

# THE LION

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## ***Message from the Rector***

### ***“The Problem of Prayer”***

#### **Part Two**

In my last article I addressed what could be called some of the “mechanical” problems of prayer, which might include things like whether or not we really have a desire to pray, the fact that prayer is work (i.e., if we are going to do it right, it’s going to take a bit of effort), and the problems of a cold heart (complacency in prayer) and a wandering mind. These tend to be the most common problems of prayer for most people. In that same article I also mentioned some of the things that we might do to help overcome these things: like finding a quiet place to pray, praying with our eyes open, or praying out loud. Of course, these are only suggestions. What we need to do is experiment a little to find out what works for us and then stick with it – even when it doesn’t seem to be working anymore. God rewards patient perseverance; this is especially true when it comes to prayer.

In this article I would like to begin to address two other problems of prayer. These two problems are what we might call “ethical” problems of prayer: the *vertical* problem of prayer and the *horizontal* problem of prayer. In order to better explain them, I would like to quote something that all of us hear each and every week: “Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Now, of course, we all recognize this as the Summary of the Law that is found at the bottom of page 69 in the *Book of Common Prayer*. But what we might not realize is that these two commandments – the commandment to love God and the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves – are not only the foundation of how we are to actually live our Christians lives, but disharmony between the two might also be at the very foundation of the ethical problems of prayer. Since these two problems – the vertical and horizontal problems – are interrelated and inseparable, and I can promise that if we have unresolved issues in one we will most certainly have unresolved issues in the other. The result will be problems in our prayer lives as a whole. So let us begin by taking a look at the vertical problem of prayer: a disruption in our relationship with God.

The first commandment in the Summary of the Law is the commandment to love God from the very core of who we are as his children. We are to love God with all our heart (the emotional and volitional seat of our humanity), all our soul (the spiritual aspect of our humanity), and all our mind (our intellectual side that explores and examines what it means to be a Christian in the first place). All of this should be obvious to us, but our relationship with God in these three things has an enormous impact on our prayer lives. The state of our prayer life is a reflection of the state of our relationship with God, and this is particularly true with respect to our behavior. That is why I classify this problem as an *ethical* problem of prayer.

Our behavior is a very good indicator of where we stand in our relationship to God. If we are loving him with all our heart, soul, and mind then we are trying our best to live and to love according to the way he wants us to – according to the way Jesus Christ lived and loved. But if this is not the case, and if our relationship is disrupted because we are involved in some persistent sin (sins of commission) or are ignoring the nurturing of our relationship with God (sins of omission), then this

disruption will show itself and our prayers will go nowhere. They will become cold and detached – assuming that we are even praying at all – and God will seem to be either distant from us or absent from us entirely.

### *Message from the Rector - Continued*

And there is a simple reason that God seems distant or absent: he is! Fr. Michael Casey, a Cistercian monk and author of the book *Sacred Reading: the Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, calls this “pedagogical withdrawal.” He writes, “Sometimes the reason [prayer] seems to go nowhere is to be sought in specific choices made by us that constitute a step away from God. An overt act of injustice or unchastity, the breaking of a commitment, the refusal of obedience, or calculated nastiness to a neighbor can bring to nothing years of apparent progress. God withdraws from us and allows us to experience the extent of our own unlovableness. It is as though God suspends the relationship to demonstrate an unwillingness to become an accomplice in our crime. Deliberate un-Christlike behavior is necessarily a turning away from God; without repentance we cannot continue as before.” (p. 91-92).

In other words, while it isn't always the case, often when our relationship with God has become cold and estranged, it is because he has withdrawn his presence and has suspended his relationship with us in order to show his disapproval over something we have said or done. And while our transgression is our step away from God, his distance or absence is his step away from us. Yet God does not do this to be vindictive: he does it that we might learn. Just like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, God will allow us to go into a far country and spiritually wallow with the pigs that we might eventually come to ourselves and return to the peace and comfort that only his presence can bring. St John Chrysostom recognized this when, in remarking on this parable, he wrote, “When words would not convince us, God often leaves us to learn from the things that happen to us.”

The reason for this is plain: God does this that we might return to him. His distance is often the very thing that brings us back into a proper relationship with him. It gets our attention and causes us to reflect on what we have said or done to disrupt that relationship, and this leads us to repentance where repentance is needed. As King David put it, “The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” God's withdrawal and estrangement is designed with one thing in mind: our restoration. It humbles us and shows us our need for him, bringing us to the repentance that leads to restoration. Isn't it wonderful that God's loving restoration always awaits his wayward children?

But sometimes our pride stands in the way. Sometimes, instead of turning from our bad behavior we begin to rationalize it, and we try to convince ourselves that we are justified in whatever it is that we are saying or doing. However, the truth is that even though we may sincerely convince ourselves that we have done nothing wrong (after all, we fallen human beings are masters at self-deception), we can't fool God, and in order to break through our complacency he often simply leaves us to ourselves. As long as we are unwilling to learn, he is willing to let us experience what it is like to be apart from him. But these distant silences are also God's loud calls to us, and for a Christian they are often punishment enough – like withholding food from a starving man. God does this so that hopefully, just like the son in our Lord's parable, we will soon come to our senses and return to our Father's house where there is spiritual food aplenty.

So, we can now see how our vertical relationship with God impacts our prayer life; and while a proper relationship doesn't promise that we will never feel God's distance or absence in prayer – we will often have dry and arid seasons; that is simply the nature of the spiritual life – a troubled relationship with God guarantees it. This is equally true on the horizontal level: disharmony in our relationships with others. This too can also cause an estrangement from God in prayer. I will conclude this series with a discussion of that in our next issue.

