

LENT 2017 – day 14 – March 22nd

As we start this morning, I would just like to remind you about the importance of personal prayer. There are many people who **only** pray when they have a crisis. Otherwise they are watching tv, talking to people, reading books, talking to friends - and they come to prayer only when they have a problem. If you pray only when you have a problem, you will never know the deeper, better side of prayer - which is the joy, peace, love, security that God brings into our hearts.

Many people never experience that because they have come to prayer in the storm.

It is like when Jesus was with the apostles in the boat in the storm and then the apostles woke him up and said, "We are sinking! Why don't you wake up and do something?" **Jesus actually rebuked them for that prayer.** When you come to think of it, you can't blame those people either. They didn't call on the Kataragama god or some other god - they called on Jesus. But they called in stress and anxiety, not in trust. That's the difference. If you pray in stress and anxiety, most often you don't get an answer. You are already tightened up inside.

The best way is to discover a relationship with God when there is no stress or anxiety. That's what you mean by having a time of personal prayer. You sit at the feet of the Lord and you're relaxed. You're not clock watching, you're not duty bound, you're not doing something out of an obligation. Instead you learn to relax in the presence of God. You're spending time with the Lord. First of all you need to spend time with God.

As you spend time with Him, you start receiving inner revelations. God the creator is ever present. You can see Him everywhere. Why we can't see Him is because the problem is inside us. It is not that God is invisible.

In one part of my life I was dealing with computers and we used to sell network computers to people. It's amazing, every time the computer didn't work, everyone assumed that the computer was the problem and not them. But 99% of the problem was that they were not competent to handle the computer. They didn't know how it worked and they didn't know the processes, but when they couldn't get a result they immediately blamed the computer.

It is the same in a relationship. Immediately you blame someone else, because we are not used to allowing the truth to enter into our hearts. It is the same thing with God. We are blind to God and we

think He is hiding. We can't hear His voice and we think He is playing hide and seek. He is actually speaking and loving, but He needs a little time to teach us His ways.

That's why sitting before the Lord is so important. Some people want to come and talk about their experiences. I tell them, "It's pointless talking to you because you're not a person who listens." There are people who enjoy telling and are never listening. So they try to corner someone to tell and they're not satisfied because they aren't listening themselves. That dissatisfaction is because they have not allowed God into their hearts. When you become content with the presence, it changes everything.

You need to go there - relaxed, contented, loved and held and then you're so free. You have a song in your heart, you have joy and you reflect that joy into the lives of other people. Some of the best disciples of Jesus Christ are the worst witnesses. We are short tempered, reactive, judgmental, critical because we are discontented deep inside. Sometimes people who aren't disciples of Jesus Christ seem to be so much more relaxed.

There is a book called, 'What's So Amazing About Grace?' by Philip Yancey. *There was this procession in New York City - gays and lesbians were marching. They were greeting people, laughing and they were joyful. The protestors had come and they were all Christians. The protestors were angry and hating and shouting insults and telling them what terrible sinners they were. Yancey is asking, "Who is reflecting God better in that state?"*

It was shocking. I never realized that we carry that kind of attitude into the world. So we better be careful. You become intolerable Christians if you don't have a prayer life and you're working on principles and values and systems and ethics with your inner life untouched.

Today you won't find the reading in the Protestant Bible, because it's from the book of Daniel, but in the NRSV it's in the book called the Song of Three Youths.

I don't know if I'm just seeing this because it's inside of me, but in most of the prayers of the Old Testament, I'm seeing the Nehemiah formula. It's as if that formula has been put into the Old Testament. Even here I can see the Nehemiah formula. This is the prayer of the three young men to God:

Song of Three Youths 3:3

Blessed are you, O Lord, God of our ancestors, and worthy of praise; and glorious is your name forever!

Can you link this with the Nehemiah prayer? Remember who God is. It looks like a hidden formula in the prayer method. Don't pray without finding out who God is. If you do that you can get more desperate after your prayer.

Song of Three Youths 3:11-12

For your name's sake do not give us up forever, and do not annul your covenant; do not withdraw your

mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham, your beloved, and for the sake of your servant Isaac and Israel, O Holy one.

Remembering your ancestors in the Old Testament and remembering the saints who have lived 2000 years in the history of the church is one and the same thing. That's why the church remembers the saints - we remember what God has done.

So the next step is the third step of Nehemiah that is coming: Remember His promises. There is a wealth in the Old Testament and the wealth is the promises given to the ancestors. It is that same tradition that carries into the saints of the New Testament - the wealth of their life and journey.

