

Experiencing the Spirit

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 24 July 2022

A Reflection by Allison Gentle and Alison Wishart

Pentecost 7C

**Contemporary reading: *Prayer for Wholeness and Healing*
by Jan Richardson; Luke 11: 1-13**

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the scripts from which the reflectors spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

Allison Gentle

The gospel reading today, fittingly, starts with a prayer, and it's our prayer. The disciples, representing us, ask Jesus, representing God, how we should pray. We know it's a good question because Jesus answers it, answers it without exasperation and answers it in detail.

Jesus tells the disciples to address God as a parent. It is hard now to imagine what a radical teaching this was at the time. One of the many reasons the Jewish leaders of the day had for persecuting Jesus was that he referred to God as his parent. They saw this as Jesus putting himself on an equal footing with God. So for Jesus to teach the disciples that we too should address God as our parent represents a revolution in humankind's relationship with our God. Jesus is telling us to draw close to God in prayer, as a child draws close to a loving parent, in the intimacy of that secure bond.

Jesus teaches the disciples to affirm the holiness of God as they start to pray. Even the name of God is holy, and contemplating God's infinite holiness is a way into the presence of God's Spirit. Many of us have experienced gazing at something infinite, the sky or the ocean, or something huge, ancient, or beautiful, and entered into a state of awe that opens the door to the presence of God. I've had that experience driving through very flat country where the sky looks unbelievably vast, and staring into the starry night sky, and visiting very old stone buildings in England. And at home in a chair, just turning my mind to the infinity of God can bring awareness of the Spirit.

Jesus tells us to speak out our desire that God's power and divine law may be established on earth and within our hearts and wills. Once we have transcended the small desires of our isolated egos by remembering that God is sovereign over the world and ourselves, we can ask for our own needs to be met, our daily bread, symbolising our material needs and the bread of life, the sustaining Spirit that lives eternally through Christ.

Half of the prayer is about the vertical dimension of faith, our relationship with God, and the other half is about the horizontal dimension, our relationship with others. The hinge is grace. We ask for God to forgive us, and we undertake to forgive others, then we ask God to help us avoid unloving speech and actions to begin with.

Praying this prayer in some form of the biblical words, or in our own words, or just following the structure, is a time-honoured way of entering into intimacy with God. You might notice that the structure is similar to the worship service: praise, repentance, supplication, renewed resolve for right relationships with others.

The parable of the neighbour asking for bread to give a visitor, like the parable of the unjust judge, contrasts human responses to supplication with God's. In both, Jesus shows that we expect too little of God if we expect God to respond to our prayer as a friend or a judge or a human parent might. We can place infinitely greater trust in God, and ask for what we need with shameless audacity. If it seems we aren't getting what we need, we should not give up and withdraw in hurt or betrayal or pique, as we might when a friend or a judge or a parent lets us down, we should redouble our prayers and keep praying till we get what we need. And maybe by repeatedly coming before God in prayer, we will find that our sense of what we need has changed.

Jesus says: *everyone who asks receives, the one who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.* It is a bold promise, and a troubling one, as we have all prayed for things and not received them. It has been said that all prayer is answered but sometimes the answer is no. But that is not what Jesus is saying here. It could not be clearer, ask and it will be given to you!

At the end of today's reading, Jesus slips past the ego and speaks to the human heart. What we can be sure of receiving when we pray persistently, is the Holy Spirit. This is the answer to all seemingly unanswered prayers. Many prayers come from ego. Some prayers ask God to bend natural laws for our benefit or tell God how to intervene in other people's lives, overriding their free-will. But Jesus makes it clear what it is we should ask for. The bread we can be sure of receiving, if we ask persistently, is the bread of life, the Holy Spirit, whose presence can sustain our true life through all the trials and tribulations, our own and those of others, that we think we need God to relieve on the material plane.

The Spirit blows where it will, and it may bring us help in an unexpected way, but it will bring help. How many times have we prayed for what we thought we needed, and the prayer seems to be unanswered; but then we realise that we have what we need, the dire situation has resolved, without us receiving the solution we prayed for. Jesus has a teaching well suited to our time-poor age: eliminate the middle steps and just pray for the Holy Spirit.

What the Jesus prayer offers is a way in to the experience of the Spirit: to recognise that God is holy and sovereign and ask for the only gift we really need, the felt presence of God in our lives, and pray that we will let God's love and grace flow through us to others.

