

A prayer, based on the words we heard from Psalm 130:
“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Hear my voice,
and let our ears be attentive. Amen.”

When I was a teenager, there were a couple of companies making Christian posters. One of them had a few with line drawings to illustrate the thoughts that they had in their captions. Some of them were

- Love your neighbour, even when he plays the trombone.
- He who gives us bread will give us teeth.
(or was it “he who gives us teeth will give us bread”?)
- If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll probably end up somewhere else.

That last one is one I’d to have a closer look at tonight.
If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll probably end up somewhere else.

That’s a part of the problem we have these days: it seems that nobody really knows where he is going.

In this passage, Jesus knew where he was going. He was going to Jerusalem, to Bethany and to the temple. And he will also have known that he was going to a painful death on a cross.

On the first day, we see Jesus looking round the temple, looking at everything that is there, and probably planning carefully what he was going to do next.

But almost as an aside, Mark mentions that Jesus cursed a fig tree.

In the commentaries on this passage, we can read two possible interpretations as to what it all means. One says

that it is symbolic of Israel in the last days; the other says that it shows that something worthless might as well be dead. I'm not going to explore whether one or both of these interpretations is correct, but I will remark that it was clearly an intentional act by Jesus.

Like him, and like so many others, we need to make plans and set goals so that we can know where we are going and not simply drift, not knowing where we are going, what we are setting out to do, and whether we are successful or not.

Goal-setting is very important, because it focuses us on what we have set out to do. One thing I have found is that even if we fail to do what we have set out to do, we can see how far we have come from where we were before.

I'm hesitant to spend too much time talking about goal-setting in terms that would be understood by people in the secular, corporate world...but I'm going to do it anyway, because I want to look at another application for it in a minute. If you are one of the people who gets this sort of stuff at work, I apologise. If you're not yet old enough to be in the corporate world, you might as well make notes, because you'll get there sooner or later.

The key to successful goal-setting is to have goals which are described as SMART. That is, goals that are

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Time-bound

so that it will be possible to see how well you have performed. But the main difference between the goals set by management and the ones I'm talking about here is that I'm looking for goals that we can set for ourselves.

So we can move from a vague goal like “spend more time with the children” to “spend 15 minutes a day with each of my children in individual conversation for the next three months”. During the time, we can see how we’re doing. At the end of it, we can see how we did.

But while we are looking at goals like this, there is another thing we need to be considering. That is something so much more important than the goals we might set for ourselves. We know that we make our plans, but God has the final word. Solomon wrote “If the LORD does not build the house, the work of the builders is useless”.

So we need to look at our prayers. I’ve said before that it’s important that our prayers should be specific, so that we can be sure whether they are answered. There are so many ways that our prayers can be answered, and we need to know what we are praying for. If we are not specific in our prayers, we cannot know whether they have been answered.

But here’s an interesting thing that happened. The fig tree that Jesus cursed withered. This came as a surprise to the disciples. “Look, teacher! The fig tree you cursed has died!” What is remarkable is that after seeing all the great acts that Jesus had done, the disciples were surprised. These are the men who had seen the feeding of the 5,000, the feeding of the 4,000, the changing of the water into wine, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, Jesus stilling the storm and so many other miracles, and yet they were surprised at the fig tree withering, just as much as Viv would be surprised if a fig tree *I* cursed should die as a result.

But let’s look more closely at what Jesus said by way of explanation. “I assure you that whoever tells this hill to get up and throw itself in the sea and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be

done for him. For this reason I tell you: When you pray and ask for something, believe that you have received it, and you will be given whatever you ask for.”

Isn't that a command and a teaching to be specific in our prayers? But it is also a command that we must pray *in faith*. We must not be doubting in our prayers. Why would God want us to pray for things that we don't believe will happen? Why would God answer the prayers we don't believe we will answer?

In a small American town, a property developer started building a casino. The local churches weren't too happy about this, so they started praying to stop the casino. A week before the planned opening, a lightning strike hit the casino and it burned to the ground.

The church folk were delighted until the property developer sued them on the grounds that the church was ultimately responsible for the demise of the building, either through direct or indirect actions or means.

The church in response vehemently denied all responsibility or any connection with the casino's destruction.

Once the case got to court, the judge said “This one's going to take a bit of sorting out. As far as I can see, we have an atheist property developer who believes in the power of prayer, and a whole church congregation that doesn't!”

I also remember the story of a church who met together during a drought to pray for rain. The minister dismissed them: You have come here to pray for rain, yet not one of you has brought an umbrella with you.

But there was something else in Jesus' teaching here, and that's one part I know I find difficult. It's easy to stand here and tell funny stories, but there is a much more serious part to all this. Jesus said "And when you stand and pray, forgive anything you may have against anyone, so that your Father in heaven will forgive the wrongs you have done."

Ask the Lord to forgive you, as you forgive others when you pray. A major prerequisite for prayer is forgiveness. There should not be any unforgiveness in your heart when you pray. Don't bear any grudges. That's a very hard command. Well, it's a very hard command for me. There are some for whom it is not difficult. I know that there are some people who have a much more forgiving nature than I do. It's to people like me I am saying this: Ask the Lord to show us if we are harbouring any unforgiveness in our heart, and help us to repent from it and forgive.

Earlier, we heard from Psalm 130: "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness." I would like to turn this around and say "If we kept a record of sins, who could stand? With us, is there forgiveness?"

If we do not forgive, the Father in heaven will not forgive us (Mark 11:26). If you do not want your prayers hindered and unheard, daily surrender your heart and your will to the Lord in the name of Christ Jesus and He will show you what needs to be fixed.

"To err is human, to forgive, divine." This captures two of the greatest mysteries of the Christian life: "That man, being what he is, can rebel against God; and the doctrine that God, being what he is, can forgive man."

It also captures the essence of the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer: "And forgive us our sins as we forgive those

who sin against us." That must be the way we should be. Our forgiveness of others needs to be there before our prayer can be effective.

Asking forgiveness is the prerequisite for both the Eucharistic liturgy and personal prayer. We need to be at peace with God and with our neighbour. And we need to remember that everyone is our neighbour.

In the Sermon on the Mount, we hear "if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God". That's the same as the instruction in our reading here: "And when you stand and pray, forgive anything you may have against anyone, so that your Father in heaven will forgive the wrongs you have done."

It's not the same as the instruction given by John F. Kennedy...or it might have been Bernard Shaw: "Forgive your enemies but remember their names." It's not the same as a friend's landlady: "I rarely forgive. I never forget."

Forgiveness is something that sets each of us free in a marvellous way. It sets us free and it sets free those who we forgive.

So, through faith and forgiveness, we have prayer. It should be our pleasure and responsibility, our pleasure and responsibility to keep on inviting our perfect God into our lives through Jesus Christ. It is the way God designed to touch us, teach us, grow us and show through us His purpose, plan, and focus on a daily basis.

Now as we reflect on those words, let's remember the words "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" as we say the Lord's Prayer together.