

How Do I Pray?

I realise that in this month of sporting finals I am probably even *more* likely to incur your disdain about the comment that I am about to make ...but after watching and thoroughly enjoying on SBS2, the recent World Athletics Championships from South Korea, I am even more convinced that AFL is *not* the greatest sport!

Perhaps it is because my brothers and I were all taken along to Little Athletics as young boys and I am *nostalgic* about the number of plastic trophies and sew-on patches that I earned for high jump?

Or maybe it is because the sport is so universally *accessible* and multi-faceted nation-wise – so in which other world sport could an 18-year-old runner from *Grenada* win a contest?

Or maybe it is the *historicity* of the sport, its inclusion in the Ancient Olympic Games and in particular, its illustrative use in the letters of the apostle Paul: “finished the race ... earning the crown ... beat my body”?

Either way, it really is the *purest* sport I contend ... and the highlight event for me is *always* the 4x100 metre relays.

Now there *is* something personal for me here – when I was in under 8s Little Athletics back in Sydney I was part of a 4x100m record-breaking squad: 1 minute and 7 seconds we took! (The world record by the way is 37 seconds!)

But there is so much *drama* in relays: runners drop the baton, they overrun the changeover zone and are disqualified, a nation you wouldn't normally expect to see on the podium, like St Kitts and Nevis wins a bronze medal!

And the relays have become more specialised in their training. It seems that previously it was just assumed that you could just take your 4 fastest runners, put them on the track and everything would be all right.

But the teams that win have people who not only know how to run fast but how to change the baton well. You can be one of the world's fastest runners and still perform in a relay poorly for lack of discipline.

Let's translate that imagery for a moment across to the Christian race or journey. If there is *one* discipline in our walk with Christ that so determines and reveals the state of our progress ... it is the *pulse* of our prayer life. John Calvin affirmed that “prayer is the principle exercise of faith”.

And so ... I have decided to preach “from the floor” (so to say) today, because I am so consciously aware that I, like many of you, would probably find the actual *act* of praying to be one of the most difficult disciplines to stick at and make progress in ... and so I need to preach to *myself* today as well.

Especially when we hear or read such grand and emotive quotes about prayer such as these: “Prayer is the sweat of the soul.” “We must wrestle earnestly in prayer, like men contending with a deadly enemy for life.” “Pray 'till you pray.” “Prayer is more than asking God to run errands for us.” “Prayer is the acid test of devotion.”

Now how do we feel?

Well I have *four* brief points to make on the question of **How to Pray?** They are not going to be a “spiritualised” list, of until-now previously hidden “secret prayer techniques” that I have all of a sudden discovered and which will guarantee *you* years of trouble-free intercession!

No .. I simply want to remind us all of four *foundational* realities of what it means to be a Christian and hence what that means for *how* we go about praying.

And because I love using alliteration, and at the *risk* of channelling Sesame Street, the letter “B” will today feature quite prominently.

So firstly, recall the BASIS of our coming to God. In the Scriptures I think the most *helpful* description of what a Christian is, is to be found in Paul's description of being "In Christ". 'Therefore (he says in 2 Corinthians 5), if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation'. The Ephesian church likewise is described as 'the faithful ... in Christ'.

We only can pray to God because we are in Christ, and in fact, we cannot get any closer to God!

Have we ever asked someone, or have we ever been *asked*, "How's your relationship with God going?". And do we not often reply, "Hmmm, I feel a bit distant and disconnected presently". Now while that answer makes *sense* to us, on *another* level there is only one correct answer to the question, "How's your relationship with God going" ... "It couldn't be better!".

For if we are indeed *seated* with Christ in Heaven, if we are *raised* with him, if we are *in* Him, then we cannot get any closer to or further away from God, regardless of how we might be *feeling*.

A lecturer at Ridley Theological College about two years ago made a very helpful point in Chapel, that he had always felt that if he wanted to pray to God whilst driving his car, he first of all needed to turn off the radio or CD, otherwise he wasn't really *entering* into God's presence, his prayers wouldn't be as effective. But he soon remembered that being in Christ means that nothing on this earth can separate us ... in Christ, we are in a constant connection with God.

And so Paul in Ephesians 6:10 exhorts Christians to pray, 'be *strong* in the Lord and in the *strength* of his power.

Secondly, pray BOLDLY. There *is* of course a place for committing to God the needs of the day that we have (that's what it means to pray 'Give us this day our daily bread') but if *all* we are praying for is for God to help us get through the day or to give us a provision of general blessing, then we do seriously miss out on the grandeur of God.

We miss out on understanding and experiencing what Paul means when he says, "to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine". Isn't this the meaning of the parable of the persistent widow? Luke records that Jesus told that parable 'about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.'

When we pray for a broken soul to find rest in Christ, when we pray for the de-throning of corrupt leaders, when we pray for the raising up of Christian workers, when we pray for the ceasing of false teaching, when we pray for healing in dire circumstances, when we pray for the collapse of the pornography industry ... we are being bold in prayer.

Such boldness is the thrust of Habakkuk's plea, as we heard in our first Bible reading. Habakkuk prays: 'O Lord, are you not from everlasting ... You cannot tolerate wrong ... Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?' A poignant question on this day remembering the NYC attacks.

