

## WHAT IS PRAYER?

**1 Kings 19:11–13a**

**Luke 6:12–13**

### **Elijah Meets God at Horeb**

<sup>11</sup> He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

### **Jesus Chooses the Twelve Apostles**

<sup>12</sup> Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. <sup>13</sup> And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles:

<sup>14</sup> Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, <sup>15</sup> and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot,

<sup>16</sup> and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

## What is Prayer?

What is Prayer? That is the focus of today and will be the foundation from which both these church communities concentrate on over the next 6 weeks. What is prayer – it might sound like an obvious question, perhaps one that is so obvious that we shouldn't need to ask the question. Why stand here in a place that people have prayed for a hundred years, with the traditions of Christianity that has practiced prayer for two centuries should we be turning our thoughts to prayer?

Perhaps because it is a given – something that we make an assumption about – how often it is done, dare I say how well it is done?

Perhaps because there are so many different ways to pray? All of which have different merit – Do people remember how they were taught to pray? Perhaps it happened when you accidentally caught someone praying? Or it might have been a habit developed as a child? Why do some people close their eyes and others keep them open? Some people are happy to pray out loud, and others can find that deeply uncomfortable. I will always remember as a teenager being asked to pray – and the tool used was the bible – classic – let's pray – and hand the bible on if you don't want to pray out loud – that bible flew around that circle mighty quickly if I remember. I just wasn't ready, and just didn't really know what to say – or what to pray about – or even whether my prayer was valid or not.....at some point and in different ways, on my own through need, with others because we were together, in silence often and then through others prayers that could be read, I began a journey, one that is continuous, on going and as imperfect as I am...it was learnt and is still being learnt through by...well ....doing it.

Perhaps because it can be something that is very private or something that is shared widely. (A study of the impact of social media on prayer is long overdue!) In fact asking about prayer can mean straying onto the most vulnerable parts of our souls – I mean how often do we really quiz people about their prayers or their prayer lives – to do so might be to suggest some sort of criteria that was being marked – and for one thing I am fairly sure that prayer was not set up as some sort of scheme that needed marks and scores.

Perhaps prayer – and what it is, how it might or might not work, different types of prayers are a good and Godly thing to spend some focused time on because it has been and remains today at the very heart of Christian practice. Christians tend to pray – well in fact prayer for all its beauty is not exclusive to Christians or in fact to people that profess any faith. Surveys have suggested that people genuinely have an interest in prayer – even pray about many different things – and they might never step inside what might be a place of worship ever. Strangely there is always a moment when I am in conversation with people through links of weddings, or baptism where we get to the end of our conversation and I have to be a bit brave – and ask “Shall we pray about this? Do you want me to pray?” Often, and more to my surprise – people say Yes – and it might be as not to offend the vicar, but that is not the feeling that I am left with. It is a genuine question and prayer is often and perhaps unexpectedly part of many people’s lives.

So what might the readings that have been chosen for today suggest that prayer is? That word unexpected seems to be very real for Elijah. We come to point in the book of kings which tells us of the details King Solomon and his reign, and then how after that it all started to unravel for the ones that followed him. Elijah as a prophet has the job of reminding the king of who God is and what God wants, but the kings increasingly do not want to know. So Elijah does what many others do in the Bible – he runs away. He flees for his life, and at a point just before our reading, begs God in prayer that he might be allowed to die. A prayer that is not answered as Elijah asks, because angels keep waking him up and providing food and water. And then Elijah comes to a cave – and he is asked by God to meet him. And this is the thing – Elijah expects God to appear in a way that is recognised. Elijah looks for God in the mighty wind, but the Lord is not there...Elijah looks for God in the power of the earthquake, but he doesn’t find him. Elijah looks for God in the fire – and why not that was where Moses had found him...but nothing. And then in the unexpected God is found in the sheer silence...that whisper of a voice “What are you doing here Elijah”.

The journey of Elijah and his relationship with God is fascinating. It requires that desire to be in relationship – perhaps that is what prayer is – the desire to seek – to meet with God, to desire that presence in our lives. It might not come

as is expected but there is the humility there in the first instance to desire and seek that connection.

And in that way the prayer is less of the lists (and I like to bring lists to God) and more of creating the space for God to speak in, and that can happen in numeral and different ways. It is the opening up of the very possibility of conversation. It seems a good start. Maybe that's why prayer sometimes at its most powerful is in the silence, the space, the possibility.

In that the gospel which recalls Jesus calling the twelve Apostles also speaks of how Jesus prayed all night. – We are not told how, or what words - if any – just the time. Now I am not recommending praying all night is for everyone, having said that I thank God often that there are still monastic communities that do precisely that. However, the central part that pray ( we will leave the question for the moment – If Jesus is God – who is Jesus praying too?) plays in that decision to choose the first followers. In the gospels we have multitude of examples of seeing Jesus pray, being told that he went to pray, of teaching people to pray. It is central to how he orientates his life. And how perhaps as we seek to answer questions, make decisions, get to grips with life, that perhaps what is prayer?? - is what Jesus showed – something that is not tagged just onto the end of a day, or a meeting, but a thread that runs through the goings on and connects with the everyday.

Desiring the need.

Opening the door.

Watching for the unexpected

...and making it central to the everyday

are perhaps some ways to get to start to explore What is Prayer – and over the coming weeks as we look at How to pray, the Lords Prayer, Listening in Prayer, Pentecost and the Eucharist Prayer I hope and pray that we will be caught up in the wonderful act of prayer, and the transformation that can happen in lives if we try. It pray it is a chance to look more closely at our own

prayer lives, at what works, or perhaps doesn't. What patterns and rituals are established, and perhaps try something different.

So I invite us for a moment, before Luci leads us in our intercessions to just take some time of silence to pray.