

## Trinity VI 2019 (Proper 17/OT17 Year C)

I have several deeply personal questions this morning. How do you pray? Where do you pray? How long do you pray each day? Do you pray?

In asking these questions, I do so not to receive any answers, nor to inflict anyone with guilt if they think that their praying is not up to much. In fact, in relation to my own prayer life I always bear in mind a phrase quoted once to me by a dear friend: 'If you wanted to pray, you tried to pray, if you thought you prayed badly, then you prayed very well indeed,' I wish I could remember who the quote was from!

Prayer is at the heart of our readings today, and in both the Old Testament and Gospel passages, we carry on where we left off last week. Abraham and Sarah's encounter with the three mysterious strangers moves from the news that the couple will have a child to carry on the line of Faith, to the extraordinary bargaining between Abraham and God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah – the cities of the plain which are consumed by wickedness. As is true with so many of these early Biblical accounts, they stand as stories illustrating exemplars of faith. Although Genesis has several other earlier accounts of faithfulness, the line of our Faith stems from Abraham's trust in God. Today's account and the subsequent story of Sodom and Gomorrah is more truly about Abraham's trust in God and Lot's faithfulness in turning God-ward than the drama of cities being destroyed by fire and sulphur. The question of engaging with God in order to seek a good deal for the inhabitants of the cities is a curious one, that leads us (in the light of our Gospel reading) to consider prayer and its effectiveness.

Prayer is often divided into categories: thanksgiving, petitionary, intercessory and a host of others. However, I think that it is probably more helpful to consider all prayer in relational terms. A friend of C. S. Lewis once questioned him to ask if he thought that if he prayed hard enough then God would cure his wife, Joy, of cancer. Lewis replied, 'Prayer doesn't change God; it changes me.' This seems to me to be a much more realistic approach to our relationship to God who is love, and revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet, in some ways, even by describing our Trinitarian understanding of God's presence within creation and our humanity, we limit the way we approach the mystery of overwhelming love at the heart of our faith. Having said that, we do need imagery to hold on to, added to which I believe we can begin to have some comprehension within our humanity of this divine life-source at the heart of creation because of Jesus Christ and the inward working of the Holy Spirit. Does this sound a bit beyond what can be grasped?

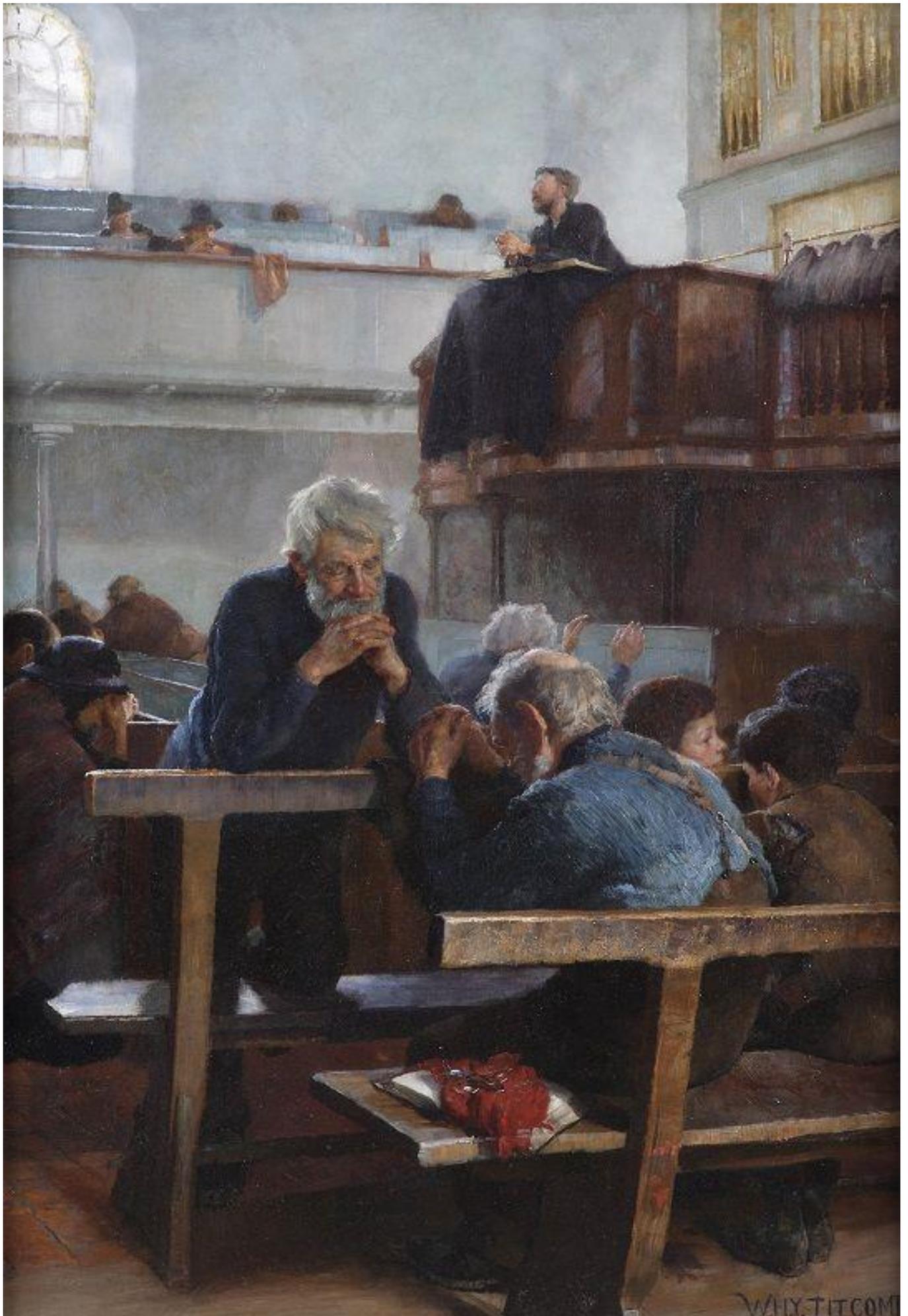
In the letter to the Colossians, Paul has this to say: *As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit.* Paul is not calling for blind belief within this passage but asking those who seek to follow Christ to allow themselves be open to God – open to the inward working of the Spirit, of trusting and knowing that we are accompanied on every step of our journey. No amount of philosophical or scientific theories about faith will allow the slightest propensity to bring about or increase faith unless a person's heart is open.