Song of Three Youths 3:13

...to whom you promised to multiply their descendants like the stars of heaven and like the sand on the shore of the sea.

This is to remember what God has promised. You can't pray without that. Otherwise the prayer is the prayer of the boat. The prayer of the boat is, "We are sinking, we are sinking! Please do something!" Jesus rebuked that faith and said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" They forgot who Jesus is and they forgot his promises.

If you really want effective prayer the first thing you do is to remember who God is. For that you need to open an investment account. You open an account by taking Bible statements that tell you who God is and recording it in that place. When you sit to pray, you can take out from the account statements of scripture that tell you who God is. But not only scripture - you can also remember historical events in your own life where you experienced the supremacy of God.

Once, we were doing management training. Normally Jagi used to take the dates but that day I had given the dates and I gave the same date to Sri Lankan airlines and Unilever. By the time we discovered it none of them were willing to yield. Sri Lankan said, "We have stopped people from going on the flights. You have to come." Unilever said, "We have already booked the hotel and got people on leave so you have to come." So since I hadn't yet received the gift of bilocation, I negotiated with both sides. I told Sri Lankan that I'd do the morning session until 1, and I told Unilever that at 1:30 I'll be at Oberoi. At 1pm I left Katunayake and the driver was driving so fast and my sugar was falling. I stopped at the Ja-Ela KFC to eat something. The moment I bought something and I was eating in the car; suddenly I heard a siren and a police vehicle passed and another vehicle passed. The ambassador of India was coming from the airport. I told my driver, "Put it behind this guy!" He said, "Zee don't even know where they are going." I said, "Nevermind, you put it." All the roads were cleared for them. Within 10 minutes, he passed the Oberoi, turned around and went to the Indian embassy. Here I was inside the hotel at 1:30.

When I want to remember what God can do, I remember personal experiences like these I've had of who God is. You mustn't only have scriptural but you begin to collect your own. Remember who God is. God could have let him stew in his own mistake but in His mercy, He intervenes. That's the beauty of this whole thing. He is above every situation.

Then he is remembering the promises. Remember what He has promised you. Maybe He has given you a personal promise that you can keep and remember in your prayer time. Then your prayer is not desperate. If not we are always praying desperate prayers.

Song of Three Youths 3:14

For we, O Lord, have become fewer than any other nation, and are brought low this day in all the world because of our sins.

What is this? Remember to repent. See how beautifully the formula is fixed into all kinds of prayer in the Old Testament. Without a repentant heart, God will not work in your life. Unfortunately we are repenting for other people. We do detailed analysis and we can even explain their ancestry and their parents and why they are doing it - but we can't see the same thing in our own lives.

Why?

Because our nature is to be outward oriented and to keep blaming other people for the events that happen in our lives. Maturity is to be able to see this and to see your own contribution. Remember that all of us have a blind spot. That's why we are a community, that's why the church is the body of Christ.

People try to have a personal relationship with the Lord, but reject everyone else. We are the body of Christ and without other people, we are not complete. Other people's input, other people's relationships, the things other people bring out in our lives. For example: If we have an anger problem, other people bring it out so we can deal with. What we do is we withdraw from other people, saying they are creating an anger problem for us. You will never get healed because we are avoiding or blaming or we'll never admit we have a blind spot. The sad thing is, the bigger the blind spot the more unconscious we are.

Also, You mustn't go to the other extreme of thinking and blaming yourself for everything either. That's why you need a community because you need a discernment. There are people who become the doormat on which they allow other people to walk all over them. Their journey to sainthood is becoming a doormat. In actual fact it is also a selfish thing you do. You say, "I'm to blame for everything, I'm such a sinner that God must be pleased with how I am accepting my sinfulness." Not just their own sinfulness but they're ready to accept everyone else's as well.

We had this huge Alsatian and when my children were small they would run and do something. If you shout at the children the dog goes under the chair. He was following Shakespeare's guidance: Discretion is the better part of valour. He thought that if anyone shouted them it was his problem. There are people like that as well. That's why we need community. Little by little, interactions with others bring it out. Working together, serving together and sharing our time together actually heals us. You need space and personal time with God, but you also need other people. Together we grow and that's why we in the CRL need to be aware of this. I keep telling the full timers that we need to work together. When you

work together, people's nature and issues come out. But that doesn't mean that's the end of the world. That means that we see the true nature of people and we take it to prayer, and we grow as we learn to handle each other.

From verse 14 onwards it is the prayer of repentance, and then it goes on to intercession:

Song of Three Youths 3:19-20

Do not put us to shame, but deal with us in your patience and in your abundant mercy. Deliver us in accordance with your marvelous works, and bring glory to your name, O Lord.

