

Study

This area of study is challenging, but also essential to understanding the Way of Jesus. By way of an overview, we are looking into three areas of Scripture.

Jesus: Read Matthew 12: 25-28 and John 12: 31. How did he understand spiritual battle?

New Testament: 2 Cor 11:14; 2 Peter 2:4; Col 2: 15; Eph 1: 19-21; 1 John 5: 19; Heb 2: 14-15. What is the worldview expressed in these verses?

Revelation. Rev 9: 1-10; Rev 12: 7-12. Why is this in the Bible? How is the language intended to make you feel? Think?

Living it out (Application):

How does reflecting on the picture of spiritual conflict affect your response to suffering in the world? Your approach to prayer?

Coming Up at St Mark's

Still 12 children to sponsor from Compassion...see Michelle Hayes for details...

Invitation cards for Christmas services will soon be available – please do take some and pass them round your friends and neighbours...



Please pray for...

Give thanks for the response to the **Compassion weekend**, and for the testimony of Eliezer. Also for the appeal for the Philippines, which nationally has revealed God's compassionate heart...

Pray for the **people of the Philippines** as they struggle to rebuild lives and their land.

Pray for **Terry Wilcox and Peter Gibson** as they visit Bellary in India to try and discern the future direction for that project.

Give thanks for the **PCC day** last week – a sense of direction and momentum. Please pray for the effective putting into practice of St Mark's vision.

Pray for the guests on our **Alpha Course**, and for the team leading it.

Mission Partner Prayer Focus:

Pray for the ministry of **Open Doors**, serving Christians experiencing persecution. Particularly pray for brothers and sisters in Syria.

Please do take the opportunity for more prayer requests/feedback - it's a wonderful way of sharing.

Thank you for your prayers for this church community!

INDIVIDUAL STUDY NOTES

Week beginning: 24th November 2013

Worship/reflection:

What evidence do you see of spiritual conflict in the world? We are focusing on challenging areas this week, so spend ten minutes focussing your heart on the Lordship of Jesus. Meditate on Luke 8: 22-26 (stilling of the storm) and Colossians 1: 15-20. Finish by declaring His Lordship in your heart.

The Way of Jesus 4: Prayer: Living in a warzone

This year we have been walking the Way of Jesus. You remember the seven Keys to following Jesus we started with at the beginning of the year? One - the one main thing - the Kingdom. Two - the two greatest commandments - Love God and Love others. Three - knowing God as Father, Son and Spirit. Four – “fourmation” - through prayer, worship, community and the Scriptures. Five - displaying God's life in what is seen, heard, touched, smelt and tasted – whole life following. Six - walking the Way in the six days of the week. Seven - the seventh day of rest. Living a life of balance and rhythm. In the summer the theme has been understanding the way the biblical themes of Kingdom and Covenant are foundational to our lives.

As we approach Christmas we are going to look at prayer. A while back I received a very honest email from someone in our church community. I had asked in a meeting what stops us from being passionate about praying. He wrote this: “Taking prayer as one of the four disciplines of Christian formation (prayer / worship / study / community), prayer is the one I struggle to understand. I struggle to make sense of it. I can understand the other three disciplines, I kind of 'get it' for each of them. I can't say the same for prayer. **It is difficult to say how prayer “works”. We have a God who deserves our prayers, but does not need them, indeed knows what we will pray before we pray it. We're told our prayers are important and it seems that numbers and persistence matter.** This is I think why I struggle to get passionate about prayer. **If I could 'understand' prayer, see how it worked, then I'd be more passionate? With prayer, there also seems to be an elements of "delayed gratification".** Worship, study and community all give some instant feedback, in some form. The results of what we are trying to achieve are relatively instantaneous. With prayer this is not the case. **Answers are not always apparently forthcoming, and prayer requires a persistence not necessarily apparent in other aspects of the Christian life.** Seeing the results is integral to passion...”

I absolutely identify with a lot of what Mr/Mrs Anonymous is saying. **If we don't get why and how to pray, we will never grow in it.** Over the next few weeks I hope we can gain a way of understanding how the Bible, and how Jesus, understood the nature of the way things are. This is because **to begin to understand prayer you have to understand the universe in which prayer happens.** Why our prayers matter at all. Why you have to be persistent. Why God just can't wave a magic wand. So many questions.

Today this is a teaching-based sermon, very much background, and we are going to start to open up things which may be new or challenging. But stick with it because we will be seeking to clarify things over the coming weeks. I want to frame this journey by pointing something out which, if you only look at the Bible for a few minutes, is obvious, but which nevertheless we often struggle to really get to grips with. The fact is that throughout the Bible there is conflict, there is difficulty, there is evil, there is death, there is illness – **and no one is ever surprised by it.** In the New Testament there is no one who says, “Why me?” when they suffer – but we often do. In the New Testament **no one assumes that God has sent them suffering to punish them** – but in our culture we so often hear it. In the New Testament **no one ever says, “Everything happens for a reason.”** They don't believe God is giving kids cancer *for a reason*, or sending disasters to teach a country a lesson, or causing buildings to collapse, or turning people into terrorists. **He is not controlling the world with puppet strings. Some things are just plain bad – and his heart breaks with ours.** If you want to know what God is like **you look at Jesus**, and it is abundantly clear that Jesus never attributed anyone's suffering to a lesson God wanted to teach them – he always showed the will of God in healing. If you are going through a hard time, and some people really suffer horrendously, there will be things that God can bring out of it – **but don't ever believe He sees your suffering as good.** You are His precious child. He gives good things to His children.