It is Jesus's promise that when we pray in this way, we will find the Spirit, we will receive the Spirit, the door to the presence of God will open.

May it be so.

Amen.

Alison Wishart

Hello everyone – I’m Alison with one ‘I’ – in case you were having trouble telling us apart.

When Jolyon asked me to talk at Pitt St about how I, personally, experience the Spirit of God, I took some time to consider his request. Like many of you, I really appreciate the thoughtful, relevant theological reflections that we get in a Pitt St service, and I knew that I couldn’t provide that, as Allison Gentle did for us this morning. But Jolyon had asked for a personal reflection, and because my personal experiences are as valid as the next person’s I decided to try.

In preparing this reflection, I mulled over the question – ‘*when or how do I experience God’s spirit in my life?*’

Some songs that I sang at high school immediately sprang to mind.

I went to a Lutheran high school and we had a mini church service every morning with 600 fellow students sitting on freezing cold plastic chairs. Five days a week for five years. I have been well churched.

One of the songs that we sang was by Bob Rowe. The first verse goes like this:

Spirit of God in the clear running water
Blowing to greatness the trees on the hill
Spirit of God in the finger of morning
Fill the Earth, bring it to birth
And blow where you will
Blow, blow, blow 'til I be
But breath of the Spirit blowing in me.

So, my logical, warped, teenage and twisted brain thinks: if God is in all of creation, then not only should we be singing about God in the ‘*clear running water*’ and the ‘*finger of morning*’ but we should also be singing about the spirit of God in the sewerage, and the gloomy, grey mornings and the endless rain that might have finally stopped or a few hours!

While this might be a logical train of thought, I did not want to go looking in sewerage or over-flowing gutters for the spirit of God, so I hit a dead end.

Then I started to think about the times in my life when I could have really used a bit of Holy Spirit action. Like in the Gospel of Luke where the man knocks on a friend’s door at midnight and says ‘*Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for friends of mine have arrived, and I have no food to give them.*’

Like this neighbour in Luke, there have been times in my life when I could have really used some divine intervention.

So what I’d like to know is, why doesn’t God offer a streaming service? I think if the Holy Spirit offered an ‘on demand’ service, there’d be a lot of subscribers. God could call it ‘Spiritfix’. It would overtake Netflix as the most popular streaming service in no time. Really, God is missing out on an excellent business opportunity.

But then I remembered that God does offer a streaming service – you pay for it with faith, and you tune into ‘Spiritfix’ through a free app called ‘prayer’.

The gospel passage in Luke encourages us to ‘ask, seek and knock’. Jesus says that “*because of your shameless audacity, your friend will surely get up at midnight and give you as much [bread] as you need.*” I like that: ‘shameless audacity’. If you’ve ever lived with a cat, you’ll have witnessed daily demonstrations of their ‘shameless audacity’.

According to Luke, Jesus is instructing us to pray audaciously. So it’s OK if my prayers are cries for help, or requests for miracles, because God wants to give out great dollops of the Holy Spirit. But there are some days, many days, when I’m having trouble tuning in to ‘Spiritfix’ – when I’m just not feeling it.

Which makes me think that I must be doing something wrong.

- Maybe I’m not praying audaciously enough?
- Maybe my faith is even smaller than a mustard seed?
- Maybe I’ve moved house so many times in the last 20 years that God has lost track of my current address (a common complaint of my friends) and doesn’t know where to deliver the gift of the Holy Spirit?

Or maybe I’m just too busy.

Because, if I’m honest, I know that I am more likely to experience God’s spirit when I’m quiet and still. Feeling safe and relaxed. As Jan Richardson writes so eloquently, ‘*when there is a calming of the clamouring, a stilling of the voices that have laid their claim on me.*’

I have to practice being still. Recently, I moved house (again), and now I’m living on top of a hill, and I can see the sun rise and set. I am practising being still when the light is changing at the beginning and the end of each day. I think of the colours along the horizon as a reflection of God’s mood. If it’s a golden sky, like this morning, I think that God is in a celebratory mood. If it’s grey and overcast, I think that God has something on her mind. Sometimes God starts the day glowing with happiness but ends it with a dark, furrowed brow. For me, I experience God’s spirit in those brief moments at the beginning and end of each day.

It’s not a revelation, or a divine intervention. It’s not an out of body experience, but it is a still point of connection in an ever-turning world. This is a very subjective experience, but it is how I am able to tune in to ‘Spiritfix’ and feel God’s presence.