- Remember who God is,
- Remember to repent,
- Remember His promises and only then you
- Intercede.

Once you go through the first three processes, you're fortified to intercede according to the mind of God.

God has a way of answering your prayers. That's why these 40 days are so important. Build a relationship with the Lord. Spend time, relax and enjoy it.

Sometimes because of this early morning thing I kneel down because I want to be in His presence. I never realized I had the gift of sleeping while I kneel. Ten minutes later I realize I've fallen asleep, but that's because you're internally relaxed and have no issues. You've dealt with it before the Lord and because of that, the gift is relaxation. If you don't have it, you can sleep in the most comfortable bed and you will have no sleep because your inner being is not relaxed.

The gospel is about forgiveness. The first reading is about getting forgiveness of God and the gospel is a parable of the unforgiving servant. So you must know the literary gene of parables - that is the style of a parable. The style is that it is a shocking thing because he wanted to drive home a point. Because of that, he exaggerated the situation. That's why he said, "Remove the beam in your own eye before you remove the speck in someone else's eye."

Even the forgiveness of the prodigal son is an exaggerated story. He wants to drive home the point. Many scripture scholars will tell you that there is only one point in a parable. We are 21st century people and we want to pick up what one verse means and then another verse means. The style of the parable is that there is only one point - and you better catch it.

People question why they did what. For example, the parable of the sower. The problem of the sower would have been that he would've been drunk because he was sowing all over the place - on a stone, on the bushes. The point is not what the sower was doing - the point is that you have to have soil that is

open for growth. You have to catch the point of a parable. If you don't catch the point you may end up in some other place.

Remember that Jesus had only one main message in every parable. He exaggerates this story by saying how this man was forgiven of a great thing and then this man who was forgiven so much goes out of the place and demands restitution from a guy who has owed him little. The numbers are purposely exaggerated.

It says that the man owed the king ten thousand talents. That is over billions in debt. Then that man came across a man who owed him a hundred denarii - that's not even one of those talents. The exaggeration is given on purpose for you to realize you are forgiven so much and you are not ready to forgive somebody for a little thing.

If you don't have a forgiving heart, God's mercy and forgiveness can't flow through us. It is not that He doesn't want to give it to us, but there is no outlet. Because there is no outlet, He can't fill you. We are already filled with anger, resentment, grudging, revenge and all the other things that His mercy and forgiveness can't enter. That's why you remove the stopper and empty yourself of anger and reactions - and you will get the result - God's mercy and forgiveness will flow through you.

Today is a good day to free your inner self by forgiving people whatever blocks you have in your heart. Only then will the mercy and love of God flow through you.

Today's Magnificat has a beautiful reflection and I thought about mercy and forgiveness. This is written by a person called Wilma Derksen. Her 13 year old daughter was murdered on her way back from school in Canada. After they found out that she had been killed, this is the incident that happened the next day:

The day Candace's body was found, all our friends came to visit, bringing warm food with them. There was so much love in the house that it helped us get through. Then, at around 10:30 that evening, when most people had left, there was a knock on the door, and this stranger stood there. He told us, "I am a parent of a murdered child too." He was saying, "We now belong to an exclusive club that no one wants to belong to." We invited him to the kitchen table, and for the next two hours he told us, in vivid detail, everything he had lost - his health, his relationships, his concentration, his ability to work - he had even lost all memory of his daughter because now, he could only think of the murder, the trauma and the hate that followed.

My husband, Cliff, and I went to bed that night, horrified by the graphic picture he had painted. Having just been through the pain of losing our daughter, it now seemed we might lose everything else as well. And so, we made a decision that night that we would respond differently - and we chose the path of forgiveness.

Little did I know that that word 'forgiveness' would haunt me for the next 30 years, prod me, guide me, heal me, label me, enlighten me, imprison me, free me - and in the end, define me. I was right out there

in public, confessing to everyone the desire of my heart. For me, forgiving has been about turning what has happened to us into good. Forgiveness is not just a one off event, nor does it mean you are doing the same thing again and again. The issue of Candace's murder presents themselves differently everyday. Forgiveness is a fresh, ongoing, ever present position of the mind, which takes on many different forms. It is a promise of what we want to do.

If you look at Jesus, the final words on the cross was, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Today is a good day to clear up all your past. Some people may have deeply hurt us, betrayed us, blocked our path to life and there is a bitterness within us. That holds us from the blessing God has for us. Today we can choose to go on the path of forgiveness because blessings are waiting for us from God.

The only way I can get that blessing is if I reach out and forgive.