

Prayer in the life of Jesus

Study Leave 2012

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Introduction

It was my intention to undertake an open reading programme of study at Cambridge, UK. mid 2012, however with the death of my husband in January I applied to take early study leave at home using the library of St John's College. My original study leave proposal focused primarily on the prayer life of Jesus as recorded in Scripture and according to scholarly debate. I was interested to read about how Jesus maintained a deeply devotional life during the demands of his ministry: how he attended to his own self-care in the midst of urgency of need and care for others, how he maintained a balanced life between involvement with the world and withdrawal from the world, for time alone with God.

With the considerable pressures that are placed on a minister's time and family life in a busy parish there is often a widening gap between sermon preparation time for the next service and a minister's personal devotional life. It may not be how we first assumed our ministry life would be. Usually the 'call to ministry' begins to take seed within a deep devotional life and even during our formal ministry training, time is allocated for the importance of personal reflection and meditation. However once the demands of parish life begin to get underway and we immerse ourselves in the needs of others and in weekly preparation for services and in the various programmes and meetings, which take place, plus allow extra time for Presbytery responsibilities, there is little time or energy left for personal devotional study.

Preparation for Sunday services calls for a discipline of study and requires specific reading and wrestling with the text to find some relevance and meaning for today's congregation, but is that enough for a personal devotion from which to launch into ministry, week by week? I was not convinced it was enough to protect a minister from "burn out", or illness, or loss in enthusiasm for the task. I wanted to explore further how we, as followers of Jesus, could better prioritise time for a rich personal life of prayer and study which would ultimately result in a healthier perspective on life and ministry, and contribute to the health of our congregation.

When I found myself in the midst of deep personal grief at the start of this study, the practice of prayer became my well-spring each morning to resource my day and my

comfort source every evening to cope with my new sense of loneliness. This Study Leave has been a very valuable gift to me, enabling time to immerse myself in hours of reading about prayer, hours practising prayer, and time to reflect on what I have read and experienced of God's grace to heal, restore me and refresh my call to ministry in new circumstances.

I came to this study with the understanding that Jesus had devoted considerable time to prayer during his ministry and regularly withdrew to a desolate place in which to pray alone. I began my study by re-reading the Gospels to see what they said about Jesus and prayer. I was actually surprised to discover that there were fewer references to his actual prayer practice than I had supposed.

Jesus' prayer life according to the Gospels

The Gospel according to Matthew only makes mention twice of Jesus going away alone to pray: firstly after the feeding of the 5000 (14:23) when he sends the disciples on ahead across the lake before dispersing the crowd and going up a mountain, alone, to pray. The second instance is in the Garden of Gethsemane immediately prior to his betrayal, arrest and crucifixion. The disciples are with him in the Garden but Matthew records that Jesus withdraws a little way from them to pray. Over the ensuing hours before his arrest, Jesus seems to anxiously go back and forth between imploring the disciples to remain vigilant with him, and needing to be alone in his suffering solitude to ask God to remove "this cup" from him (26:36ff).

Matthew records some instruction by Jesus to his disciples in the way of prayer – he tells them not to imitate the pious, public praying of the hypocrites but instead to go into their room and pray in private, asking God for their needs which he says God already knows before they ask (6:5-8). Jesus also instructs them in a way to pray, using a formulaic prayer which has become known in the Church as the "Lord's Prayer" (6:9-13). Jesus instructs the disciples that a prayer made with faith has the power to accomplish miracles – like moving mountains or instantly withering a cursed fig tree (21:22). Other than a few times where Jesus is recorded as blessing

food, or laying hands of blessing on little children, there are no other references to Jesus' prayer life in Matthew.

Mark's Gospel uses the same stories to illustrate Jesus' prayer life, twice stating that Jesus went up a mountain to pray – firstly alone after feeding the 5000 (3:46) and secondly when the transfiguration occurs (9:2) at that time Peter, James and John are somewhere nearby. Mark emphasises Jesus' preference for “deserted places” in which to pray (1:35) and his early hour of prayer – “while it is still dark”. Mark records Jesus' time of anguished prayer in Gethsemane and his instruction to the disciples about ‘praying with belief’ to be a prerequisite for answered prayer (11:24) and needing prayer to successfully remove evil spirits (9:29). Mark's Jesus also warns against long pious prayers (12:40) and that is all Mark records of Jesus' praying.

