

Have you been talking to your imaginary friend lately? Fairly common jibe...usually good humoured from our non Christian friends about us talking to an invisible God. How often do you do this, they ask.

You are not very long into reading Paul's letters when you realise he is always mentioning how much he is praying for the people he is writing to.

Philippians 1v3-4 **'Everytime I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy.'**

Colossians 1v 3 **'We always pray for you, and we give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.'**

What an encouragement it must have been for Timothy to receive these words, **'Night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. I long to see you again, for I remember your tears as we parted.'** (2Tim. 1 v 3-4)

The same would be true of Philemon, **'I remember you in my prayers.'** Philemon v4

Is Paul talking to an imaginary friend?

This is a man who met the risen Christ. He's the reason we have 'Damascus Road experience' and 'to see the light' as well-known idioms in our English language.

He has gone from throwing Christians into prison to now being in prison himself as a Christian and in a few years, he will be beheaded for his faith in this imaginary friend we get ribbed about! There are just some things you can't fake.

The reading this morning is Paul's second prayer in 3 chapters. It's great that it was written down for us to learn from and to be able to use as a prayer ourselves.

There is a danger with a subject like this. It is so easy to talk about prayer, preach sermons on prayer, own books on prayer and maybe even read some of them, have a prayer list, get prayer alerts on our phones and these all have their place but none of these things guarantee the one thing that is needed. You've guessed it. To pray. To just do it.

I. Let's do that now! Ask God to change our prayer life this morning.

In chapter 3 v.1 Paul was about to pray for the Ephesian believers, but before he got going he interrupted himself and set off on a discussion of the great mystery of both Jews and Gentiles being united as one in Christ and together building God's New Society. This is so like Paul. He is such a wholehearted individual, there are times he can't stop himself and just pours out the wonder and the gratitude for what Christ has done for him. He keeps this going right until v.13.

We saw that in chapter 1 where he doesn't seem to take a breath. There are no punctuation marks in that opening first section.

In our passage this morning he resumes his original prayer in v. 14-21. He repeats the opening phrase, **'When I think of all this..'** and then off he goes, **'I fall to my knees and pray to the Father'**

This is an interesting phrase, as Jewish men almost always prayed standing. Maybe because the priests who ministered in the temple did so standing. In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18 both stood, but as you remember one of the men stood by himself and the other at a distance! It was attitude rather than posture that was important.

There are many examples of praying different ways in Scripture.

'David went in and sat before the Lord and prayed.' 2 Samuel 7 v. 18

'Come let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker.' Psalm 95 v 6.

'David fasted and spent the nights lying on the ground.' 2 Sam. 12 v 16

When the outlook was the bleakest, this was what people sometimes did.

Our posture in prayer is not as important as the act of prayer itself.

We do know that a good physical attitude helps to keep us sharp mentally. It's why teachers spend a lot of time telling pupils off. **Sit up.** Stop lolling about. They know they will concentrate better. So if we keep falling asleep when we pray, maybe we need to try another posture. Going for a walk, praying with a friend.

Kneeling suggests humility and reverence and also urgency. Our Lord knelt in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and trial.

The Ephesians had seen Paul on his knees before in Acts 20v 36.

On his way to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey, He dropped to his knees and prayed with them. He told them that it was the last time they would see him. Knowing this they wept loudly, embracing and kissing him.

The opening line of this prayer must have reminded them of that day. Here in a cell, chained to a soldier, Paul gets on his knees. 'Quintus, Give me a bit of slack on that chain.' Thanks and down he goes.

Note the direction of his prayer. **'To the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth.'**

What confidence this gives us. Such a powerful, creative Father, can surely hear and answer the prayers about to be uttered.

v.16-19 Four Requests which flow out of each other and build on each other.

The **first** request is for inner spiritual strength. Look at v.16, **'I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit.'**

This is not turning over a new leaf, getting a grip on yourself, (great Ulster expression). It's not the power of positive thinking or self-discipline. Neither is it 'when the going gets tough, the tough get going' kind of power. These all by-pass Jesus. We can do it all by ourselves. That's why they are called self-help books and the shelves are full of them. It's an attempt to pull ourselves up by our own shoelaces, which is why we don't pray in the first place. No.

This is a fundamental work of God from his Spirit to our spirit. **'Not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength'** the Message has.

Don't you love that phrase, 'from his glorious, unlimited resources.' Let that sink in. Wouldn't you love for someone to pray that phrase over you? I know I would.

- 2. Let's do that now!** Pray for the person on your left that God would 'empower them with inner strength through his Spirit.'

