

Homily 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C 16th October 2016

Prayer is one of the great mysteries, possibly the greatest mystery. Google defines prayer as “a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or another deity.” Most if not all religious practices contain some form of prayer. We have prayer groups in our parishes that offer prayers for various intentions. Prayer can simply be described as talking to God, yet it generates a verity of emotions in people. The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner writes: *“When I pray, it’s as if my words have disappeared down some deep, dark well, from which no echo ever comes back to reassure me they have struck the ground of Your heart”*. Yet, my own mother would speak of the power of prayer. When asked why? She would talk about how during World War II she and the entire parish said The Rosary for peace constantly. Mum would never let us forget that peace in the Pacific occurred the 15th of August, the feast of The Assumption of Mary into Heaven. When mum was dying all she wanted was for you to hold her hand and say The Rosary.

I personally pray for my deceased relatives and friends. I have a deep love of the Psalms. In the psalms I find myself at my best and my worst, in the psalms God at times is close and at other times very distant. For me the Psalms capture my journey with clarity and beauty. I try to practice the Benedictine tradition of continuous prayer which seeks a total awareness of God in everyday life. I pray the Office and practice Christian Meditation. I get quite annoyed with people who look for benefits from prayer and meditation. Unlike Karl Rahner I do not feel my words have disappeared down some deep, dark well. I would describe my prayer with words like peace, oneness and refuge. I am unsure if my prayer has changed my physical world around me, but I am totally convinced it has changed and will continue to change me.

During my clinical pastoral education course at North Ryde Psychiatric Hospital I was taught a valuable lesson about prayer. When you start the course for about the first six months you spend your time learning about yourself through training exercises. These training exercises see the student responding to a particular scenario while the rest of the class looks on. The course facilitators are very experienced at putting you

in very tricky situations and “pushing your buttons”. In one significant exercise I was responding to a grandfather in causality whose grandson had had a serious accident on a skateboard the grandfather had given the child. The child had suffered significant head injuries and was in a critical condition. The role of the grandfather was played by Alan one of senior course facilitators. Alan was a good actor and very convincing. When I sat down next to Alan I asked him his name and what was going on, the normal things. Then, I asked: What can I do for you? He replied: Can we pray for a miracle? I need a miracle. I need my grandson to walk out of here. The facilitators understood me very well and knew what my reaction would be to asking for a miracle; they knew I would have difficulty. I was about to be taught a beautiful lesson about prayer. My reply to Alan’s request for a miracle was to say; why don’t we pray for the best outcome of your grandson. Alan looked at me and said: What kind of God wouldn’t want my grandson to walk out of here? If I could have crawled into a hole I would have. During the exercise debrief I realised that despite my theological study, my formation and my prayer life I still had a very dualistic view of the world. In fact I saw two worlds. The world

we live in a physical world governed by science and for want of a better expression God's world the spiritual domain. I guess my position arose from my annoyance of a view of prayer as some kind of supernatural currency with God as a vending machine. I say this many prayers and do xyz and God is required to fulfil my request. But if you ask me the same question now: Can we pray for a miracle? My answer would be okay: How would you like to pray? I have lost count of the number of times in my hospital ministry I have asked God in prayer to support a seriously ill patient and to restore them to health knowing full well that the patient is dying. Have I changed?

Obviously yes but on the other hand no. What hasn't changed is my very logical mind, a legacy of having spent my working life in computers, mathematics and engineering. What has changed is I am happy to live in the tension of allowing God into everything. The tension I experience when I pray for a dying patient to recover, when I pray for a miracle. In these moments my logical mind still screams at me "folly" but now I remember that beautiful line of St Paul in 1 Corinthians "but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles". I remember I follow a

crucified Christ and as the Franciscan Richard Rohr says nobody in their right mind would dream up a religion based on a crucified god.

As a society we are very outcome focused, in our workplaces we talk of key performance indicators, project outcomes etc. At home we set targets for paying off our mortgage, improving our credit card balance, finding a new house etc. We talk about work life balance as if work and life are two separate entities. As if work is somehow disconnected from our life. My prayer life challenges these perceptions. Prayer focuses me, on the here and now, on finding Christ in the everyday. I still have goals but I'm more focused on the journey than the outcome. By keeping me connected with God, prayer infuses God into everything I do. Difficult people and situations are still difficult but somehow I don't feel quite as isolated. Like Moses in today's first reading I have often felt supported by the prayers of my community during difficult times. Prayerful reflection on my life with its challenges and difficulties leads me into a deeper understanding of true self. Karl Rahner writes; prayer leads us into ourselves our true self which precisely the person God is seeking a relationship with. St Benedict

tells us that ultimately prayer is living. For me prayer is staying connected with God. I am not trying to pester God into some outcome that I feel would benefit me no I'm just staying connected to nurture my faith. Without prayer, faith is nothing but a statement akin to; I have faith in the tyres on my car. Without faith prayer is just meaningless words or at the best good poetry.

I will leave you with Ester de Waal description of prayer: "*Prayer is the blue sky behind the clouds*".

Deacon George Bryan

Some books you might find interesting:

Encounter with Silence, Karl Rahner, St Augustine Press, A book of meditations about man's relation with God.

Seeking God, Esther de Wall, Canterbury Press, The way of St Benedict

Interview with Ranjit Rao from the ABC web site, The Spirit of Things: Beyond work-life balance: How to achieve the balance and inner peace of the Buddha in the midst of a busy hectic life

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/spiritofthings/beyond-work-life-balance/7152668>

Ranjit Rao has written this book which I haven't read but may be interesting:

Meditation and Martini, Ranjit Rao, Michelle Anderson Publishing,