

**SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE ON MAY 7, 2017 BY THE  
REV'D STUART LANGSHAW – LOCUM TENENS PRIEST.**

It could take us a long time to mention all the things that contribute to our physical health – things such as nutrition, sleep, exercise, positive relationships and so on. It could also take us a long time to mention all the things that contribute to our spiritual health – things such as worship, fellowship with others, acts of Christian service, prayer and so on. As we now start our way towards the programme called “Thy Kingdom Come 2017” – a programme instigated by the Archbishop of Canterbury – it would be good for us to think about prayer and what it is.

If we are people who have been brought up since our childhood in the Christian faith, we will have been taught about prayer, and we would have practised prayer for many years. Usually we would have observed our Christian elders and others using “intercessory prayer” - praying for others. But as we grew older we would have been introduced to other sorts of prayer too – confession; petition (praying for ourselves); praise and adoration of God. Behind all the sorts of prayer that exist, there is the fundamental belief that God exists, and that God can be communicated with. Atheists don't pray.

We have many fine words of prayer in our Prayer Book, Hymn Book and liturgy. 4 of the 5 hymns we are using in our service this morning are prayers. Hymn 155 ❶ is an individual's prayer for oneself ... referring to oneself under the metaphor of a lamb on this “Good Shepherd Sunday.” Hymn 8 ❷ is a prayer of praise and adoration of God. Our Communion Hymn, number 312 ❸ is another individual's prayer for oneself; and Hymn 287 ❹ is another. Our very first hymn, number 5 ❺ is not a prayer; rather it is a presentation of some Christian teaching about God. When you arrive at church each week, it is a good practice to look at the hymns we shall be singing and work out what sort of hymn each is – a prayer ... statement of faith ... words of encouragement to the people here with you.

When we think about prayer specifically, it's a pity really that prayer has to be expressed in words. That's because, at its base, prayer is a feeling on our hearts and minds and souls. At its base, prayer is how and what we are feeling about a situation that we're involved in. And because prayer is these things, prayer is deeper than words. For example, a friend of ours may be undergoing a serious and tricky surgical procedure. What we are feeling is a deep and sincere wish and hope that our friend will come through unscathed, and will recover well. That feeling is deeper than words. Maybe you have had an experience when there were no words that could adequately express what you were experiencing – holding your baby child for the first time ... seeing the most gorgeous sunset ever ... a pain so deep and so profound that it had to be expressed by a noise rather than a reasonable, articulate set of words. Remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane where his intensity of feeling was so great that his perspiration flowed out of him, just as blood flows from a new wound. No words ... just feelings. No words ... just prayer.

I remember what someone said many years ago – God does not speak English – or Japanese – or French – or Polynesian. God speaks “heart.” But very often, words there are. We use words to express logically ... to express that very deep feeling openly and clearly. And we use words, not so that God knows what we are praying. God knows that from what we are feeling. We use words in our prayers so that we, and others, know what we are feeling.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart."

From The Feast of the Ascension on Thursday May 25 until The Feast of Pentecost on Sunday June 4, we are invited, encouraged, urged by Archbishop Justin Welby, to give ourselves to prayer for 5 of our friends and for our parish. We are asked to open our spiritual faculty in an intentional, dedicated way ... to pray. Intercessory prayer ... praying for others. 11 days of intentional, dedicated prayer – in the depths of our feelings, and also in our use of words.

Our Pew Sheet today contains information about this period of prayer. Pages 5 and 6. It would be very encouraging if there were parishioners who took this on as an extra part of their personal devotional lives. It is our great desire that our parish might expand and grow numerically, and that it might deepen and grow spiritually. Those desires ... those wishes ... become our spoken prayer. It is our great desire that our friends who know and love God may have their knowledge and love strengthened and made more robust. And it is our great desire that our friends who keep God at bay, who have grown cynical and hard towards Christian things, might know God's love in their hearts and lives. Those desires ... those wishes ... become our spoken prayer.

Please read and re-read the Parish Prayer that's printed on Page 2 of the Pew Sheet. The words easy to read what is printed ... but what are the longings and feelings that lie under the words?

With our Parish Prayer and with all intercessory prayers, we are not telling God what to do ... we are not trying to try to change God's mind. That would make us more powerful than God. On the contrary, these prayers open up the mind and soul of the person who prays to God's loving influence, and we are opening up the life of the person or people for whom we pray also to God's loving influence. There are so many people who seem to want to quantify the number of "positive answers" to their prayers. May I say, in all humility, I think they are wrong. We need to have, not so many people who can count the positive answers to their prayers, but so many people who are conscious of their own being opened to God's life and God's love and God's grace and God's spirit as they both *feel* in prayer, and also *use words* in prayer.

In the programme, "Thy Kingdom Come 2017," those who commit themselves to pray for 5 of their friends and for the parish of Walkerville, will open themselves to God's loving and gracious influence in their lives, and will open the lives of their friends and of St Andrew's to God's loving and gracious influence. If you choose not to commit yourself to Thy Kingdom Come 2017, as you pray, you still open your life to the work and influence of God.

Let us determine that we shall be people of God - - - people of God's love - - - agents of God's grace. Let us feel deeply within us the desires and wishes we have for others and ourselves, and through both deep-seated prayer, and prayer in words, let us be the conduits of God's love and grace.

Hymns from the *BBC Songs of Praise* hymn book that is used at St Andrew's – see next page.

❶ Loving shepherd of thy sheep  
keep thy Lamb in safety keep;  
nothing can thy power withstand,  
none can pluck me from thy hand

❷ Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,  
there is no shadow of turning with thee;  
thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;  
as thou hast been, thou for ever wilt be.

❸ O Love that will not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
that in thine ocean depths its flow  
may richer, fuller be

❹ Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,  
be all else but naught to me, save that thou art,  
be thou my best thought in the day and the night,  
both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

❺ God is love: let heaven adore him;;  
God is love: let earth rejoice;  
let creation sing before him,  
and exalt him with one voice.  
He who laid the earth's foundation,  
he who spread the heavens above,  
he who breathes through all creation,  
he is love, eternal love.