The Gospel of Luke is the most thorough of the gospels to speak of Jesus' practise of prayer. Luke records Jesus praying at significant events: after his baptism when the Holy Spirit is sent upon him (3:21), before choosing the ‘twelve’ he spent all night in prayer (6:12), at the moment of his transfiguration he was praying (9:28), in the Garden of Gethsemane (22:40ff) where Luke records that Jesus was so distressed in prayer, his sweat was like “great drops of blood”. Luke makes particular mention of Jesus' choosing to go to a desolate place to pray alone: when the crowds kept pressing in (5:16), at daybreak before he taught in the synagogue (4:42), when he was pondering his mission and what others thought of him and Peter told him “you are the Messiah of God” (9:18). There seem to be several instances when the disciples were with him and Jesus went a little way off from them to be by himself to pray and I wonder what the disciples were doing at the time or what they made of his need to be alone.

Perhaps that is what prompted them to ask him how they should pray (11:1ff). In Luke's record, Jesus instructs his followers about prayer. Luke's version of the formulaic prayer that Jesus taught his disciples differs from Matthew's version. It is more concise and recent scholarship suggests the Luke version to be closer to what Jesus may have taught – I will discuss this in more detail later.

According to Luke, Jesus also gave instruction to pray for others: “pray for those who abuse you” (6:28), to pray with persistence (18:1), and to pray with thanksgiving – which he did by example after the return of the ‘seventy’ who had completed their mission to other towns -Jesus offered a public prayer of praise at their return, stating his own intimate relationship with God and giving thanks that God has “hidden the secrets of the kingdom from the wise but revealed them to children” (19:21ff).

The Gospel of John makes very few references to the actual prayer practise of Jesus. This Gospel records only three significant occasions when Jesus prays and then it is a public prayer: at Lazarus’ tomb (11:41), in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest (12:27-28), and a very long prayer for the disciples, probably around the time of the Last Supper (17).

After studying again the Gospel references to Jesus’ prayer life, I realised that my impression of Jesus’ disciplined devotion to regular prayer came more from inference to it by the Gospel writers rather than many recorded instances of it. I began to see that what I believed about Jesus’ discipline of prayer perhaps came more from the traditions carried on by his disciples in the early Church and their teachings about prayer and its importance, in the Book of Acts and Pauline Epistles.

Reference to Jesus’ prayer life from the Early Church

Certainly throughout the book of Acts, and the Epistles, frequent mention is made of the prayer practise of the early Christian Church. We are told that the disciples devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 1:14), that new converts devoted themselves to prayer and fasting (Acts 2:42), that the Church prayed fervently while Peter was in prison (Acts 12:5). They prayed for discernment in choosing leaders (Acts 1:24; 13:3 and 14:23), for boldness in witnessing God’s grace (4:23), for help to heal the sick (9:40; 28:8), for the Holy Spirit to come (4:31; 8:15) as a farewell to Paul’s visit in Syria (21:5) and with thanksgiving in times of significant hardship, as in when Paul and Silas were in prison (16:25). Paul’s letters, to the new Christian Churches springing up in various towns, instruct them to devote themselves to prayer, to

persevere in prayer, to pray for each other, to pray night and day, to pray without ceasing, to pray during suffering, to pray in the Spirit, to pray with thanksgiving, to pray about everything and to be disciplined in their practise of prayer.

From my readings of the Gospels through the Book of Acts to the Epistles, it is evident that an evolutionary change takes place within the discipline of prayer for the early Church. I wonder if that is why the Gospel writers didn't go into much detail about Jesus prayer life; because they didn't fully understand it or reflect on it at the time and by the time they came to write about it, their understanding about the practise of prayer had changed. I am sure that Jesus himself went through a transformation in his practise of prayer during his lifetime, especially during his ministry as his life became more immersed in the needs and demands of others. Certainly by the time the early church came to reflect on his discipline of prayer, the prayer of the Christian community had evolved from the rigidity of routine and form of traditional Judaistic piety to a more spontaneous practise, in which what is said in prayer, and where and when prayer takes place, is more dependent on the circumstances and life situations of the pray-ers.

Recent scholarship about the historical Jesus at prayer.

Joachim Jeremias, and his 1967 study on Jesus' life of prayer, was often quoted in the books I initially read for this study, so although his work was published at an earlier date than my reading list covered I decided to set aside my current reading to engage with his comments for myself. And I was very glad that I did because it was a foundational place to begin. In his work, Jeremias discusses the evolution that must have surely taken place within the attitude to prayer for the early Christian community. He points out that Jesus, as a devout young student of the Torah would have been taught from boyhood a very structured discipline of prayer: learning what words to say as prayer, and where and when to say them. He makes the comment that Jesus (and the first disciples) came from a people who knew how to pray, a people who had the discipline of prayer wired into their psyche from earliest times.

