

The Priority of Prayer by Carolyn Carter - 28 Feb 2021

Matthew 3:16 – 4: 4

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

The story that Lent is based on isn't in the set readings this year but I thought it was important for us to look at it. After Jesus was baptised by John He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days to pray and fast. Straight after the high-point of His baptism the enemy came to tempt Him to distract Him from His purpose.

Jesus had just heard the Father's voice declaring His love and identity as His Son and that's what the enemy comes to question - 'If you are the Son of God'...he always tries to get us to doubt what God says, he did that in the garden of Eden – 'Did God really say?'so many of His tactics are still the same and I don't want to spend too much time on him but it's good to be aware of his plans – so we can arm ourselves with the Truth of God – as Jesus did.

WE also need to hear the Father's voice in order to be able to stand up to him. Hearing God's voice is vital! We can so easily be distracted from listening to God by all the other noise around us – there's so much of it at the moment that the enemy doesn't need to try very hard!

But Jesus was SO deeply rooted in God's Word and knew His voice so well that he was able to use it to silence him. An interesting thing is that ALL of the verses He used were from a small section in Deuteronomy. Let's look at Deuteronomy 8, the quote Jesus uses relates to the Israelites who were about to enter into the promised land – I also think it is very relevant for us right now -

"Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna.... to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."

It's interesting that Jesus uses this passage - HE was now in the wilderness, this time for 40 DAYS. He was also LED there by the Spirit of God and HE was undergoing a time of testing BEFORE starting His ministry. He TOO was hungry - the enemy waited till the last day of the fast to tempt Him to make bread... but He knew that it was more than bread that gives life!

God is the source of life and His voice sustains everything. It ALL exists because He spoke. We need His voice like they needed DAILY manna from heaven in the desert to sustain them - Indeed Jesus called Himself the True Bread from Heaven. He is also The Word. The Israelites needed to collect this bread each day and we too need to hear God's voice, to connect with Jesus EVERYDAY. We can't live on yesterday's manna. We need to feed from the word of God more than ever – in this time of shaking we need to be grounded in the truth!

God calls us each to come away to meet with Him, to receive His Word for us for Today.

Many times in the gospels it says Jesus went away by Himself to spend time with His Father – He was so connected He only did what He saw His Father doing and said what The Father was saying. He was the perfect Son of God yet He took time out to pray, how much more do WE need to take time with God?

This is not meant to be legalistic or out of obligation – but a living relationship. We were made for this connection and we need it as much as we need bread. We abide in Him and He in us – we share what's on OUR hearts and He shares what's on HIS heart!

The first and greatest command is that we 'Love the Lord our God' – everything else including loving our neighbour as ourselves is meant to come out of that.

We can't come to know or love someone unless we spend time with them.

Brother Lawrence says "We must know before we can love. In order to know God, we must often think of Him". Prayer is simply that, thinking of and talking to God, taking time out to be with Him, not just bringing our needs, or the needs of others (that's important) but it's about knowing Him. It's what the disciples saw in Jesus and why they asked Him 'Lord teach us to pray'.

We all live busy lives (me included) but let's remind ourselves to regularly to turn our thoughts and affection towards Him, to thank Him for His presence and ask Him into whatever we are doing. It only takes a moment and we can do this throughout our day. That's the 'Practice of the Presence of God' that Brother Lawrence lived and wrote about.

But it's also important we take some time out to be with Him. Time may be limited, and Jesus knows the pressures we are dealing with He knows what season of life we are in and there's grace, but I feel a sense of urgency for the church at the moment – so perhaps there is some time where we can to come away from distractions even just 10 minutes each day - I'm talking to myself here too – In order to do this we need to turn the volume down on all the other voices, set aside our to-do lists! Jesus had crowds of needy people turning up everywhere He went, yet He prioritised time with His Father up a mountain-side because he knew that it was only through His Spirit that anything lasting and of value could be done.

In all relationships, if we want them to thrive we need to invest in them, give them our full attention. Prayer sometimes feels hard because we can't see God and sometimes we can't see the fruit of our prayers.... it seems unseen, like it's not achieving anything in our results driven world but whenever we spend time in God's presence we cannot remain the same. He builds things on the inside of us – just like the roots of a tree.....when you see trees standing strong in storms it's because of their vast root system - which is grown underground, in the hidden place.

In this lockdown it feels like God is inviting us to a deeper relationship with Him in the secret place. The verse in Deuteronomy says God led His people into the desert to humble them (it actually says it twice!) in order that He might know what was in their hearts and if they would follow Him. In many ways this time we've been going through feels like a wilderness – perhaps God is using this time for the same thing?

So many of our usual activities have stopped. We don't have church meetings or anyone to lead us in times of worship at the moment. Maybe God has allowed it to be stripped away for the same purpose... to humble us so He can know what's in our hearts and if we will seek Him.

Are we going to take Him up on the invitation? I really believe that, if we do, when we come together to worship again, we will see God's presence and power in a way we've never seen before! James 4:8 says 'Draw near to God and He will draw near to you' As we move towards Him God comes running out to meet us like the Father in the prodigal son story! He actually desires to meet with us WAY more than we realise!

Jesus identifies Himself as a Bridegroom coming for His Bride (the church). This aspect of who Jesus is isn't mentioned much in sermons but it seems to be highlighted at the moment in a way it hasn't been in the past – more and more preachers and prophets are speaking about it, it's appearing in songs - so I think we need to pay attention to it.

God is calling the Church back to their first love – to intimacy with Him. He loves each of us SO much and has such a deep desire to be with us (that is why he was willing to come to earth and die to end the separation that sin brings) He calls us to Himself that we might choose to love Him in return.

In Matthew 25 He teaches about the end times and says "In that day the Kingdom of Heaven will be like this" then tells a story about bridesmaids waiting for the Bridegroom to return. They have lamps. There are those who have oil to keep their lamps going, and those who suddenly realise

they don't. Oil often represents the Holy Spirit but here I think it is speaking about our personal relationship with God.

They are all faithful bridesmaids waiting in expectation for Him to return, the lamps they carry may represent ministries or acts of service – they are all shining lights.

Both groups fall asleep when He's a long time coming back – but that's not what Jesus comments on – it was having oil that mattered – the ones that didn't have it ask those who do for some of theirs – but it can't be transferred and they needed to go and buy their own, to invest to get some – no-one can give anyone else their intimacy with God – it is for each to steward to keep the flame alive. It's about whether they know Jesus or not, and whether He knows them. We know God knows all of us – but Jesus' story states that those who have oil are wise – but those who don't He says He doesn't know (meaning in a current, living and connected way).

It's quite a sober passage - but it's important to look at passages we find hard sometimes - and I think God is highlighting it at this time for a reason....to challenge and inspire us to realise that He's calling us to get ready, to get oil, to invest time in knowing Him more.

Let's do what Jesus says - go into our rooms by ourselves to pray to our Father who is in secret, make space to hear His voice – seek the bread and oil that comes from His presence - let's ask Him, as the disciples did, to teach us to pray!

Amen.