

Sermon on 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24 It Doesn't Change God, It Changes Me

Now I know I haven't tried any movies on you in a while, so here we go!

There's a wonderful scene in my favourite movie of all time *Shadowlands* the story of CS Lewis.

CS Lewis through his writings has had an immeasurable impact on the world for the cause of Christianity.

The Narnia series alone would rank as one of the great Christian allegories in English literature.

Purists say that Anthony Hopkins' portrayal of Lewis in the movie is not entirely as he was, but for my money, on every level it's a masterful performance.

Lewis' wife Joy Gresham who has been diagnosed with cancer, goes into remission for a while which offers them some precious time to live and be together in each other's company before they are separated by her death.

The college chaplain, in a rather blunt and unthinking manner, says to Lewis in a tone of congratulation: 'I know how hard you've been praying. And now God is answering your prayer.'

Lewis responds, 'That's not why I pray Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me, waking and sleeping.'

Then as the chaplain walks away thinking the conversation is at an end, Lewis says quietly to himself, almost as if he is preaching in a strange kind of way, 'It doesn't change God, it changes me.'

It doesn't change God, it changes me.

I pray because I'm helpless.

I pray because the need flows out of me, waking and sleeping.

It doesn't change God, it changes me.

Lewis didn't pray in order for anything to happen necessarily.

And if we think we can make things happen, or direct God by our prayers we are mistaken anyway.

God knows every word, every thought before it is even on our tongue.

God knows our need and sees through all our deceptions, especially our self deceptions.

This was what the college chaplain didn't seem to get... somewhat ironic really.

Prayer Doesn't change God, it changes me.

I wonder if you've ever been brought to your knees in this way?

If you've ever felt like the need of your heart is so great and your longing for peace so deep, that prayer has flowed out from you, almost of its own accord?

And I wonder if you've ever come out the other side and felt changed?

I went and sat with my friend and long time supervisor Peter Pereira on Friday.

He is frail, weak, weary.

He is dying.

There were different things going on.

Different people coming in and out.

The conversation was broken and mixed.

And he was pretty tired. We didn't stay for long.

The nurse was there for a while.

We didn't pray in a formal sense.

There was no gathered time like that.

There was no 'let us pray' announcement.

No forming of sentences and words which would have all seemed inadequate anyway.

No beginning and end.

Yet somehow it was sacred time.

Somehow God was, as St Paul says, sanctifying us through and through.

Preparing the way.

Somehow in our helplessness to 'pray' in that formal sense, the encounter was bathed in the prayerful, tender, and gentle presence of God.

It didn't change God, it changed us.

Someone who was there said that there is a peace that has come over Peter in these difficult days, the peace of God which passes all understanding, which passes all words and all gestures.

The tender love of the tender Lord.

In amidst the bitterness of deep loss imagined and anticipated, there is also the sweetness of great blessing in sharing, in loving, in praying.

It doesn't change God, it changes us.

I pray because I'm helpless.

I pray because the need flows out of me, waking and sleeping.

'Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances', says St Paul, 'for this is God's will for you in Jesus Christ.'

It's one of the hardest things to take in about Christian faith that living as a prayerful people doesn't insulate us from the ravages of the world.

'That's not why I pray.', Lewis replies to the college chaplain.

We don't pray in order to 'get God to do what we think he should...'

As a kind of 'get us out of jail free' card.

On the contrary, it is faith and prayer which have guarded the hearts and lives of Christians in even the bleakest circumstances.

Incredibly, as Paul beseeches his Christian friends in Thessalonica, we are to give thanks to God, ‘... in all circumstances.’

In all circumstances – good and bad, light and heavy, difficult or smooth.

This is not a blithe passing over of grief or pain.

It’s not a cleverly marketed avoidance strategy which denies the real heartache of things.

It’s not a cheap way of getting around bearing our cross which Jesus instructed his disciples to ‘take up daily’.

It is an encouragement to see and pray into God’s presence at all times, through all things.

An encouragement to recognise that the deep desires of our lives, our heaviest struggles and hurts, and our insecurities, are to be given over to God in prayerful trust.

Even our deaths and the deaths of those we love are to be handed prayerfully into the heart of God.

And that as we do this, wonderfully, we are sanctified and changed as God draws us, in a phrase Lewis used in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, ‘further in.’

The need which flows out of all of us, our very fragility and helplessness as human creatures, finds its right consequence and response as we grow to live a prayerful existence, directed towards our creator.

So that from our earliest recollections of life to the last times of our being, we are still being changed and renewed in turning to Christ.

We are still being sanctified through and through.

‘The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.’, Paul writes.

It doesn’t change God, it changes us.

The British theologian Sarah Coakley writes beautifully picking up this same sense:

*“There is our own primary desire for God, of course, which we strive in prayer to put first: but underlying that is God’s unique and unchangeable desire for us, without which all our own striving is fruitless.”*¹

¹ Coakley, Sarah, ‘Prayer as Crucible’, in David Heim (ed), (2009, 2010, 2011), *How My Mind Has Changed: Essays from the Christian Century*, Cascade/Wipf and Stock, p108.

Today is the third Sunday in Advent where the church focuses traditionally on the theme of Joy.

And today's reading from the oldest part of the NT begins with an instruction to rejoice.

Rejoice always.

In many churches I've been a part of, this simple instruction has proven the hardest to achieve.

'Rejoice always.'

Be a joyful people.

For any number of reasons churches can sometimes be the last places one might look for joy and a prayerful rejoicing people.

Read Paul's letters, including this one, and you'll know not much has changed in 2000 years.

His churches knew loss and struggle as often the church of today does.

Yet he maintains an unwavering belief that the call to rejoice and to be a people at prayer is still necessary and relevant and important.

It doesn't change God, it changes us.

I wonder whether we here in this church, in this little outpost of the Kingdom, can grow to be a people at prayer who rejoice in the Lord always?

We are little different to how churches have been for millennia.

We struggle sometimes.

Occasionally we get on each other's nerves, we exhibit the faultlines of our being in various ways.

We are a people, corporately and individually, who have known loss and heartache in different ways.

We carry all this together in our common life of witness and sharing and it is all perfectly normal.

The call to prayer is not an antidote to 'cure' such things, as if we have an infection which will go away when we find the right anti-biotic.

As I said, prayer is not in the first place about getting God to do what we think he should.

Yet to be a people at prayer through all of this, to know in all our interactions from the least significant to the most, that we are breathing the very breath of God, is to know true joy together.

In our helplessness and the need which flows out of us waking and sleeping, we reach out for God, only to find God is already reaching out for us.

Sometimes it will take the form of formal words and crafted thoughts, as often we have in worship.

Sometimes it will be in the quiet recesses of our own hearts as we silently bring before God the needs of the world.

Sometimes it will be in a way of being together which doesn't need framed thoughts, but in which through our loving, we are actually praying into the heart of God, almost without knowing.

And the miracle is, it won't change God.

God's love is constant and nothing we can do can change that divine reality.

But it might just change us.

We might find deeper joy in our lives even in hard circumstances.

We might find it easier to love people in our midst we struggle with.

We might find our vision coloured more and more towards forgiveness and grace for one another and the world.

And all this would be God's work from beginning to end.

It doesn't change God, it changes me.

So, we close with St Paul's own words which are our hope, our joy, and our assurance now and forever...

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances: for this is God's will for you in Jesus Christ...and may God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.

Amen.