Scholarship suggests that Jesus would have undoubtedly observed the traditional 3 times a day prayer routine of Judaism, and probably continued to do so throughout his lifetime. It was an expectation for all Jewish males over the age of 12 yrs, (women and children were exempt) that a strict observance to the religious routines of prayer would be maintained. This prayer routine consisted of blessings at meals and prayers at three specific times of the day. Early in the morning and in the evening they recited the *Shema* and *Tephilla*. At the time of the afternoon temple sacrifice (3pm) they recited the *Tephilla* alone.

The *Shema* comprised of the Deuteronomic admonition to early Israel, given at the end of their wilderness journey just before entering the 'Promised Land'. "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deut 6:4). "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to subsequent generations, when you are at home and when you are by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Deut 6:5-7). This command to remember their relationship to God was to form the basis for their day – to be said as a recited prayer at sunrise ("when you rise") and at sunset ("when you lie down").

The *Tephilla*, which was also said morning and evening, and again in the afternoon consisted of 18 benedictions or blessings, reminding them of who God is for them. The first benediction begins something like this: "Blessed are you Lord God of our fathers: God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob; a God great, mighty and revered; the God most high, Lord of heaven and earth. - Blessed are you Lord, the shield of Abraham!"

This discipline of praying three times a day and the form these prayers took would have been the framework for Jesus at prayer. The Gospels record that he rose early to pray and that he prayed in the evening, often all night. Also according to Mark's gospel, when one of the scribes asked Jesus which commandment was the most important (Mark 12:28-30), Jesus replied with the words straight from the *Shema* "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your strength."

From the few public prayers that the Gospel writers mention it is indicative that Jesus' prayers went beyond reciting these creeds of *Shema* and *Tephilla* in order to reflect on immediate needs – as in the Gethsemane prayer, or in intercession for the needs of others – as when he prayed on Peter's behalf that his faith would not fail (Luke 12:31), or in thanksgiving for God's presence and relationship with him. It is this discipline of prayer which would seem to inform his inner life and resource his daily strength and which the early Church sought to later emulate.

We know that the early disciples were still following this routine for prayer after Jesus' death and resurrection because there is reference to Peter and John healing a man "on their way to the temple for afternoon prayers" (Acts 3:1) and it may be assumed that if Jesus had stopped this practise of afternoon prayer the disciples would not have carried it on after his ascension.

The idea that Jesus would have begun and ended his day with this Deuteronomic admonition has been one of the most meaningful aspects of this study for me. In the early days of my personal bereavement I began to book-end each day with these words from the *Shema* and I have come to realise that even if that is all we manage to pray at day's beginning and end it is the most profound statement to embrace our waking hours - in this one, short statement we find our identity and purpose in God.

However Matthew Fox maintains that even though Jesus daily recited the *Shema* and *Tephilla*, for Jesus the real concern of prayer was not saying prayers, "it is the field or matrix in which prayers are said."¹ Jesus seemed to combine liturgical form with an ex-tempore way of prayer because there were times when he was critical of hypocritical or empty recital of prayer. In the Gospels Jesus instructed the disciples to be private in prayer and not pretentious, "like those who love to stand on street corners so that they may be seen by others (Matthew 6:5). Fox claims that there is nothing pious or hypocritical about the descriptions of Jesus at prayer, rather they are descriptions of a person deep in heart-felt anguish, "sweating blood" or with tears or wrestling with evil spirits. He states that often Jesus' prayer is linked with his struggle to accept his messianic vocation or as preparation for total involvement in

¹ Fox, 1972 p3

his mission of love. Fox suggests that the verbal attack Jesus often makes on pharisaical piety indicates that he destroyed prayer as merely comfort,² or a merely pious routine to religiously follow, for Jesus it was a life-style, a source of on-going strength to empower his action and his daily mission.

Hal Taussig suggests that there is much discrepancy in the way the different Gospel writers present Jesus at prayer. He says in Matthew, Jesus instructs people to pray in secret and in few words (6:7, 8). In Luke he criticises the long prayers of the pious (21:47) and teaches a very brief prayer as an example of how to pray (11: 2-4). In Mark and John he doesn't teach about prayer at all. In Mark he is only recorded praying in places of retreat. In John, Jesus prays an entire chapter – praying for his disciples – in language “completely foreign to the way Jesus talks (or prays publically) in the other Gospels”.³Taussig asserts however that the difference between the way Jesus prayed and his contemporaries prayed, or even the early Church prayed, was that there was both subversive humour and social character to Jesus' prayer,⁴ and that in spite of the discrepancies in the Gospel record, Jesus' prayer-life promises much to those who want to be transformed by their praying because his prayers are full of self-critique and a down-to-earth social awareness of the needs of others.⁵

Most of the recent scholarship which discusses Jesus at prayer, does so from the sole reference point of the prayer Jesus taught, known today as the 'Lord's Prayer' and recorded in only two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke. It is generally held that the Luke version which is shorter is likely to be closer to the original and that the Matthew version is an expanded prayer to reflect the liturgical language of the *Shema* and *Tephilla*. Matthew's version is directed towards the Jewish converts to Christianity, while Luke's version is recorded for the Gentile converts to Christianity.

