

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

Matthew 8:23–34

Now when [Jesus] got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!”

This morning I am talking with you about the importance of prayer. ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ is a prayer. It may not be a very good prayer—Jesus went on to say that it was a prayer of fear rather than a prayer of faith: ‘Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?’ Obviously it is better to pray in faith rather than in fear. So ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ may not be the best kind of prayer. But it was a prayer that the Lord heard, and that the Lord answered: he ‘rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm’, and the disciples were saved.

I remember a news report of a man in a small boat out on the Gulf St Vincent who was caught in a fierce storm and overturned and thought he was going to drown, and he said ‘I had never prayed before, but I prayed then!’—and he lived to tell the tale.

So ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ may not be the best kind of prayer, but it can be a good place to start. It may be the first time we ever pray a real prayer. One of my earliest memories of praying is when we lived in the country in Gawler and I caught the train into Adelaide for school each day, with my older brothers, but one day I had to do that all on my own and meet my brother on the corner of North Terrace and King William Street where the Gresham Hotel used to be, and there were people rushing past around the corner, and my prayer then was just ‘God, God, God, God’ and when I stopped saying that for a moment someone going past kicked my kit bag, so I started saying it again fast: ‘God, God, God, God’—and my brother came and it all worked out. Another time as a boy I prayed before I went to the dentist—that I would be brave—and that was the first

time at the dentist that I didn't cry. You've got to start somewhere. 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' may not be a bad place to start.

It's a prayer we may need to keep praying all our life. As we get older we think we can cope better, but right through our lives we are often more in need of a prayer like that than we think. The collect or special prayer for today reminds us:

O God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright;

—ask the people who have been caught in the floods in Queensland and New South Wales and Victoria—

Grant us such strength and protection, as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We may not be caught in physical floods at the moment—though the threat of death or deprivation or disablement is always with us—but the prayer also mentions the danger of temptation. How many of us may need this week to cry out, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' And for all of us there is that eternal form of perishing that we need to pray against, that John 3:16 reminds us of:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

That gives us very good grounds on which to pray, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' Have we ever prayed that prayer in that way: 'Lord, I do not want to perish eternally. I want to have everlasting life with You, starting now. I believe in Your Son, whom You have given. Lord save us!' That is a very good place to start.

We are not alone in prayer. There were a number of disciples, and they were all in the same boat, and they were all together intent on waking the Lord. We too gather with others to pray. The introduction to Morning and Evening Prayer says that we come together 'humbly to acknowledge our sins before God . . . to render thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands', and to 'set forth his most worthy praise' as we 'hear his most holy word', and so are able 'to

ask those things that are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul'. That covers it pretty well, I think. And we do that morning and evening. Particularly on Sundays, but I encourage you to have that practice of morning and evening prayer, in one way or another, every day. As clergy we have the set forms of Morning and Evening Prayer from the Prayer Book, with the Psalms and strong doses of the Bible, every day, and it is right that we should. I would have to say that such a practice—whether I felt like it or not—has been a mainstay of my ministry these forty years, and through it many times the Lord has saved me from perishing in one way or another. But some form of morning or evening prayer, with some hearing of God's 'most holy word', should be the practice of all of us, and our coming together on Sundays should encourage us in that, and help to keep us at it.

But why should we pray? Not, I hope, just out of a sense of duty, or because we think it is a 'good thing'. That will run dry very quickly. Prayer is talking with God—hearing what He's got to say, and saying what we want to say to Him. Why do we talk with anyone? Because we know them, and want to get to know them better, or simply because we like them and want to spend time with them, and we want to be about something together with them. So we don't pray just because we think we have to, but because we know God, and want to get to know Him better, or simply because we like Him and want to spend time with Him, and be with him in what He's on about.

'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' was a starting prayer for the disciples, but they didn't stop there. The Lord took them on. And they soon came to a place where they were less concerned about themselves and were starting to be more fascinated in him:

He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, 'Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?'

'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' may be one way we start praying. 'Who can this be?' needs to be the spirit in which we continue. And, let me tell you, after sixty or more years of praying, that is one

question you never get to the end of. ‘Who can this be?’—there is always more that we can get to know about Jesus. So I want to help you in that process. I am beginning this morning as your parish educator, and during Lent, beginning March 13th, we are going to have an intensive time of finding out more who God is, and so who we are in relationship with Him. Over five weeks we are going to ask five questions:

Who is God?

Who is Jesus?

What Does the Holy Spirit Do?

Why the Church? and

What Does This Mean for Me?

I’ll be preaching on those questions morning and evening on Sundays, and then at the group meetings in the hall on Monday nights, or Tuesday mornings or Tuesday afternoons—you can pick which time to come—we’ll be looking more closely at the Scriptures and going into it in more detail. I encourage you to be here on those Sundays, and to sign up for those groups, and encourage others to come—maybe even people who have never prayed before, whom God is calling to get to know Him better, and to come to love Him.

What are we hoping and praying for from these sessions? A better educated parish? Not primarily. Rather, first of all, a people who know that they need to cry out, ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ Or who know that they have cried out in that way and the Lord has heard and answered their prayer. And then a people who won’t be able to avoid asking the question: ‘Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?’ And who then go on to be a people who always want to get to know God better and, knowing and loving Him, to want just to spend time with Him, and to keep on asking Him for whatever is ‘requisite and necessary’. People who can end up saying, as the prophet Isaiah says:

Yes, in the way of Your judgments, O LORD, we have waited for You; The desire of our soul is for Your name And for the remembrance of You. With my soul I have desired You in the night, Yes, by my spirit within me I will seek You early (Isa. 26:8–9).