

Wordless prayer ROMANS 8:26-27

It is a sad irony that prayer, which is designed to be such a blessing and encouragement to God's people, can become a burden, a difficulty, a problem. Of course conversation with God will always be a challenge, but at times we make it harder for ourselves by failing to grasp some of the nature of prayer. Today we look at just two verses, ROMANS 8:26-27, and see how they can encourage us to keep on praying and not be discouraged by real or imagined difficulties.

These verses come in the context of Paul's arguing that we live in an in between time. We have a taste of heaven, we are headed for a wonderful destiny, we have the strong companionship of the Spirit of God, we are accepted by God because of Jesus' mercy. Nevertheless we only have a taste of heaven. We live in a state of weakness, even if that weakness is an occasion for us to claim the strength of God. Weakness afflicts our prayer life. Prayer which is a wonderful gift is also caught up in our human fragility.

Paul says we don't know what to pray for. This is part of what it means to be weak, to be this side of heaven. Of course there are many times we do know what to pray for. The issues are plain, the course of action is clear. But what about the times when things are not plain or not clear? Paul's point seems to be that just because our words fail our prayers do not. Just because we are confused doesn't mean we are without help.

Paul seems to say that if we can't articulate our prayers, God's Spirit steps in and helps us out. He interprets our inarticulate sighs and groans. He sifts our confused thoughts. He brings to God the sort of prayer we would like to pray but can't find the words or even the thoughts to pray. He unjumbles our inner chaos and presents to God the father an acceptable prayer. This is a wonderful instance of God caring for us in our weakness. He knows our limitations and takes great care in accommodating them and not despising us for them.

What a contrast this is to a certain type of teaching which insists we only bring to God prayers that are properly phrased and theologically precise. Or prayers that are full of strong and vibrant faith. Our prayers are never to be attempts to impress God with our knowledge or eloquence. God can hear silences as easily as words. He does not see prayer as some sort of doctrine exam. And he most certainly is not measuring our prayers to see if they meet a certain faith quotient.

There is an approach to prayer which stresses the degree of faith we are to have when we pray. God will sniff out any doubts or weakness and knock us back if we don't measure up. Faith, in this approach, means certainty. We figure out just what God plans to do and we align our prayers to his will and so we get what we ask for. This is certainly true in many cases where we know with some assurance the purposes of God revealed in Scripture. But there are times we simply don't know. And this is what Paul is addressing here. The times when we don't know what God wants.

In our present weakness we can't always know. But this is not lack of faith. Faith is not knowledge. It is not always certainty. It is trusting God knows what he is doing even when you do not. It is trusting that God is good even when things are bad. Don't wait for certainty or power or even lots of faith before you pray. A mustard seed is enough. Bring to God what faith you have and let him get to work on it. Don't put off prayer out of a vain attempt to summons up faith that might get him to listen to you more readily.

Any prayer we pray is an expression of weakness. Prayer is not our way of storming the ramparts of heaven with the heavy artillery of our faith. It always expresses our helpless dependence on God. As such, our prayers can be jumbled, incomplete, incoherent, or wordless. Don't let confusion, lack of faith, uncertainty, incoherence, rob you of the privilege of prayer. Prayer is not the preserve of a spiritual elite. It is for all of us. It is not for the strong, it is for the weak. Which in reality is all of us. We can be weak in prayer for other reasons as well as lack of faith or lack of wisdom to discern the will of God. Our incoherence can

arise from sheer physical situations. Fatigue might mean we lack the energy to put our concerns into words. Just when we need to pray most we can't find the energy or the words. No matter, a sigh or groan will work wonders!

Similarly with pain or grief. Sometimes when we are in pain we simply can't pray in any formal extended sense. No matter, our sighs and groans inwardly directed to God will be heard. Sometimes when tragedy strikes and grief seems to paralyse us, we know we ought to pray but if we do pray at all they are pretty basic. No matter, prayer does not depend on our energy, our faith, our words, our wisdom. We have one who intercedes for us who never lacks energy, and always knows the mind of the father.

And we might tentatively suggest that these verses might have some relevance to the common situation where a follower of Jesus has some intellectual disability or has developed a dementia type condition. Can we honestly believe that our father in heaven turns his back on such people who might not be able to articulate prayers? Just because they might not be able to communicate coherently with other people does not mean they have no other access to God. Remember God hears our silences, our sighs and our groans.

May it not be that people like this who are treasured by God communicate with him along these lines? May it not be that these verses apply to all such people whose words fail them and yet who seek the God who is seeking after them? Need we despair at such people that they have been locked in a lonely cell of solitary confinement away from the comforts of Jesus? Our God has not given the gift of prayer merely to the sound of mind or the strong of faith or the wise of insight or the mouther of fine words. We can surely trust him to have made provision for those who can't find the words or the wisdom or the faith. And it may be that sighs and groans are the unseen and unheard means of communion with God on the part of people who seem incapable of prayer as we commonly understand it.

So where does all this leave us? Most times when we pray we will be able to articulate our thoughts and use words or "speak silently". There will be times when we know what to pray for and the challenge for us will be to go God's way which we have discerned. In other words, sometimes these verses will not apply to us. We need to apply other scriptures instead.

But in our weakness, whether it be physical, psychological, spiritual, we sometimes run out of words, or run out of ability to see what is the way forward. If our faculties have failed us, then we can trust God is hearing in some way our confused thoughts and making sense of them. If we still have our faculties, we can trust God will make sense of our confusion or uncertainty. We can trust God will give meaning and interpret our silences and understand our sighs and groans. We can trust him to deal gently and kindly with us in our pain or grief or weariness. We can quite literally sigh or groan or simply say "help" or "sorry". We can quite literally lift our hands in a sort of silent offering to God of our incoherent inner life. We can rest quietly and trust God is sorting things out inside us as we confess that we are incapable of doing so.

Seen through the lens and filter of these two verses, prayer ceases to be a burden and becomes a blessing. It ceases to be an exercise in cleverness or human power or eloquence. It becomes an occasion for us to be helpless before our strong helper. Prayer becomes an expression of weakness and as such an opportunity for us to receive the strength of God.