I would like to make a full study of the Lord's Prayer at some subsequent opportunity because the phrasing is rich with meaning and so much can be learnt from it for our daily prayer, however there was not time in this study to delve into it at any depth – it

² Fox 1972, p5

³Taussig 1999, p6

⁴ Ibid p3

⁵ Ibid p115

would be a wonderful study in itself – but there are four aspects which reflect on Jesus' way of praying that are relevant to this study. Firstly the remarkably intimate way Jesus had of addressing God as Abba, which was astoundingly familiar for his time. In the Gospel accounts of his prayers Jesus always uses the familiar to address God (usually as Father), with the exception of his cry from the cross, as stated in Mark and Matthew, where he is directly quoting Psalm 22. But by constant use publically of this familiar, intimate way to address God Jesus does two things, he reinforces to the disciples that his coming heralds a new relationship with God and the familiarity of address invites an intimacy of content within the prayer itself. Haussig also suggests that this use of the term "Abba" to address God, moves the Jewish perception of dependence on the human family as the primary place of security and provision onto God as the primary place of security and provision.⁶

The second aspect to this prayer that is remarkable is that Jesus taught this prayer to be said in the vernacular, Aramaic, (his first language and that of his disciples) unlike the formal Jewish prayers which were always recited in Hebrew. Using their everyday language brought prayer into the arena of the ordinary people which highlighted the down-to-earth nature of the way Jesus prayed.

Thirdly the simple words Jesus offered resonated with everyday human need and continues to resonate with our basic needs throughout the centuries: for bread, forgiveness, deliverance and relationship (with God and others). Whether the primary request is for the forgiveness of sin (Luke) or debts (Matthew) both indicate an urgent spiritual and social need.

Fourthly the prayer is laced with a sense of justice threading through it. Jesus oscillates the focus of the prayer between request for personal need and responsibility for the needs of others. Jesus states that we can seek forgiveness from God to the extent that we are willing to bless and forgive others.

While some scholarship criticises the repetitive use of this prayer as being similar to the adjunct by Jesus not to pray with vain repetition (Matthew 6:7), according to the

⁶Haussig 1999, p7

Didache, the early Church eventually stopped using the *Shema* and *Tephilla* for daily prayers and instead recited the “Lord’s Prayer” three times a day in their place⁷.

According to scholarship, in the early centuries of the Christian Church the Lord’s Prayer was an integral part of worship: it was recited before communion by those who were baptised (because it was considered “privileged knowledge” reserved only for full Church members). It was used as instruction for baptism, (committed to memory) and said for the first time at the baptism. It was prayed daily by the faithful and functioned as a token of Christian identification.⁸ It has remained a significant part of worship in the Church throughout the last 2000 years, but sadly is becoming less used, known or appreciated by many people today.

Conclusion

We may conclude that no day passed for Jesus without time set aside as sacred for regular prayer: in the early morning, in the afternoon and at sunset, and regardless of the busyness of his day. He used the framework of liturgical prayer and its routine practise to inform and invite his own personal expression of prayer in a deeper way. He withdrew from the needs of the crowds and the companionship of the disciples to seek time alone with God. But Jesus did not stay in that state of retreat as many of the later mystics did who followed his example of a deeply devotional prayer life. Jesus used his time alone with God to refresh his spirit and sense of vocation and then moved again into the mainstream of life amidst all the needs which pressed in upon him. However some of the mystics have contributed a great deal of wisdom to our practise of prayer today.

St Theresa of Avila spoke of prayer in variously creative ways. She imagined prayer as being like a “gentle puff of breath to a candle when it has almost gone out, to reignite its spark and flame”⁹. In her analogy of life as a river flowing with vitality and force, she imagines the busy moments and daily distractions that we face to be like the pleasure yachts or heavily laden freighters, or the pollution and debris which can

⁷Jeremias 1967, p81

⁸ Ibid, p82

⁹ Pennington 2001, p40

clog the waterway – in this analogy, prayer is like allowing ourselves to sink down into the cool fresh depths where the water runs in peaceful flow from its source of Infinite Love.¹⁰

