‘Being loved into life’ Lent Course 2025

Session 1 – Our experience of prayer.

This evening, in our first session, I want to build a foundation for everything else that we’re going to exploring during our Lent course.

A good friend of mine, a church leader in the United States, was once asked to visit a lady, who had experienced enormous challenges in her life. And as he went in the door, the lady took one look at my friend - and sighed. “Oh,” she said, “I suppose you’ll want to hear about my sex life! That’s the first thing all of my other counsellors ask me about!” “Well, if you want to talk about that, we certainly can,” replied my friend, “but when it comes to exploring what’s really going on, I’d much prefer to hear about your prayer life.”

And I think he’s right. I think to pray, goes to the very heart of what it means to be human. And that prayer, rather than simply being a ‘shopping list to God’, that our ‘prayer-life’ not only reveals what is truly (really) going on within us, but it also can be the deepest source of life and sustenance and joy that we can ever experience.

Which is why, in our lent course this year, we’re going to be exploring the life of prayer. And especially, I want to share with you, some perspectives, some new insights, some practices of prayer that I have discovered, both during my Sabbatical and subsequent reading in Ignatian Spirituality, (especially in the writings of a Jesuit Catholic Priest, and University lecturer Richard J. Hauser SJ).

And I share these insights simply because, not only are they rooted in the bible, not only have they been tried and tested for centuries, not only have I found them just so helpful – but they seem to have been able to knit together all of the other discoveries that I have made, within multiple Christian traditions down the years! And these new treasures have brought me such joy, such freedom from fear, such intimacy with Jesus – that, as your Vicar, I feel duty-bound to pass them on to you.

So, let’s begin at the beginning (shall we?) with an event that just changed everything – the Christian equivalent to the ‘Big bang’ – by which I mean - the giving of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

You see, the New Testament is emphatic that everything has changed because the arrival, the death, then resurrection of Jesus. BUT then, there was another event followed, which flowed directly from all of these previous actions, which then transformed / revolutionised everything - the subsequent sending (the giving) of God the Holy Spirit - and the Spirit’s new presence NOW in the world, in those believing in Jesus.

So, why did the sending of the Holy Spirit change everything? Well, as the Apostle Paul, explains it, before Jesus, (and the sending of the Spirit), the primary presence of the Lord on earth was in the revered Temple of Jerusalem. If you want to know, to experience God, that’s where you went (where you had to go). But now no more. As Paul writes:

‘Didn’t you realise that you were God’s temple and that the Spirit of God was living among you? If anybody would destroy the temple of God, God will destroy him, because the temple of God is sacred; and you are that temple.’ (1 Cor 3:16-17)

Christians – this is us! The very presence of God is within us! And this changes everything!

For the scriptures do not simply point to the Holy Spirit as a new presence of God in believers; they further insist that this Spirit [once given to us, once within us] is now continually active and powerful in our lives – all of our lives - once we have turned to Christ.

It is the Holy Spirit, according to Jesus, who would empower the disciples in their mission:

“…but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8).

And to the Apostle Paul, this event, this receiving of the Holy Spirit into the lives of new Christians was so transformative, that, they hadn’t so much received ‘new lives’ they were in fact a ‘new creation’: “And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old is gone, and now the new one is here.” (2 Cor 5:17).

And the Apostle Paul wrote this because this was his lived experience too! You see, prior to this his life was all about abiding by the rules, keeping to the letter of the law – but now, with God within him, his life had a whole new focus and freedom - as he sought to respond to the internal directions of the Spirit of God within him:

“Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.” (Romans 8:5-6)

God’s Spirit had joined with his spirit (our Spirit) and could/would now direct our lives.

So, now that we have the Holy Spirit does this mean that we are now perfect? That now, once we have received the Spirit we only have tendencies flowing towards good? Well, no! Sadly not. The New Testament stresses that we are still divided beings, also possessing tendencies towards evil. We continually experience pressures from within ourselves, as well as from our external environment, moving us away from the inclinations of the Spirit. BUT (and it’s a very big but), the clear message of Scripture is that we need not be CONTROLLED by these inclinations. For if the presence of the Spirit does not take away these inclinations (as it surely did not for the Apostle Paul) it does give us the power not to be controlled by them; for grace is stronger than sin.