This leads to the **second request v.17** To be indwelt by Jesus and to be established.

What a phrase v.17' **Then Christ will make his home in your hearts'** He goes on to say, **'as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong.'**

Do you remember Judas (not the one who betrayed Jesus) asking this question. John 14 v22, **'Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?'**

Jesus replied, **'All who love me, will do what I say. My Father will love them and we will come and make our home with each of them.'**

Here's the interesting thing with this prayer. This is not salvation he is referring to as Paul has already said in chapter 1v1, **'I am writing to God's holy people in Ephesus, who are faithful followers of Christ Jesus.'**

This is referring to our daily walk with the indwelling Christ, what the theologians call sanctification. It's the pruning of John 15.

Alan Redpath helps us understand this. 'The conversion of a soul is the miracle of a moment, but the making of a **saint** is the task of a lifetime.' (saint is the old fashioned word for disciple of Jesus)

Remember in chapter 2, we looked at being **'God's masterpiece'** v.10. We are a work in progress and God isn't finished with us yet.

To be established comes when we put down roots into that love.

Where are the gardeners? You know all about planting. Spreading out the roots carefully before putting into a good sized hole, with peat and good soil and fertiliser. Then you tread it well in so that it is firm.

Remember the parable of the sower in Mark 4. The seed that fell on shallow soil, sprouted quickly, but when the sun came up, the plant soon wilted and because it didn't have deep roots, it died. When the disciples asked Jesus later on what this was about, he explained it was someone who heard the word and received it with joy. **But since they have no root**, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word they quickly fall away.

Paul wants us individually and as a church to put our roots down. Anyone can start something. It's going on that counts. We all know of those who have gone back. And yet let's not be too hard. We remember we have had our ups and downs and only by God's grace that we are living for him.

3. Let's do that! Let's now pray for those who seem to have wilted in the heat and no longer call Jesus Lord. Hold on to the story of the prodigal and pray for their return.

Paul's third request v.18

'And may you have the power to understand as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high and how deep his love is.'

Maybe it's because Ed Sheeran was in court for supposedly copying someone else's lyrics recently that I notice here that The Bee Gees might have something to answer for as well. Do you see it? How deep is your love!

A great old hymn begins: O the deep, deep love of Jesus

Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free.

Rolling as a mighty ocean

In its fulness over me.

We used to sing the children's song, Jesus' love is very wonderful. The chorus: So high you can't get over it.

Here's the part where we have more questions than answers. Paul is praying that the church would know something that's beyond knowledge! The love of Christ extends boundlessly in every direction. It's what Eugene Peterson in the message calls, **'the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love.'** The imagery Paul uses is like that of an infinite universe whose end can never be reached. Charles Swindoll says that he can't help but think of the cross in these words.

Wide enough to cover anybody!

Long enough to go beyond any barrier!

High enough to take us all the way to glory and beyond.

Deep enough to touch any need, any sin, or any hurt.

You only have to read the gospel accounts to know this is true. Jesus was constantly pushing the boundaries of love way past what the religious leaders of his day and even his disciples were prepared to do. The Samaritans were included,(Jews hated them) the woman caught in adultery (treated with dignity, forgiven and told to go and sin no more), the thief on the cross. (outrageous, scandalous even.) This same love needs to take hold of us so that we can follow the master. That's why Paul makes this final request to the church. That's us. It is a prayer for God's fullness v.19

'May you experience the love of Christ though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fulness of life and power that comes from God.'

Paul continues to astound us. He even tells us it is too great to understand fully. After all how can we as finite beings be filled by an infinite God? What does Paul mean? He prays that to the fullest extent of our human capacities we would overflow with God's strength, love and power.

Kids at the beach bringing full bucket of sand or container of seawater home. Filled to the brim with the Atlantic Ocean -not all of it of course, but as much as it could hold.

v.20-21 What a finish!

This great benediction ends part I of Ephesians. To God be the glory he says in each verse. There aren't meant to be celebrities in God's work, just servants. God is the one **'who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we ask or think.'**

Let's open our hearts this morning to receive from God.

Notice all you long winded pray-ers (including myself) it's all over in 8 verses! But what a prayer.

What can we take away from all this?

1. Make time every day for God. Whatever and whenever suits your life pattern. When you wake and when you lie down. As you walk and as you drive along the road. (eyes open please) On your feet and on your knees. Just do it.
2. Let's seek to make prayer our first response-not the thing we try as a last resort when all else fails.
3. **'Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.'**