*All Saints’ Cathedral Evensong Meditation, Bishop Stephen London, July 3, 2022*

This evening I want to reflect briefly on the meaning and mystery of prayer. In the first verse from the reading from Paul’s letter to Timothy, we read, “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone.” When Paul writes ‘first of all’ (proton panton), it is not just that we start with prayer, but that prayer also has first priority in the Christian community. Christians always start and end with prayer. We see this in the scriptures; we see this throughout church history. But why? What are we doing in prayer?

In this passage, Paul lists four kinds of prayer, but what is odd about the list is that the first three are all naming the same thing.

The first is δέησις, or supplication. It comes from the word in Greek ‘to beg.’ This kind of prayer has to do with need. It names the fact that there are so many things in life that we can’t just make right, so we turn to God. The second kind of prayer is the general word for prayer in the New Testament (προσευχή). This is about bringing our requests to God. And the third is intercession (ἐντεύξις), which is similar to the first two. Bringing our requests before God.

It is only the fourth word that is different, thanksgiving or εὐχαριστίας. As the word tells us, essential to prayer is the experience of gratitude. The rest of the scriptures are like this. There are words for lots of different types of prayer: there is worship, praise, supplication, confession, sacrifice, purification, lament and thanksgiving.

But the scriptures don’t ever reflect on the mystery of prayer; they just assume it. There is no deep meditation on the mystery of prayer. What are we doing in prayer? Is it just about asking for things? No, it’s not. We have to go behind the lists of types of prayer to its more primal meaning. But to talk about prayer, we first have to talk about faith.

Part of the problem with the word faith, is that many people think it is a synonym for belief. Belief is part of it, but faith is so much more complex and interesting. Faith is actually a relationship word. It is interesting to note that in the bible there is no word for relationship. Just to make sure I was right about this, I digitally searched the NRSV for the word relationship and got zero hits. Which is funny because relationships are central to who we are as human beings. Brené Brown, the now famous social worker, tells us that as persons we are built for connection. She writes, “We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don’t function as were meant to be. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache … The absence of love and belonging will always lead to suffering.” We need friends and family and acquaintances and neighbours and pets. These of course are all names for relationships with other people. What is the name for our relationship with God? The name is faith. And the good news of the Gospel is that God is a God of relationship. God wants to be in union with us; God wants to share the divine life with us.

And prayer is the language of faith, the language of our relationship with God. But I use the word language loosely because it is not about the specific words, or even about words at all. It is the language of the heart coming into the presence of God who loves us so much. It is how we connect with God. Sometimes prayer is just a longing or a sighing, sometimes it is the soaring beauty of a massed choir. I pray my daily offices everyday not because I get to check a box, but because this one way in which I love God. I spend time with God; I study his Holy Word looking for grace and mercy; I open my heart to God; I listen in silence for what God would speak to me. It’s not the words, so much as the words give me a way to structure my relationship. It is the head and the heart coming together. How do you come before God? How do you grow in your relationship with the divine? If you don’t pray, I would encourage you to do so. If you are unsure where to start, talk to your priest. If you want to go deeper but are not sure how, talk to your priest. But know that God above all, wants to be with you. That is at the heart of the mystery of prayer. Amen.