

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 13th September 2020

I suppose many of us here learned to pray when we were very young. It is one of my earliest memories of bedtime – once we were under the blankets, my Mother would then say to us to clasp our hands and close our eyes.

“This night as I lay down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. God bless Mummy and Daddy and Granny and Grandpa and Auntie May; and Mrs Smith who isn’t well. And, o yes, God, if you could keep my wee brother out of my hair for just one more day, I would really appreciate it. Amen.”

We learned to pray at the close of day.

Nowadays, after breakfast, I begin my day with prayer, asking God to bless all the folk I will encounter during the course of the day, and a blessing upon each one.

And just before I switch off the bedside light, I say quietly, “Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit.”

I have a prayer list which changes from day to day!

I wonder how many of us do as Paul exhorts us in his letter to the Ephesians, where he writes, “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.”

If this sounds familiar, it is because it is a theme that St Paul strikes elsewhere as well. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, he says, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Pray without ceasing – that is quite an undertaking.

Away back in the early years of the 20th century, there was a wonderful minister in Glasgow, the Very Revd Dr George H Morrison, who was Minister of Wellington Church on University Avenue. Dr Morrison was a renowned preacher and they came from all parts of the city to hear him on a Sunday morning, and indeed, so long was the queue outside the Church for the evening service, that often some folk didn’t get in!

And we learn that as Dr Morrison went about his daily work, visiting his people in all their needs, as he was sitting on the tram, he would notice members of his congregation in the street, going about their business, and he would pray quite simply, “God bless Mrs Smith; God bless Mr Jones!”

Prayer was part of his daily routine. It should be part of ours as well. Prayer is the oxygen of every Christian life. Just think of how often we are told in the Gospels of Jesus getting up early, then going away to a quiet spot to commune with His Heavenly Father. That should be our pattern as well.

Most of us, I suspect, pray irregularly. Maybe we give thanks in the morning or at night before we sleep. Or maybe we say a prayer when we come into Church or when we are going to visit the doctor in his surgery or when we are about to sit an exam.

I have watched some footballers on television make the sign of the cross - and from what I know about footballers, boy, do they need it!

I know a lawyer who says he prays before he goes into court to defend a client, because in some cases that is about all he had going for him!

Sunday by Sunday, in our worship, we say our prayers, thanking God for all His goodness, asking His pardon for our waywardness and sins, praying for the sick, those in need, those who are bereaved; praying for all sorts of people and all sorts of situations.

Prayer is an ever open door that no one can shut, and from the early Christian centuries, the followers of Jesus were a praying people – it was through prayer that revival came; it was through prayer that the Gospel was spread; it was through prayer that the Church grew in faith and in numbers.

Several years ago now, the Very Reverend Professor James S Stewart used to tell his students for the Ministry at Edinburgh University, that when they go to a new church, they should make a point of taking their congregational roll each day and praying for all the names on it, going through it a page at a time – the faithful folk; those who have fallen away; the young and the old. I have followed that advice in each of the three Churches where I was Minister. I could not have done my job without prayer.

Time and again, I hear folk saying, “O, I prayed, but there was no answer.”

Friends, let me tell you that God always answers our prayers made in faith.

Years ago now, just outside the village of Houston in Renfrewshire there was a grand Victorian mansion, “Craigends”, a quite splendid baronial house set in extensive grounds, and owned by the Cunningham family. My mother, as a girl, working in the Union Bank in Johnstone, could remember the two Miss Cunninghams coming into town in their chauffeur driven car to do their shopping. Well, by and by, the house fell into ruin, and yet still by the side of the front door was the large brass bell. If you pulled it, it rang deep in the heart of the empty house, and no one answered.

Many folk look upon prayer just like that – you ring a bell somewhere in the heart of the universe, but there is no reply.

“Pray without ceasing”, writes St Paul.

If you ask me to sum up what I think prayer is, I would say to you that, for me, prayer is quite simply sitting quietly in the stillness, waiting upon God, laying before Him all that is on our minds and letting Him speak to us in the silence. And He does!

The Revd Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister