1:9-14 by revd Susan

This morning I want to talk about prayer because a) it is how we grow our relationship with God, and it brings us into his presence.

b) it gets us through and c) we are called to bless and pray for others – sometimes prayer is the only way we can love and serve our neighbour.

But first a little background on our readings: our gospel reading recounts Jesus’ baptism, the heavens opening and the spirit descending on him like a dove. The baptism is found in all 4 gospels; in Luke it is just 2 verses, but they mention the heavens opening and the dove, so I am thinking that these 2 points are very important.

Some Christians say its not worth reading the Old Testament because that was before Jesus came, and its all different now, we don’t need to worry about the God of Old Testament anymore. But if Jesus quoted it then surely, we should know it too. Much of the New Testament only makes sense in the light of the old. Take for instance verse 10 of Mark’s gospel:

***10 just as he (Jesus) was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart,***

In Isaiah 64 verse 1, the prophet cries out ***, O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—***

Well, here we have the heavens opening and Jesus, God’s son, here on earth. The second part of that verse; ***and the Spirit descends like a dove on him.***

A reminder perhaps of the dove in the story of the flood.

And even the voice of God saying, ***“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*** Echoes the creation story; ***God saw all he made and said it was very good.***

There are other connections between the old and new testaments we could make but that would be self- indulgent on my part!

So then, here is Jesus filled with the Spirit, who now leads him into the wilderness. Why? Well, I believe it is in the wilderness or desert experiences where our calling is tested, and, if we keep our focus on God and his faithfulness, our faith is strengthened for the next part of our journey of faith. Jesus was no different – he was fully human as well as divine.

Let’s turn out attention to the psalm, Walter Brueggemann, the old testament scholar, says that psalm 25 demonstrates the pattern of the whole psalter, that is all the psalms, because it moves from Israel’s unquestioning obedience to praise, but, in between, come suffering and hope.

I won’t say anymore about that as I don’t want to spoil the lent course.

However, there is a good reason why we are turning our attention to the psalms during lent – they are a fantastic source of honesty, encouragement, and prayer.

There has possibly never been a time, certainly during my lifetime, when prayer and faith were more needed.

The psalmist here is praying, and **the prayer enables the psalmist to see the worlds injustice and violence in the light of his past experiences of God’s steadfast love, or as Walter puts it, God’s tenacious solidarity with us.**

When we feel alone it is so hard to carry on when times are tough, when we feel that someone is standing with us, it’s a little easier, but, **when we know** **that God stands in solidarity with us, we can conquer the darkness with his light.**

This pandemic is awful, its deadly and wearing, the restrictions on us can be depressing, we miss our friends and family, many of us have times of feeling very low and tired but, together with God, we have got this.

The way through this is the same as any other trauma, illness or tragedy, and it is prayer. So, I just want to touch on a few different ways we can pray.

**The first type of prayer I want to talk about is lament**: lament means a passionate expression of grief or sorrow; we certainly find that in the psalms.

 I think some people are uncomfortable with this type of prayer, because we might feel it is self-pity. But I believe to keep ourselves both healthy mentally and emotionally, we need to acknowledge our pain somewhere, and what better place is there to take it, than in prayer to God.

The psalms are a great place to find all sorts of prayer, psalm 88 is a great example, just listen to a few of the verses;

***O Lord, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
2let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.***

***I am like those who have no help, 5like those forsaken among the dead,***

***You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them.***

And our psalm, ***do not let me be put to shame: do not let my enemies exult over me.***

***Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;***

Then we can hear the psalmist begin to turn his heart and mind away from his troubles, to God,

***4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.***

***5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.***

The second type of prayer is repentance and we can use verses from the psalms for this too; psalm 51:

***Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;***

***according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.***

***2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.***

***Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and rightspirit within me.***

When I feel true repentance it usually comes with tears! But and **this is** **important,** God’s Spirit never makes us feel ashamed;– that comes from ourselves, other people, or our enemy.

**Then there are prayers of Thanksgiving:** I think this is where singing comes in handy: we can sing a hymn of thanks and praise, or you can sing a new song to the Lord, giving him thanks for his blessings. Of course, you don’t have to sing, you can just speak, or you can just dance for joy!

**Then we have Intercessory prayer** – or ‘standing in the gap’. Intercessory comes from intercede, to intervene on behalf of another.

Standing in the gap is sometimes used because some intercessory prayer is just that – standing in the gap between God and someone, perhaps someone who does not know God or even believe. It might involve standing in someone else’ shoes for a while – not physically of course, but, on occasions it feels like it, because God’s Holy Spirit sometimes allows us to feel what the other person is feeling, and it can be painful.

Intercessory prayer can be in words or silence, it is sometimes more like a groaning within especially when we simply don’t have the words… I find praying in tongues really helpful here because it helps me to get a sense of what God might be doing or want to do.

Finally, as it is the first Sunday of lent, a word about fasting:

Fasting does not have to be about abstaining from all food, it can be a partial fast – which might mean giving up something we really enjoy; meat, watching T.V., staying off social media….

I believe fasting is a prayer, because it concentrates the mind, it reminds us of our weaknesses, and we might spend more time in prayer because of it.

People often give up something in Lent, or in more recent years we have been encouraged to take something up – reading, taking part in a lent course or challenge, more prayer, giving financially. I think it is something we can talk to God about and see if we get a sense of what he might be asking of us.

Lent is a good time to start a new habit of prayer, why not try a different way of praying this year….