The Bible is never surprised by evil, difficulty, and by the fact that we have to learn to persevere in prayer. Why? **Because we live in a warzone.** We are in a battle. You see this right from the beginning, throughout the Old Testament and through the ministry of Jesus. **“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy,”** he taught. “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Jesus knew he was in a battle, **in a world that was not as it should be.** That's why he himself persevered in prayer. That's why he put right in the middle of the Lord's Prayer, **“Deliver us from evil.”** You see the reality of the battle in the persecution of the early church, the list of terrible things that happened to Paul. We are trying to get under the skin of the way everything is, and why Paul wrote this: For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. **This dark world? Spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms?** But I thought God was in control...I thought He holds the whole world in His hands? In ultimate terms, yes. But you will remember that the Bible ends with Revelation. And the book of Revelation ends with a huge, terrifying battle, painted in vivid metaphorical colours. Satan is finally defeated. Death is no more. God is victorious. **The beauty of the Bible is that it is intensely realistic about the way things are.** And right now, it says, **we are in the midst of a conflict.**

What are the roots of this conflict? In the beginning we learn that God created two realms - the heavens and the earth – **a spiritual realm we can't see, and an earthly realm we can.** Spirit

and people. Made in love, for His glory. And, most importantly, **given the freedom to choose whether to serve Him or not.** We know from Scripture and history how human beings have chosen – and we see the effects of that obviously around us – in the brokenness of the world. We call it “The Fall”. But here is the mysterious thing – we are given a glimpse into the fact that the spiritual world, which had the same freedom, also made the same choice. And it too fell, in rebellion. This spiritual world Paul calls “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” **It has limited, but real ability to screw things up.** CS Lewis memorably said this: **“There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.”** It's why our battles continue. We will go a bit more into detail about this over coming weeks, but according to the Bible **the main reason why when we pray for things they don't automatically happen is because the spiritual world is a lot more complex than we imagine.**

At this point I anticipate you may be thinking two things. A lot of people in our culture would think this is all bonkers. And you may be thinking that. But just to encourage you, if you are a Christian who never asks themselves, “Am I bonkers?” then you are not being real, and you are probably not getting out of your comfort zone enough. Of course this is strange – we are not used to dealing with the spiritual reality of evil. This is partly because **we live in a world where we are well-insulated and distracted.** Partly because **spiritual battle in our culture comes to us in subtler ways** – through, for example, consumerism. The lies that if I just had that thing, I would be happy. Or the sense of rooting our identity in what we own. And it's strange because of course **we are surrounded by voices who say there is only one way of knowing things – through our senses, and with scientific reasoning.** So certainly we need to acknowledge the reality that these form the way we think. But the main task for us is that however we see the world, **let it be in a way that is as faithful to the biblical story, and to Jesus, as it can possibly be.** And let it make sense of the way things actually are – both the incredible beauty, and the seemingly random suffering and destruction. The second thing you may be struggling with is that we are talking about prayer as if it is “asking for things.” And for you prayer is not really about that. **It's about being with God. Relationship.** And you are absolutely right. **It's precisely about our relationship with our Father.** And yet...this relationship is one in which **He dignifies us by making us partners with Him in a covenant.** Where what we do **really matters.** It's a real relationship – us **“praying for things” expresses the nature of the kind of relationship He has made us to have with Him.** And He also calls us to seek and pray for His Kingdom. God, by His grace, has enrolled us in the battle, and made our “praying for things” important.

I know in some ways this has been a “feel bad” sermon, but I actually think it's a liberating message for good reasons: We will only live joyful, happy lives **if we can understand and not be surprised by the reality of suffering and evil.** We will only be able to love God **when we see that suffering does not come from Him**, but that He is with us in the battle. It will stop us saying unhelpful things to each other when we do struggle. We don't have to say, “Everything happens for a reason.” We can simply say, “Some things are just bad...for now.” And knowing we are in a battle **helps us to come to terms with the complexities of prayer.** How beautiful a thing it is that God enlists us as His partners in this wonderful, yet groaning creation! How amazing it is that we can pray! As my friend also wrote in his email: “With prayer this is an element of the unbelievable. I am talking to God, right? Mind blowing. Very often I struggle to believe that I actually have the ear of God, not to mention believe that he is interested in what I have to say and think. Belief is integral to passion, in turn passion is integral to commitment?” Let's remember who we are – we are covenant children of God, people for whom everything that is true of Christ is now true of us. You and I have an amazing place in the universe, and God has made you His partner – His friend – who, Jesus said, will do even greater things than Him.