C. S. Lewis's quote about the nature of prayer changing the person rather than God, leads us to the nature of petitionary prayer - a fundamental one for our understanding of the effectiveness of prayer. I know that it will matter not a jot how hard I pray for it; a Rolls Royce will not suddenly appear outside the Vicarage overnight. But what of those occasions when we pray for others: those who suffer, the troubled, the distressed, or indeed for ourselves when we are experiencing trials and turmoil? Are we to discount miracles? This in turn leads to further questions. Why does God seem to answer some prayers but not others? What of miracles? What of those who seem to endure more than their fair share of life's woes and problems?

Many questions, and no 'pat' answers. For what it is worth, I do believe that miracles occur. In acknowledging that, I also understand God to be at the heart of these inexplicable signs of goodness, *because* God is Love. However, I don't believe that these occurrences rely on the quality or quantity of prayer. This would lead us back to the question of Abraham's bargaining with God rather than of faithfully opening oneself up to that Love to allow God to change the person. Abraham is finally fashioned as a person of faith in the account of the near sacrifice of that beloved son. It seems (and is!) a terrible concept to us; what sort of loving God asks a father to sacrifice their beloved child? However, the story is actually one about absolute trust, and ultimately about God's love for every scrap of flawed humanity.

I hope that it won't seem indulgent if I tell you that I was telling a person this week about my own experience when my mother was terminally ill. She was diagnosed the day before the school summer holidays started, so I was able to be with her for the whole journey. I found myself, in that old phrase, 'abiding in the Lord.' I found time to work on the Scripture syllabus for my schoolwork, and the words of Jesus to Martha 'I am the resurrection and the Life,' were constantly on my mind. I found great comfort and peace at every step of the journey, both for my mother and me. I didn't pray for a miracle. I found that abiding in the Lord during that period fundamental to my further journey. In acknowledging this, I do know that people will have experienced events within their lives as seemingly as far removed from that peace at the heart of God's Love as it will every seem possible to experience. This will be the case for most, if not all of us, myself included. However, it is, again, a question of our allowing God's constancy and presence to be known to us. He is always longing to do so – longing for us to know of the Kingdom here and now – and living in such a way that others know of the Kingdom Life in its fulness, which transcends the worries, misfortunes and bitterness which life might throw at us.

There is a lovely painting I am very fond of by one of the Newlyn artists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, William Holt Titcomb. It is called '*Primitive Methodists at Prayer*,' and depicts worshippers in a Cornish chapel. All are praying around the building. In the foreground is an old man on his knees on a bench with his hands clasped together fervently. Others are kneeling, one child might be talking to another, or is he too praying? It matters not. Prayer is the mysterious sap of our connection to Jesus, the True and Living Vine – the image of the invisible God. We should never underestimate its power or capacity to draw us into the knowledge of the ocean of God's Love for us – the knowledge that we are fully known and treasured. Through prayer, we allow ourselves to know that God shares every moment of our journey, no matter what it might be, and that through this action we are continually transformed into the likeness of God.



*Primitive Methodists at Prayer* – W.H.Y. Titcomb 1889 – Dudley Museums

## **Genesis 18: 20-32**

Then the Lord said, 'How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.'

So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham came near and said, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?' And the Lord said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' Abraham answered, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?' And he said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' Again he spoke to him, 'Suppose forty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of forty I will not do it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' He said, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.'

## **Colossians 2:6-19** Fullness of Life in Christ

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

[Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.]

## **Luke 11:1-13**

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' 2 He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'