

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” ³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” ⁴ So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵ The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah^[a] and Meribah,^[b] because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access^[b] to this grace in which we stand, and we^[c] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more surely, therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.^[e] ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹ But more than that, we even boast in

God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

So Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)^[a] ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir,^[b] you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir,^[c] give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband,’ ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir,^[d] I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you^[e] say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you^[f] will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You^[g] worship what you^[h] do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks

Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he,^[i] the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” ²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah,^[i] can he?” ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³²But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” ³⁴Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving^[k] wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Rev’d John Shoaf — Sermon — 12 March 2023

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Two valuable bits of inspiration have come my way recently.

First, Doug lent me a book which made quite an impression. It’s written by a former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, and it’s called *The Church in the Market Place*. It’s about his tenure as Vicar of St Nicholas’ church in Durham, in England, which is a large church in the town square. Like many churches, St Nick’s had been experiencing a shrinking congregation, and when Rev’d Carey became Vicar, he was faced with a building needing repair and a parish needing revitalising. The book is his story of what he and his congregation achieved.

The details of his efforts and the journey his congregation took to develop and grow the church make for interesting reading, but are not important to relate here. But what struck me is how their project of renewal got started. Very simply, Rev’d Carey states in his book:

Renewal begins with prayer. And that is where we started.

I firmly believe that if we, too, want to renew our church, to grow and reach more and more people in our communities, we too need to begin with prayer. Prayer connects, it unites, it inspires, it refreshes and builds. It connects people together with the Holy Spirit; it unites people in a common purpose; it inspires new ideas; it refreshes the mind and spirit and builds on the gifts which God has given us. Prayer brings us close to God and helps us to know God’s plan for us. Prayer is perhaps the most important thing a Christian can do.

The second bit of inspiration which came my way was from Robert, who forwarded me an article about a church near Melbourne, Australia which has begun a prayer ministry in a disused church shop on their property. The idea was suggested by one of their parishioners, and again, the details aren't important, but what they did is great. They set up a prayer box in the church where people, whether of the congregation or not, could drop in prayer requests. These request were then prayed over on a regular basis. Prayers may be requested anonymously: a prayer for "the person who is undergoing surgery this week" is just as effective as "pray for John Smith." After all, God knows who it is we are praying about.

This has several benefits: first, people know that they are not alone in praying for the things on their minds; it establishes a pattern of regular prayer for those who commit to it; and it brings our congregation as a whole closer to God. Prayer is communication with God and reflects our faith. God wants to hear from us — the more the better. And the mind that is in prayer is a mind that is focussed on God for the benefit of our fellow humans. Two of our most important concerns, loving God and loving our neighbours, are addressed in the one action.

I know that prayer is hard sometimes. We can all say a short prayer, a few sentences; and we call all pray the Prayers of the People as we do every Sunday here in church. And those prayers are valuable. God hears all prayers. But God always looks for commitment from us, and loves it when we focus our minds on addressing him. It's that connection with God that is so valuable. Think of it like human communication. A text from a friend is great; a phone call is better. There's more time to relate. Your mind moves through more growth into richer ideas and connections.

Things come to you when you pray, things that you wouldn't think of otherwise. God uses prayer to put ideas into our heads.

And if nothing else, just sitting down and resting for half an hour during your busy day is pretty nice too!

I'm going to be looking at the parish schedule and scheduling some regular prayer meeting times, and I hope you'll join me as we pray together for our people and for our parish.

As usual, Jesus is our model. At that great and terrible moment of his life on earth, when he was about to begin that last journey to the cross, what did he do? He prayed. He went off away from the disciples and spoke with his Father. In Matthew 26 we read:

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

³⁷ He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." ³⁹ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want." (Matt 26:36-39)

At this crucial moment of his life, he prayed to his Father. He prayed for guidance, for reassurance, for comfort. Before he took the decisive step of submitting to his arrest, he prayed. And we can do the same, when we are on the cusp of something new and perhaps a bit scary.

Because we are on the cusp, aren't we? As a congregation, we are on the cusp. Oh, we aren't about to be arrested, tried and crucified, as Jesus was, yet we are part of the same mission, to bring the Gospel to all people. We have some good things happening here.

We are blessed in many ways. Yet we're not achieving our full potential. We have empty seats which could be filled. We have communion and community to offer to so many more people. We have the word of God — if we firmly believe in that word, then we will want to share it. Exciting things lie ahead. We're starting to implement some of those good ideas you had when we all met together a few Sundays ago for our parish meeting.

But we must prepare. And that brings us back to prayer. Let's start now.

Loving God,
we lift up our hearts to you in prayer.
Sometimes we don't know how to pray.
Sometimes we think it is just silence.
Lord, let even our silence speak to you.
Search our hearts.
See our longing for you.
See how we wish to serve you.
Empty our hearts of all that distracts us,
and fill us with a desire to serve you.
Send us your lost people, Lord,
and use us to help bring their hearts back to you.
We pause for a minute in silence,
so that you may read our hearts and feel you with us.

For all your love and care and inspiration, Lord,
we give you thanks. Amen.