In Ephesians 6:18 Paul exhorts Christians, 'Pray in the Spirit at *all* times in every prayer and supplication ... always persevere in supplication for all the saints.'

Thirdly, prayer is a BATTLE. It is so easy, isn't it, to crash on the couch and put the TV on Masterchef or Top Gear, or sleep in that extra 15 minutes in the morning, or read up on the sport in the newspaper ... instead of praying.

By way of quick suggestion, it is better *not* to set out to pray, like people often do with a new year's exercise regime plan – do you know what I mean by that? "Okay, this year, I'm going to be up *every* morning at 5.30am ... one hour's exercise ... and then get ready for work!". It is far better to pray for shorter periods throughout the day – 3 minutes giving thanks for the death and resurrection of Christ, 2 minutes praying for a friend in need, 5 minutes praying for work colleagues, 1 minute praying for a sick child ... than trying to rouse ourselves for a marathon prayer session. The disciples struggled to stay wake for one hour in prayer, and so do we.

In saying that though, there *is* a place at times for "planning to pray", as we did two Friday nights ago here at church where we deliberately set aside a *longer* time for intercession and we "wrestle in prayer", as Paul says about Epaphras in Colossians 4.

We *must* not forget also that we actively work against an *enemy* in prayer – Satan, who has a vested interest in seeing us “drop the relay baton” so to say, in regards to our prayer life. Just like the sensation of someone licking their fingers and snuffing out a candle flame, so the Evil One desperately wants our prayer life to fizzle out.

And so in Ephesians 6:11 Paul exhorts Christians to ‘put on the whole armour of God (why?), so that [we] may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.’

And finally, remember that we are part of a BODY. Although I do affirm that Athletics is a superior sport, its one drawback is that it is a very *selfish* sport. It’s you ... and you ... and you alone ... (except for the relays!) *You* are the sole competitor and a medal pivots on your shoulders alone. But of course in team sports like AFL, Soccer and Netball, it is indeed a case as Solomon affirms in Ecclesiastes 4, that: ‘Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.’

There is something intimate and collegial about praying with other Christians and seeking the will of the Lord together. It is *very* difficult to cherish bitterness or harbour resentment against someone when we are praying with or for them. As Baptist preacher and author Don Carson notes, “All of us would be wiser if we would resolve, never to put people down, except on our prayer lists.”

The Church is a gift of God made manifest in Christ. We *need* one another. We delight to be amongst one another. And we need to pray together. It is too difficult to go it alone.

Where one Christian stumbles spiritually, others can be like Aaron and Hur in Exodus 17, where they physically hold up Moses’ arms for a whole day so that Joshua could defeat the Amalekites in battle. The apostle Paul knew this too well and so in Ephesians 6:19 and 20, he exhorts Christians to ‘pray also for me’.

In the person of Jesus Christ, these four foundational realities come together.

Our basis for prayer is that we are “in Christ”. As we now through Jesus have access to a Father who delights to give us good gifts, we pray with boldness. At Calvary, the work of the Devil was destroyed, therefore the battle of prayer is already won for us. And so through faith, we are now members of Christ’s body.

Friends, all of us need to work how we shall actually get *down* to the business of praying, in our perpetually hectic family and working lives, but let us continually recall that when we do so, our joy is not so much the *physical* act itself of praying, but the One to *whom* we are praying. As a 19th Century English churchman helpfully asserted: “God’s chief gift to those who seek Him is Himself”

Well I finish with an historical account of prayer: In 1722, Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, troubled by the suffering of Christian exiles from Bohemia and Moravia, allowed them to establish a community on his estate in Germany. The centre became known as Herrnhut, meaning “Under the Lord’s Watch.” It grew quickly, and so did its appreciation for the power of prayer.

On August 27, 1727, twenty-four men and twenty-four women covenanted to spend an hour each day in scheduled prayer, praying in sequence around the clock. Soon others joined the prayer chain. More signed on, then others still. Days passed, then months. Unceasing prayer rose to God twenty-four-hours a day as someone – at least one – was engaged in intercessory prayer each hour of every day. A decade passed, the prayer chain continuing nonstop; then another decade. It was a prayer meeting that lasted over one hundred years.

Undoubtedly this prayer chain helped birth Protestant missions. Six months into it, Zinzendorf, at twenty-seven, suggested the possibility of attempting to reach others for Christ in the West Indies, Greenland, Turkey, and Lapland. Twenty-six Moravians stepped forward the next day to volunteer.

During the first two years, twenty-two missionaries perished and two more were imprisoned, but others took their places.

In all, seventy Moravian missionaries flowed from the six hundred inhabitants of Herrnhut, a feat unparalleled in missionary history.

By the time William Carey became the “Father of Modern Missions”, over three hundred Moravian missionaries had already gone to the ends of the earth. The Moravian fervour sparked the conversions of John and Charles Wesley (the founders of Methodism) and indirectly ignited the Great Awakening that swept through Europe and America, sweeping thousands into the kingdom.

The prayer meeting lasted one hundred years.

The results will last for eternity.

Amen.