And what is grace? Well, grace, according to St Paul, means (for him) ‘everything God has given us in Jesus Christ’, with the Holy Spirit being the completion of what God has given us in Jesus. So, we might consider ‘grace’ as the power given us through the presence of the Spirit to enter into a deeper relationship with Christ and so become more like him.

But here’s the thing – here’s what makes this grace, this gift of God the Holy Spirit unlike every other relationship we have. For, it is that through his Spirit, that Jesus always takes the initiative, his role is always primary. By which I mean, we can go to him, only because he first draws us to himself. Any movement to Christ, any movement towards good, occurs because he sends his help, his Spirit.

Now, it goes without saying that we have a crucial role in keeping ourselves open to the Lord, as he extends his initiative – for we are free to ignore his promptings and act contrary to them – but this should not dilute the fact that we can move toward the Lord and towards good - because he enables us to move.

So, according to this understanding, the fact that you are here, is already a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work amongst you [already]! Isn’t that so encouraging? No more waiting for, another experience. The Holy Spirit already at work, now, within you and me!

So, let me summarise. This scriptural understanding of the Christian, insists that the Holy Spirit is present in us, continually active in us and continually extending, continually taking the initiative, in moving us away from evil towards good, in shaping us (transforming us) to become more like Jesus, whose Spirit now lives within us. And our role now is to become aware of these movements of the Spirit within, to listen and to respond, to cooperate, to keep in step with, to say yes!

But this understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit, often isn’t what we think, or what we have been brought up to think, about how Christianity works, is it? Often, we have another understanding altogether – and in his book Richard Hauser SJ, goes on to explore this through the use of two diagrams (which I found really helpful); the Western model of the person: the self-outside-God model - as opposed to the model we’ve been looking at ‘the scriptural model: the self-in-God model. Let me show you:

So, let’s look first at the ‘the western model of the person’ the ‘self-outside-God’ model. In the Western model the existence of God is never disputed, but God is residing primarily in heaven outside the self. The transcendence (the ‘otherworldliness’ of God) is so stressed that there is little or no acknowledgment of God imminence (God at work within us). As a result, within this model, all good desires flow from our own natural capacities and will power, with God having little or no role at all. With ‘grace’ being the reward that God gives us (safely stored in heaven) as a reward for our good deeds.

All of which is nonsense, (although some are drawn to this model because it keeps God at a safe distance). And yet it’s a mere caricature. It’s not what the bible says at all! No, the reality, as revealed by Jesus, as recorded in Scripture, as lived by Christians down the centuries, makes much more sense – and is a far exciting, far more liberating and far more liveable - than the Western ‘God-outside-self’ model could ever be! It’s the Scriptural ‘Self-in-God’ model.

With the ‘Self-in-God’ model – God is precisely that, within the believer through the giving of the gift of the Holy Spirit. And grace is the constant activity of God’s Holy Spirit within us - the power given us through the presence of the Spirit to enter into a deeper relationship with Christ and so become more like him.

And so, if in the ‘Self-outside-God’ model:

* Person initiates and God rewards.
* Grace is a treasury of merit stored up in heaven and earned by good deeds.
* Focus is on reward for self now or in heaven after death.
* Emphasis is on sporadically performed good deeds.

With the ‘Self-in-God’ model:

* It is God who initiates and the person responds.
* Grace is the transformation of the total person into the likeness of Christ by the freely given gift of the Holy Spirit.
* Our focus is upon loving God, and others, in intimate relationship with God now.
* Emphasis is on internal attitudes and continual awareness of the Spirit’s movements.

So now the question becomes – how? How do we do this? How do we adequately acknowledge the role of the Spirit in my good actions? How do I pay attention to activities of the Holy Spirit within me? Just how do I cooperate? How can I know and enjoy and relish the presence of Holy Spirit within me? How do I say yes? How do I journey onward in this transformation, to be more like Jesus, which is what the Holy Spirit wishes to accomplish in me? Well, this is what we are going to be explore in the coming weeks of our lent course.