

Matt 26:36-46

Well as I was saying earlier in the service we have over the summer been looking at 1 Cor 9:24b, “Run in such a way as to get the prize”. We have seen that to run the Christian race we need training and one aspect of that training is prayer.

For the next few weeks we are going to focus on prayer in our services and sermons. Yes of course we have preached on prayer before but so central is prayer to the Christian life, the Christian race, that we continually need to be encouraged to pray. Actually we often need to be helped to pray.

So over the next six weeks we will look at the necessity of prayer, the pattern of prayer, Praise and Thanksgiving, Prayer as ploughing in preparation for the seed of the gospel, Prayer for others and Prayer and the gospel.

In the services we will try and provide helpful tips for praying and answers to the questions we may have about prayer.

Along with the sermons we recommend this little booklet “Help for a sick prayer life” and of course there are a great many other books we could read to encourage us to pray and that is what we are wanting to do. We want this series to challenge and encourage us in our prayer life.

I have said before about how when I was working in central London two young men in their punk gear stopped me and after a few moments asked me what they could pray for me. It was most unexpected but shouldn't be. So now I give you permission to ask each other a. what can I pray for you and b. how is your prayer life going or as it is put in this booklet “how is your prayer battle going? I also give myself permission to ask you these questions. Why ask them? Well not so we can catch each other out or so we can feel superior but because prayer matters and without prayer our life with Christ Jesus shrivels and dies. Prayer is the oxygen that keeps our spiritual life going so the questions are relevant to our spiritual health and so this series is relevant to everyone here this morning and to those who are listening to this on download whether you attend Christ Church or not. So listen up.

1. what's happening

V36 gives us something of the context. Jesus was with his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane. They had shared the Passover meal together and now it is late. Jesus was aware of what lay ahead. However, despite him speaking several times about his death and at the last supper about his betrayal, the disciples seemed blissfully unaware of what was going on.

They had come to the garden and v36 he told most of the 11 to sit down while he was going to pray. Taking Peter and James and John aside he spoke of his anguish, v38, ““My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Then he went away from them and prayed.

What they and we are seeing here is

2. Jesus' example

Jesus here was setting these weary disciples and us an example.

Here was Jesus aware of the events that were happening around him. He knew that his betrayer was on his way. He knew that soon he would be arrested and taken away and that there would be only one outcome of his arrest. He knew that death lay ahead and he knew it would be painful.

So he prayed. Here is the example for Peter, James and John and for us that faced with a big event in his life Jesus prepared through prayer – it was if you like part of his training so he could run the race that lay before him.

During our lives we face many big and testing things, job interviews, operations, moving home, raising a family, funerals and so on. How do we prepare for such big things that face in order that we may come through them in a way that builds us as followers of Jesus rather than them having an adverse effect on our faith?

The answer as we look at Jesus is that we begin on our knees in prayer. Jesus faced a huge and decisive event in his life and in the history of the world. He prepared for it through prayer. Before he got caught up in a whirlwind of events that led to his death he was at prayer. He prayed because he needed to and he prayed it was normal to him.

The summer is just about over soon it will be autumn and then every time I leave the house I will pick up my coat and put it on. I put it on because I need to and because it is natural too me. I don't have to think about it. For Jesus prayer was natural and now before this big event he prayed just as he prayed it would seem at the start of each day, Mark 1:35, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."

Two things from this:

a. we need to pray

I just want to suggest that actually each day for us is a big event and that we should pray before we get caught up in the whirlwind of events of that day. Whether you do that the night before or early in the morning I don't care but I think we should do it. Each day is a big challenge. As you look at the day you may well know what we have on for that day and for those things we need prayer but then there are some things we don't know will happen, the temptations that may come and need to be resisted, the opportunity to speak to a colleague or a friend about our faith, the friend who needs some support or comfort. Each day is a big thing and as with Jesus before we get caught up in the whirlwind of events we should pray so that we are as prepared in God as we can be.

