



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 14 June by the Reverend Canon Tim Stevens, Canon Precentor.

The Second Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Genesis 18: 1-15, Matthew 9:35-10:8

Imagine for a moment, the man stuck in his house in a severe flood. As the water began to come in to his house, the man went upstairs, looked out of the window and prayed for help.

As the water came higher, he climbed out, and sat on the roof. Before long, a small rowing boat came down the flooded street, and the man was offered a lift to safety. But he replied – no – I'm praying to God, and he will help me.

Not long after this, as the water got deeper, a large power boat appeared, and the man was encouraged to climb down from the roof and get in to the boat. Again the man declined, and told his rescuers that he would be alright, because God would help him.

As the water level reached the rooftops, a helicopter came alongside the man, and offered him a rope to be carried into the helicopter. A third time, the man replied that he needed no help, because he was praying to God, and God himself would take him to safety.

When the inevitable happened and the man died in the flood, he found himself standing before God at the gates of Heaven. Indignant, he asked God – "I prayed for help – where were you?". God's reply, perhaps not surprisingly, came back – I sent you a rowing boat, a power boat and a helicopter. What more did you want?".

As we come to the half-way point of this Year of Prayer, I wonder where it has taken us so far. What have we learnt about prayer, from sermons about prayer and music, from Lent talks on types of prayer, from study of the Nicene Creed, from a whole week of intentional focus on prayer which ended just a week ago, and from the many other things which have happened so far this year.

If you are here for the first time this morning, and don't know what I am talking about, please do pick up one of the flyers for the Year of Prayer over coffee at the end of the service, because the wonderful thing about being half-way through the year, is that there is still half of the year to go, and plenty still to be explored.

But, as we reach the half-way point of the year, perhaps it is a good moment to stop and ask where this year has taken us. Perhaps you have been encouraged to join a new time of prayer, to think about your personal prayer differently, or to listen in a new way to God's response to your prayer.

Perhaps as you've listened, you've begun to hear answers to long-standing prayers – not unlike Sarah in our Old Testament reading this morning. She and Abraham had prayed for a child for many years, and now, at her age, it was too late.

But this morning, we heard of the visitors, who approached Abraham, who Abraham was quick to welcome, to pay attention to, to call his Lord, and to prepare a meal for.

We heard the visitors ask for Sarah by name, an unusual move for complete strangers. And we heard Sarah laugh at the suggestion that she would now have a child. We also heard the challenge to Sarah – and her denial that she laughed. She suddenly was so conscious, so afraid, as the text said.

But Sarah did go on to have a son, Isaac, because as the stranger said, nothing is too wonderful for the Lord.

Answered prayer – God present – but not in the way Sarah had hoped or expected.

Answered prayer – God present – when Abraham had the opportunity to welcome the strangers, to show hospitality, to stop and listen, and to know himself to be in the presence of the one to whom he prayed.

How have we, during this year of prayer, put ourselves in the presence of the one to whom we pray?

And if we have, what have we noticed, what have we heard, how have we felt, as perhaps our prayer has begun to change.

Perhaps we have been the one who has noticed somebody who we don't know, smiling encouragement at us across the stalls of the Quire during Evensong when we ourselves are feeling low and in need of love.

Perhaps we have been the one who has brought somebody to God in prayer, and the next day – seemingly randomly – bumped into them in the street.

Perhaps we have been the one who has tried to offer something new to God, and found that barriers which we have struggled with have suddenly been lifted.

These are real examples, which people who I have spoken to have shared with me in the last couple of weeks. And they are all moments when a response to our situation, our prayer, can be so clearly discerned, that we can't possibly

laugh, but we can smile, feel better, express relief and gratitude, and know that our prayer has been heard, a new time of relationship has emerged, and God is there with us.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus teaches us a lot about being with God, about God with us – which if you remember all that we heard at Christmas, is the name given to Jesus by the prophet, and quoted in the first chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel – Emmanuel – God with us.

Today though, we are in chapters nine and ten of Saint Matthew's Gospel, and things have moved on. The opportunity to meet the Emmanuel – God with us – has drawn the twelve apostles into a new life. They have walked with him, heard him teach, watched him heal and perform miracles, spent time with him, growing, and choosing to accept what this means.

Saint Matthew at this point in his Gospel, suddenly announces who these twelve are. Perhaps this is the moment when they deserve recognition, the moment when they are no longer wanderers, but have seen and understood enough to be called disciples.

And having reached this moment of identification as disciples, the relationship changes again. There is now work for them to do.

But what is really clear in this passage we heard this morning, is that they are not alone. There are four stages to the mission which the disciples are given.

First, Jesus has compassion on the people they come across. He has care, he shows concern, he loves. Without love, mission is nothing.

Second, is prayer. Jesus tells his disciples to ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out labourers. Without God's presence, mission is nothing.

Third, the disciples receive what they need. They have been trained, they have learned from Jesus, and now they are given authority over the unclean spirits. Without receiving from God, mission is nothing.

And finally, they go. They go to the places they are sent, they go to proclaim good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. They go, to do all that Jesus has called them to. Without action, without going, there is no mission.

Prayer has led to mission. Mission, demonstrated by Jesus in his sending out of the disciples. Mission, because of God's love, after serious prayer, having received all that is needed, and mission that is active, into which we go.

Where has this year of prayer taken us so far? If you are feeling this morning that this sounds demanding, then remember Sarah. She laughed at God when she was told that she would bear a son. She had longed for this for so long, but

Isaac could only come into her life when God was ready, when the time was right.

If the time is not yet right, what is our next step in preparing ourselves?

If the time is right, and this year of prayer has moved us; if we are now longing to take next steps – prayer leads to mission.

The disciples went out to do all that Jesus asked of them. Little did they know then, that in only a couple more years, their mission would be to so many more – that eleven of these twelve would share in carrying the good news to both Jews and Gentiles across the known world.

What will the mission of this Cathedral be in a couple of years' time? What is your part in that? What does God call us to? How are we loved? What do we pray for, and how does God respond?

What have we received in preparation? What are we going to do next? Are we going to sit on the roof, pretend that God will do it all for us, and utter our prayers without listening to his response?

Or are we, as we travel this year together, ready to respond, and with the disciples, go out and be changed, as we change others.

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