

- Our Gospel today forthrightly addresses the theme of **prayer**. Praying *daily* with Scripture *through the Prayer Book* is a centuries-old Anglican spiritual practice. This centers on **the Church's faith that God speaks to us through the Bible. And, that God is with us in prayer**. We find a great example of *both* in the prophet Jeremiah, in a story we heard in the Daily Office this week.¹ In it, we learn **how God gave his own words to the prophet**, to be written on a scroll. God's message through Jeremiah *alarmed* the Jerusalem officials, and Jeremiah's scroll was brought to the king. He then blandly cut it up with a penknife and threw the scraps into a fire! After this, the king's officers lowered the prophet into a cistern, leaving him there to starve in the mud! Yet, because of his vision and faith, **Jeremiah could have prayed these Holy Spirit-inspired words from Psalm 71**: "*You have shown me great troubles and adversities; but you will restore my life, and bring me up again from the deep places of the earth.*"²
- Regrettably, *most of us are not like Jeremiah*. Despite Jesus' counsel that we should **pray always**, we go through life *not praying much*. *Instead*, we immerse ourselves in other activities, like our work, time with friends and family, and trying to keep up with repairs. With any time left over, we watch TV, follow sports and enjoy movies. **But then come unwelcome surprises**, those bewildering moments when our lives get disrupted. *After a sudden illness or accident*, we find ourselves unexpectedly in the Emergency Room. *An unanticipated blow* to our financial security *halts* our sense of momentum. *Or a crisis* in a loved-one's life shakes our confidence and sense of purpose. When things like these happen, questions arise. Questions like ~ **Why is this happening? What will it mean for my future? And how can I pray now?**
- We have plans and schemes for the **ordinary** challenges we deal with. New appliances always come with a manual, even if we don't read it. Magazines provide how-to stories and new methods for dealing with familiar problems.

But sooner or later, we face a situation for which we have *no ready explanation or quick-fix*. If we have kept our lives mostly in order, these *out-of-the-ordinary* events are *unsettling*. They prompt us to ask questions we may otherwise avoid. *What do I do now? Who will guide me?* ~> These are what we can call, *the "asking God" questions*.

- Security and assurance often come through self-reliance, from depending on ourselves to *get along and get ahead*. But *this makes it tough for us to turn to others*. Sometimes, it's the *last* thing we want to do... even if it's the *only* thing left to do. What a paradox! *We are shaped by a culture which, on one hand, discourages us from asking for assistance. And, on the other, our culture nurtures the awareness that many of us are victims, victims who are owed assistance. Both* of these ways of looking at the world can hinder us from *hearing* our Gospel today. For, either way, *it becomes hard for us to learn from Jesus when he teaches us about prayer*. His 'Our Father' prayer provides a good example.
- *We habitually repeat this prayer, assuming that it has "asking God" right at the heart of it. But, there is more than one way to ask God: we can ask God our good questions*, in the context of a Spirit-enabled relationship. *And, we can ask God for good results*, hoping to receive them.³ *But what about hearing God, instead of asking God?* Though Jesus' thoroughly Jewish prayer mentions *us and our needs, his prayer is God-centered, and God-focused, not us-focused*. Notice how the first half of his prayer is devoted to *praise and adoration*. *Following him, we speak to God, saying "your name," "your kingdom," and "your will."* And *only then, after* centering ourselves on God's holiness, and on God's will and sovereignty, *do we begin to ask for our basic needs*. And *not our wants*, but our *basic material needs!* Along with them, we ask for *our basic spiritual need*, the forgiveness of our sins. (Think about this: *how many of us actually want God's will to be done in our lives, without also* wanting to specify the answer in advance?)

