

Order of Service

**Wesley Methodist Church 75 Taranaki Street
10am Congregation**

9 May 2021 Easter 6

Leader: Philip Garside.

Sermon: Connecting through prayer

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

I have titled this sermon: **Connecting through prayer. Connecting through prayer**

Let’s pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds, be acceptable to you O God, our rock and our liberator. Amen

I have been thinking often about Bryan, in Intensive Care in hospital, in the past couple of weeks. Along with all of you, I’m very worried and concerned about him and how he is going to recover from his accident. Gathering with Bryan’s family and friends for prayer at the hospital, a few days after his accident, really helped me to feel that I was doing something positive. I think others felt that way too.

I don’t usually sit down, close my eyes and pray in my day-to-day life, but I do bring people and situations to mind as I’m working or driving or sitting and reading. I have a feeling that I ought to pray better or more often, but that is not something I do in any formal sense.

This has led me to wonder whether just thinking about someone, as we go about our daily lives, is a valid form of prayer? I have heard this called a “prayer on the run.” We hear the phrase “Our thoughts and prayers are with you,” when someone is in a difficult situation or is grieving a loss. “Thoughts and prayers” can sound a bit glib, but I’d like to explore with you this morning whether there is more to it.

John “Dominic” Crossan was a Catholic priest who lived in a monastery for many years, before becoming an academic and leading progressive, New Testament historian and theologian. Crossan has talked about prayer as “being in the presence of God,” and that in his time in the monastery, he felt that he was at prayer in every waking moment. While the monks gathered for worship regularly several times each day, they had lots of other work to do and weren’t

on their knees praying all the time. So how could Crossan be praying every waking moment?

This leads to the big question, What is Prayer?

This morning in this service we will engage in several activities which could be called prayer – some are more obviously prayer than others.

Our call to worship is a responsive prayer. The leader calls and the people respond. This prayer draws our attention to the presence of God. For a short time we leave our daily lives and gather together for worship. Gathering together is important. There is power in gathering.

Early in the services I lead, there is a Prayer of Approach. We have left our daily lives outside, behind us, and now start to focus on God. The essence of this prayer is saying to God, here we are to worship you again, imperfect as we are. Please take us as we are, just as you find us. There is no need to pretend we are something different. God doesn't mind what we are wearing or if our hair is untidy. Again, there is the pattern of a call by the leader and a response by the people.

The leader then speaks words of assurance, on behalf of God. Reassurance that we are good enough. Today's Assurance ends with: **Let us receive the gift of abundant life. Amen.**

In a more traditional service this section is known as Confession and Forgiveness – with an emphasis on us as sinners, seeking God's mercy and forgiveness.

At the start of a sermon there is a short prayer hoping that the words of the preacher and our heartfelt meditations will be acceptable to God. The preacher is offering the sermon to God, as well as to the congregation.

The next formal prayer comes after the sermon. This is our Prayer of Intercession, where we ask God to intercede on our behalf for the people and situations named in the prayer. This is why I give you an opportunity to share any joys you want to celebrate and people or other things you are concerned about. The intercessions are both for ourselves and for others. We are laying our concerns and joys before God and asking God to hear us and share the burdens we feel.

The Lord's Prayer is memorable and powerful. It is a manifesto for God's Kingdom on earth. There are different versions of this prayer in Matthew's and Luke's gospels – see Matthew 6:9-13, and Luke 11:2-4. And church tradition, sometime in the centuries after Jesus, has added the ending: **For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.** We are going to sing the Lord's Prayer this morning.

The prayer as the offering is gathered and placed in the sanctuary, is a prayer of thanks, with the charge that the money and goods we have given, including by automatic payment, should be used wisely.

The service closes with the Benediction or Sending Forth, where the leader asks for us to be blessed as we leave the church and get back to our daily lives.

The Grace at the very end, is a prayer that we give to each other. This is why people turn their heads and catch the eye of others in the pews as we say it. It isn't just some odd Methodist custom.

All of these prayers are in the form of words spoken by the leader and the congregation.

What else in our service might also be considered as prayer?

In previous services we have spoken the Kindle a Flame, candle lighting litany. Today we sang it. This litany works well spoken or sung. So could music be a form of prayer? I certainly think so.

Singing is special because it engages your whole body, your mind and your heart. And when the words we sing are addressed to God and about praising God, we are transported to another dimension. We catch a glimpse of the Holy Spirit among us and in us.