Thomas Merton suggested that prayer is finding our true selves in God. He believed that it is human nature to present falsely to others, that we spend a great deal of our lives hiding behind various masks or fabrications of the true self. He said prayer is “going beyond the false self and all that constructs it. It is getting in touch with who we really are - a return to the heart - finding one’s deepest centre -awakening to the depths of our being which is to be found in the presence of God”.¹¹

Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr speaks about prayer as a “different consciousness”, he talks about the transformation that can take place when time is spent in contemplative prayer. He says prayer enables us to see the world with new eyes, with a God-consciousness; by a life of disciplined prayer our thinking will change because, “we do not think our way into new ways of living, we live our way into new ways of thinking”. He asserts that prayer and suffering are the “two primary forms of transformation”.¹²

Prayer however, as Cynthia Bourgeault suggests, is much more than words¹³. Whether we are reciting the *Shema* or the Lord’s Prayer or some other liturgical prayer, or just putting before God our fears and hopes in the manner of the Old Testament Psalmist, for Jesus, prayer was both words and silence, talking to God and listening – perhaps that is why he needed to get away by himself so he could listen in peace, be still in God’s presence. However that that sort of deep listening to God, is only possible when our confidence is in God, so that the clamour of our fears may subside and the planning of our busy schedule may find rest as we wait in God’s presence – where “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).

Peterson, in speaking about the life of a minister, differentiates between “religious careerism” and “vocational holiness”. He remarks that we may begin our ministry

¹⁰ Pennington 2001, p69

¹¹ Ibid, p55

¹² Richard Rohr 2008, p124

¹³ Bourgeault 2004, p4

with noble intentions of balancing our ministry to others with adequate time spent in personal reflection and the personal journey through prayer towards holiness, but then “we look at the job descriptions handed to us, we look at the career profiles outlined for us... and we scratch our heads and wonder how we ended up here”¹⁴. Before we know it we are spending the bulk of our energy and creativity on building up the Church, trying to meet the expectations of those we serve, becoming performance-driven, programme-obsessed ministers, gearing our activity and thoughts towards success that can be measured in popular terms – numbers in the pews and a healthy Church bank balance. He says that in our “zeal to proclaim the Saviour and enact his commands, we lose touch with our own basic and daily need for a saviour”¹⁵ .

It is an easy trap to stumble into unawares, because as Peterson writes, “the work is so compelling, so engaging, so *right*, we work with what feels like divine energy...until one day we find ourselves (or others find us) worked into the ground”. Peterson recommends an alternative to getting caught up into the frenetic pace of ministry and trying to prove ourselves worthy of the task, he names the alternative as living a ‘prayer-defined life’ - making time to pray the Psalms each day as was the custom in the monastic days of earlier Christianity, having a time for regular daily contemplation, and committing to a private journey (or journal) of personal prayer – one mystic cites prayer as daily “plunging into the mighty waves of God’s mercy”.¹⁶

It is a challenge, that as ministers we can easily become distracted and lose our primary focus. Peterson suggests it is because there are many things to do in parish work that seem useful and important and we have become a consumer society. He states, “the world of religion generates a huge market for meeting all the needs that didn’t get met in the shopping mall. Ministers are expected to come up with products that give customer satisfaction.....before long...we become skilled at pleasing the customers...and the mystery and love of God becomes obliterated by the frenzy of the religious marketplace”¹⁷. In his thesis, personal, daily prayer is the refocusing agent in ministry – to refocus our primary commitment away from our penchant for

¹⁴ Peterson, 1992, p112

¹⁵ Peterson 1992, p114

¹⁶ Soelle 1978, p85 quote of Henry of Nordlingen

¹⁷ Peterson 1992, p173

meeting the needs and expectations of ministry, to discovering God in our midst and in the midst of the people we serve and allowing our ministry to take shape from that.

I realise I have only begun to scratch the surface of the vast topic of prayer - as a discipline in the life of a minister and in the way that Jesus' exemplified to us. I would have liked to have looked further into how the Psalms, which were regularly sung in Jewish religious practice, may have influenced Jesus at prayer – and how they can impact on our own life of prayer. I would have liked to have looked in greater depth at the practices of the first disciples in the burgeoning early Church concerning their prayer practice. I would have enjoyed studying more fully 'Lord's Prayer' and what it offers for our contemporary worship. But this has been a refreshing place to begin to think more deeply about prayer and what its regular practice contributed to the ministry of Jesus, and may contribute to our own. Above all else this study has encouraged me in my own ministry. It has refreshed my call and challenged me into a disciplined life of prayer. I carry with me the adage "pray until you are a prayer – until you are a sacred special word of God – incarnated through Christ".¹⁸

¹⁸ Pennington 2001, p51

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