- In our Gospel today, **Jesus approaches Jerusalem**.⁴ He senses the *looming adversity* it harbors for him and his disciples. To strengthen his followers, he tells them a little story with a simple point. We shouldn't let the details distract us from Luke's introduction to it. He plainly states the purpose of Jesus' story. "**Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.**"⁵
- Unless we are careful, **we are likely to assume that Jesus wants us to see prayer as boiling down to persuasion!** But the point of his story is **not** for us **to try to persuade God** about the rightness of our needs! The point is for us to be as *persevering* in prayer as this woman was. This is precisely **so that God can persuade us** about the rightness of God's will.⁶ Jesus commends the example of *her persistence, not her insistence* on getting her way. Discerning that God wants us to be attentive and faithful, we then see that **our relationship with God is the real issue, not our needs**. If even an unjust judge will respond to persistence, how much more will our righteous God vindicate Israel's faithful, who seek him?
- Just as children do with their parents, we usually take our relationship with our Father in heaven *for granted*. At the same time we are absorbed with our *needs and wants*. Yet, **we can also choose to be intentional** about our relationship with God, and trust God's Providence for our needs. Well, this is hard to do!
- Here we can connect with Jacob's experience, in our first reading.⁷ Jacob's life has been greatly disrupted. He is filled with unease about meeting his brother Esau, *whom he has wronged*. Jacob worries for himself and his future, and about his kids and his possessions. **He wrestles with anxiety**. During a dark night, he discovers *he is wrestling with more than worry* - **he is wrestling with God!** And so, he is also wrestling with **himself**.⁸

- This is the key: *wrestling with God is usually the result of resisting God, and of resisting God's will*. Wrestling with God can leave us with the spiritual equivalent of a limp. As with Jacob, this 'limp' results from our stubbornness and hard-heartedness. In spite of this, God truly wants *everyone* to receive divine blessing, whether it's Jacob and Esau, or all of us. But, sometimes, and maybe even often, *we get in the way!*
- At the very least, as Jacob discovered, *prayer is about hanging on to God, no matter what... ~ even while we are asking God questions, and even while we are contending with God's will for us.* → *It really is ok to tell God we are angry or sad, or disappointed or depressed. And it really is ok to tell God that we blame God for these things!* The point is to *tell God*, instead of *telling our friends* or Facebook. *By asking God, or honestly telling God, we engage with God.* Then, like Jacob, *we are in the best position to receive God's blessing.* It helps us see that *prayer has little to do with changing God's will.* Instead, *prayer has everything to do with God changing our will.* For God always seeks to change our will so that it comes into accord with God's great love for us.



James Tissot, *Jacob Wrestles with an Angel*

Persistence: asking God *questions*, rather than asking God for *results* ~

"Why do you pray?" he asked after a moment.

Why did I pray? Strange question. Why did I live? Why did I breathe?

"I don't know," I told him, even more troubled and ill at ease. "I don't know."

From that day on, I saw him often. He explained to me, with great emphasis, that *every question possessed a power that was lost in the answer . . .*

'Man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him,' he liked to say. Therein lies true dialogue. Man *asks* and God *replies*. But we don't understand His replies. We *cannot* understand them. Because they dwell in the depths of our souls and remain there until we die. The real answers, Eliezer, you will find only within yourself.

"And why do you pray, Moishe?" I asked him.

"I pray to the God within me for the strength to ask Him the *real* questions."

An extract from *Night*, by Elie Weisel {from: <http://www.fsgworkinprogress.com/2016/07/night-2/>}

Regarding *answers* to our *questions*, many feel encouraged by Jesus' words in John 16:12-13, that "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth..."

Genesis 32:22-31

The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Notes

¹ See Jeremiah 36.

² Psalm 71:20. (Note that 'great troubles and adversities' are not inconsistent with God's Providence!)

³ See the extract from *Night*, by Elie Weisel, printed with the worship bulletin.

⁴ As we have seen recently, this is an important theme, as well as structuring element, in Luke's Gospel.

⁵ Emphasis added.

⁶ Persevering in prayer is also a central theme in our collect prayer for today, and in our Epistle, Paul encourages Timothy to be persistent.

⁷ Genesis 32:22-31.

⁸ For many of us, engagement with God often means wrestling with God, our 'holy adversary!' It may be the Christian ethicist, Paul Ramsey, to whom I should attribute the latter phrase.