My hymn, Loving God of Aotearoa, which we sang earlier, touches on several types of prayer. Gathering, approach, a call for forgiveness, and a hope that as we leave worship we will be compassionate people.

I have led you before in a contemplative prayer exercise by Franciscan writer and priest Richard Rohr, which picks up the first line of the song we sang with the children, **Be still and know that I am God.**

Let me show you on the screen how the prayer works. In each case there is a call by the leader and the people then respond by keeping silent. It goes like this:

Leader: Be still and know that I am God

[silence]

Leader: Be still and know

[silence]

Leader: Be still

[silence]

Leader: Be

[a very long, meditative silence]

You might like to try this yourselves at home. As I thought about exploring prayer in this service, Richard's exercise, which I saw him do in a video, came to mind. And that brought the song I learned as a young adult to mind. So sometimes prayer takes us on a train of thought, from one idea, to another, and another.

When I looked up the readings for today, I saw this line from John's gospel: **"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."** This immediately brought to mind the lovely, but tricky song by Thomas Tallis, that Heather and I sang for you, which we performed with Festival Singers last year. The words are actually from Chapter 14 of John's gospel, but they are close enough.

How about sharing the Peace? Is that a prayer? To shake another person's hand, look them in the eye for a moment and bless them with God's peace, is of course another prayer.

The music which Colin chooses and plays for us at the start of a service, during the offering and again at the end of the service, helps to link together the sections of our worship. Is that another form of prayer? It could be, if we notice and appreciate it.

Let's go back to our big question: What is Prayer? Our act of gathering together and worshipping God each Sunday morning is full of different types of prayer.

Let me tentatively suggest that a definition of prayer involves us as individuals, being conscious of the presence of God, and bringing a concern or joy before God.

American Christian writer, Anne Lamott, says that there are two types of prayer: "Help me, Help me, Help me" and "Thank you, Thank you, Thank you." I really like that.

The pioneer psychologist Carl Jung formulated the idea that people in the world are linked by the Collective Subconscious. We are joined with other people in a way that is just out of sight of logical thought, that can't be seen or touched, but which is real. I have heard it said that if we are given an inspiring idea by our subconscious for a new song, a new technique, a new book, a new mission or ministry, then we have to act on the idea. But we only have a limited time. And if we don't act on it, then we have lost our chance and it will drop back into the Collective Subconscious and be given to another person.

The concept of the Collective Subconscious puts me in mind of the Holy Spirit. We can't see it or touch it, or feel it, but through it we know we are in God's presence. It links people together.

As I mentioned in the time with the children earlier, last year I published Rev Siosifa Pole's book: *Fisi'inaua 'I Vaha – A Tongan Migrant's Way*.

In it he says this:

“Aotearoa New Zealand is one of those lands that is wonderfully situated in the southern part of the Pacific Ocean. It is the sea space that gives the inhabitants of Aotearoa freedom to live the way they like to, without interference. The sea creates a sacred space to celebrate individual uniqueness. Yet, the sea is also a means of connecting these island nations. Although they are not connected by land, the sea connects them, for it reaches to each island’s shore and beaches. Moreover, the ocean is a sacred space of connection.”

Wow! I thought when I read this in his manuscript. So rather than dividing us, the seas and oceans connect us.

If the land and the sea together can be thought of as a sacred space of connection, then prayer, which joins us with God and other people, is also a sacred space of connection.

When we pray, in whatever form we pray, we are connecting to something bigger than us – God’s love.

We need to be careful how we interpret this morning’s readings from the 1st Letter of John and the Gospel of John. They talk of victory and laying down one’s life for one’s friends. When these scriptures were written, probably between the year 90 and 100 or so, Christian communities were part of the Roman Empire and subject to harassment and persecution, because they didn’t take part in the public worship of the Roman gods. So militant language in the scriptures, encouraging people to remain true to their Christian faith is understandable.

When we look again at the two readings, other more rewarding themes are revealed. We are to follow God’s commandments – the 10 Commandments from the Hebrew scriptures, sharpened by Jesus restatement of them in Matthew’s gospel. Our burden, as followers of the Way of Jesus, will be light. We are to love one another. Our reward will be a life of fulfilment and joy.

We are always in God’s presence – we just have to recognise it.

The Holy Spirit empowers us and joins us to others – people here beside us and loved ones who are far away.

Prayers can be as complex as the parts of a formal worship service.

I suggest that they can also be as simple as thinking about another person with love.

Crossan is right. We can be at prayer 24/7.

Prayer connects us in God’s love.

Amen.