## **Curate's Corner**

Rev. Mr. Randall Russell

Several years ago I remember reading a Newsweek article that stated although about eighty percent of Americans say they believe in heaven, only a little less than thirty percent say they believe in the physical resurrection of the dead. And to be honest, when I read this I really didn't doubt those statistics. In fact, based upon my experience I'd say those statistics were probably pretty accurate. In my opinion most people, even many Christians, really don't understand what is meant when in the creed we say "I believe in the resurrection of the dead".

In the creed when we say that we "believe in the resurrection of the dead" it needs to be understood that we are not only talking about Christ's resurrection, but the future resurrection of all those who have died in Christ as well. In 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 we read, "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by one man came death, by one Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming." And this, of course, is not the only bible verse that addresses the topic of the resurrection. There are several others such as Job 19:25-27, Daniel 12:2, Matthew 22:23-33, John 5:28-29, and Revelation 20:12 just to name a few.

After all, floating around in heaven as a bodiless spirit is not supposed to be the anticipated conclusion to every Christian life! Christ returning to judge the quick and the dead, Christ returning in order to establish a new heaven and a new earth, Christ returning to raise the dead and restore all of creation is the future glory which every Christian should anticipate. For I don't know what it is like to float above the clouds as a spirit, but I do know what it was like to hug my mother while she was alive; I don't know what it is like to play a "spiritual" harp high above earth, but I do know what it is like to worship alongside my brothers and sisters in Christ at church; and I don't know what it is like to be a ghost, but I do know what it is like to fall asleep with my son or daughter in my arms and awake to see them smile. And the greatest comfort for the Christian is that all those things do not have to come to an end, but they change and be transformed.

Again, the Apostle Paul explains, "Behold, I tell you a mystery: we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory' [1 Cor 15:51-54].

Christ is risen! And the granddaughter who longs to hug her departed grandfather will hug him once more. Christ is risen! And the son who longs to hear his mother's laugh in person one more time will hear it again. Christ is risen! And the Christian who longs to walk side by side with Jesus as Adam walked side by side with God in paradise will do exactly that! For Christ is risen so that all those put their trust in Him might one day rise as well. So Happy Easter to all the faithful who await the final Easter to dawn.

Peace in Christ.

## ***Music Notes***

Kathleen Knott, Music Director/Organist

### **“Come Down, O Love Divine”**

# 516 The 1982 Hymnal

Come down, O Love divine, and seek thou this soul of mine,  
And visit it with thine own ardor glowing;  
O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear,  
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing. Vs. 1

The text of this hymn provides a wonderful meditation as we prepare to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. The text has a long and interesting history. The original Latin text (“Veni, Sancte Spiritus”) is attributed to The Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton (d. 1228) and is known as “The Golden Sequence.” Bianco da Siena (d. 1434) included this text in his collection of hymns, and in the 1800’s the Italian scholar Telesforo Bini published the surviving manuscripts of Bianco. This text was translated into English by Richard Littledale and came to the attention of the great English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958).

Vaughan Williams composed the wonderful tune that we sing to this ancient text. The tune is called “Down Ampney” and is named after the composer’s birthplace in Down Ampney, Gloucestershire where his father was vicar. Vaughan Williams became music editor of The English Hymnal and included “Come Down, O Love Divine” in the hymn book. He was also a collector of folk music and this interest influences his compositions. His music is characteristically English. “If that Englishness in music can be encapsulated in words at all, those words would probably be: ostensibly familiar and commonplace, yet deep and mystical as well as lyrical, melodic, melancholic and nostalgic yet timeless.” (Peter Ackroyd, *The Origins of English Imagination*). This hymn is a treasure which is a perfect marriage of text and tune.

In addition, thank you to our Parish handbell and vocal choirs for their dedication during the Lent, Holy Week and Easter season. Our ringers and singers are all committed to their music ministry.

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## ***Lay Ministers***

Did you know that St. Mark’s has a group of lay ministers that were commissioned by Bishop Grundorf on September 14, 2014?

The purpose of this group is to be available to members of St. Mark’s as needed. For example, if you have a need or would like to talk with someone in addition to Father Mike or Deacon Randall, the lay ministers are available for prayer or just to talk. In addition, we have recently had a number of fellow parishioners that had a number of difficult situations occur in a short period of time and the lay ministers have been able to assist in a number of different ways.

Please plan on joining the lay ministers for our next coffee hour with refreshments on Sunday, May 1<sup>st</sup> immediately following the 10am service.

## ***Upcoming Holy Days***

### **April/May/June/July Holy Days**

April 4 (noon) – Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (transferred)

April 25 (noon) – Feast of St Mark the Evangelist

May 2 (noon) – Feast of Saints Phillip and James, Apostles (transferred)

May 5 (noon) – Feast of the Ascension (Day of Obligation)

May 16 (noon) – Monday in Whitsun Week

May 17 (noon) – Tuesday in Whitsun Week

June 11 (10:00 a.m.) – Feast of St Barnabas the Apostle

June 24 (noon) – Feast of the Nativity of St John the Baptist

June 29 (noon) – Feast of St Peter the Apostle

July 4 (10:00 a.m.) – Independence Day

July 25 (noon) – Feast of St James the Apostle

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## **St. Mark's Anglican Church**

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