

Sunday 18th April (Easter 3) 2021

- [Acts 3. 12-19 / Psalm 4 / 1 John 3. 1-7 / Luke 24. 36-48](#)

Q/ Is prayer serious (daily) work for you or just an occasional Sunday ritual?

Everything we ever do is a prayer – for prayer is life. Everyone (including clergy) is very bad at praying. If any of us are happy with the way we pray, then there must be something seriously wrong, as this would amount to spiritual complacency. When our conformity runs riot, it is then that we need God’s forgiveness even more than usual. So how do we pray?

How do we ‘[eschew those things that are contrary to their profession and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same](#)’? How do we preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus ‘[to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem](#)’ as instructed in that ‘*ta-dah*’ moment we read about in Luke today?

It is difficult to determine what or who is right when prayers are conflicting. The military government of Myanmar (formerly Burma) prays for a different set of realities to that of An Sang Su Chi; Northern Ethiopia; Yemen; and countless other nations continue to suffer conflict, humanitarian hardships, and all manner of chaos. Some feel sanctions are the way forward, others do not. Who is right, and where does righteousness and the will of God sit in all these complex situations? God’s wants our prayers to be made **real**, and they only become so when they are made in the name of Christ, but TOGETHER, in unity. Our eucharistic prayer reminds us of our place in the scheme of things (in God’s plan for his Creation) when we pray ‘[therefore with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven](#)’. Meanwhile, there seems to be a primitive way that we paper over the cracks. An anthropologist would call it ‘orgiastic states’ or in the vernacular, ‘sex ‘n’ drugs ‘n’ rock ‘n’ roll’. Apart from the obvious benefits of pleasure, surely these rites display a basic craving

for unity with something more than oneself? We are transported, taken out of ourselves, by the music, or whatever the displacement activity of choice may be, in order to escape the terrible sense of alone-ness which disappears as we feel 'at one' with something greater. Or the girl who, despite the dangers finds her life revolving around the needle and the vein, or the risk of AIDS from constant promiscuity. If you feel superior to this, then have you *never* known the pleasant feeling when drinking, as the alcohol starts to take over your system leaving you feeling somehow a bit lighter, more free, or a little happier? There is not much difference. Nevertheless, the tension between positive and negative prayers and behaviours, between prayers of meaning and prayers of absurdity, remains. The key questions to ask ourselves in each situation we face are: do we want our spiritual warmth on our terms or God's, and do we really pray 'through Jesus Christ' (i.e. in His Name) or just for ourselves and those whom we love?

How do we avoid sinking into self-indulgent prayer?

Tillich (theologian) speaks of God being whatever is your ultimate concern (sex, money, politics, possessions). All these are short-term gains, symbolic of a basic human need to be united with something greater than ourselves. But this is only a temporary unity. So, what about religion? What do you believe? Is it at this point I produce God as a kind of 'ace' from my sleeve? Well, not quite that crudely because religion can often turn out to be even more of a cover-up job than the earlier examples mentioned, sadly becoming the ultimate comfort-blanket. You know the kind of thing, God the benevolent figure who shields us from potential disasters and evils of life ensuring our survival after death, preferably with lots of heavenly bliss thrown in! The original 'bid daddy' who leaves us all in a childish state, keeping a tab on all the good little boys and girls. This approach is a retreat from reality

because it does not square up to the experience of many Christians for whom the quest for truth brings hardship and suffering. St. Paul, for example, jacked in a lucrative job to be a lonely outcast at odds with his fellow Jews and Christians. His search for Christ was certainly no comfort-blanket.

Belief – version 2

Every day I faithfully repeat the Lord's Prayer to our Father which art 'in heaven', and sometimes sing hymns to a bearded, stern, robed-in-majesty God, liable to speak from the clouds. A powerful image indeed.

Belief – version 3

Believes in a less human God, still a person, no longer in the sky but somewhere beyond the world, although He keeps it all running and intervenes from time to time. The problem with this view is that it leaves God as just another creature, many more times powerful than us, yet still capable of our speculation – something 'out there' (like the Kremlin or Whitehouse rooms that contain the button which presumably can finish us all off?!). I can think about it/Him, although it does not bear any resemblance to *my* life, my *pain*, or my hope.

Belief – version 4 (the gambler)

If I bet there is not a God, and I am wrong, I risk eternal punishment. If I bet there IS a God, and I am *wrong*, I have not lost much anyway, but if I am right, there is all heaven to win! It is just more 'sensible' to believe and have a chance at the jackpot. This view harbours a strong risk of believing because of what we can get out of it, which is of course profoundly immoral. If I do 'good' in the hope that God will reward me, and do not do anything 'bad' because God might punish me, then I have not acted in a moral way at all, I am merely being

sensible in the same way that a laboratory rat is sensible when it learns that pushing button 'A' results in food but pushing button 'B' results in an electric shock! There is no morality in the fact that he stops pressing button 'B' and sticks to button 'A'; and if I look to God for reward or punishment then my actions have no moral content. Furthermore, to believe in God because belief in God is necessary for salvation robs Worship of any sort of moral value (God is no longer worshipped because he is good and right and true, but because he is our entry ticket to heaven). This is not worship, it's only common sense (or low cunning) as God becomes a means to an end, someone to be kept sweet because displeasing him affects our personal survival. The net result is selfish worship, and the church becomes a kind of Noah's Ark that we crawl into for safety and then watch everyone else drown as we concern ourselves with 'higher things.' Comfort-blanket? Insurance Policy? Moral Blackmailer? Distant figure in the sky? All hopefully rejected.

The disciples were, we are told **'in fear of the Jews.'** Pharisees insisted on laws, rules, righteousness, pursuit of self-perfection, status, fixed roles, fixed power and four-square order. Jesus on the other hand, is less easy to define, but is nevertheless our role model. What did he do, exactly? Well, he **WAS**. He existed. In a nutshell, he was **REAL**. Wherever humans went, he went. He did not hang around the temple complaining. Jesus cured and cared by simply ***being himself with people***, not playing a part. In the end, he challenged the world to search for the true meaning of life by laying down his own; as a servant. Christ challenges all who **'profess and call themselves Christian'** to follow him by truly loving and serving people (instead of weighing and measuring them) without fearing the consequences of doing so.

Fr. Mike (Easter 3) 2021