At the end of the passage in v46 we read, “Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” They are words of great fortitude and courage. They are words that stem from his time of prayer during which he had clarified his task, submitted to the will of the Father and prepared himself for the hours ahead. As such he set us an example be it when we face big events in our lives or as we face each day we need to come to God in prayer before it so that we walk into those events or that day with God and in his power and strength.

b. prayer should be natural to us

If we pray regularly it becomes natural, we just do it, though hopefully not without thinking. Jesus seems to have shown the disciples a pattern of regular prayer and prayer in our lives needs to be regular so that it becomes natural to us. We have a regular time of prayer but also it becomes natural to us to pray before meals, with our children or grandchildren, about situations that suddenly occur in the day or as we thank God for some blessing that comes our way. Prayer in one sense needs to be so part of our lives that we do it without thinking. It need to be natural to us.

3. Jesus’ call

Speaking to the three disciples in v38 Jesus asked them to wait and watch. Then later when he found them sleeping the call in v41 was, ““Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak”

The disciples had a problem. They had been awake a long time. They had just had a good meal and some wine and quite naturally they were tired and sleepy. They found it easy even in the garden to drop off to sleep.

So we may well expect Jesus to encourage them to stay awake. However, in the word watch Jesus was saying more than keep awake with me. He was calling these disciples and all other disciples to be alert to the nature of the battle that they face. They and we are in a spiritual battle. As such we need to keep alert and watch our step.

Watching the progress of the flame for the Paralympics the other day for part of the time it was carried by soldiers who had been wounded. Some I am sure in Afghanistan by improvised explosive devices – ieds. Certainly in that situation aware of enemy action you would be very watchful.

The way of the Christian can be dangerous for we easily walk off the path. We easily fall into sin. Peter reminded his readers to “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8) I think they must have lived in Essex!!

The path we tread as followers of Jesus is not easy there are many temptations along the way and we need to watch how and where we walk. We need to be awake and alert. The matrix signs on the motorways often exhort us “don’t drive tired” and while the grammar is bad the message is clear and wise.

As Christians we need to be spiritually alert, spiritually on the ball if we are going to live a godly life. Sleepy Christians are easily deceived. Sleepy Christians are easily led astray. Sleepy Christians don't stand against temptation because we don't see the pitfalls coming.

Jesus called his disciples to watch to be alert and to pray that is to be spiritually preparing themselves for the battles ahead. Jesus through prayer prepared himself for the hours ahead. The contrast with the sleeping disciples is stark isn't it? While he prayed they slept. When he was ready they weren't. When he stood against the forces of evil they didn't, in v56 we see that they all fled and Peter couldn't stand the interrogation of a servant girl let alone standing before the Sanhedrin. As one writer puts it "While Jesus was showing the victory of the spirit over the flesh the disciples were manifesting the victory of the flesh over the spirit."

Jesus was showing the necessity of prayer and he called his disciples to "watch and pray".

We too need to watch and pray if we are to live effective Christian lives. We need to be alert to the battle we face and in prayer that we may walk the way of Christ each new day.

It is through prayer that we prepare to live each day. Prayer wakens our spiritual heart to the challenges and opportunities of the day ahead. Prayer as we come to God each day and say lead me not into temptation helps to waken us up. Prayer as we come to God recognising our weaknesses and talking to him about the need to be protected and asking him to do that. As we watch our lives and know where our failings are, we come and pray that he would lead us in paths that avoid those points of temptation and prayer also helps us to be on the ball as we face other challenges.

Can I suggest that over the next few days you take stock of where your prayer life is. Look as it were at the prayer gauge and ask where the needle is pointing. I'm not saying this to make us feel guilty but as a Pastor concerned for each of us and our spiritual well being. I say it not from a position of strength but as one who struggles with prayer. I say it because I know as I'm sure we all do that without prayer our individual Christian lives are going nowhere and that without prayer we as a church will not see God's blessing. So would you look at your prayer life? Along with that perhaps get this booklet and read it.

Jesus calls us to watch and pray and I am under God asking us to look at our lives and see if we are being obedient to him and to see where we need to give some attention to our prayer life.