

## Pray Continually

### 1 Thessalonians 5: 9-24

For some people, routine and taking the same steps everyday is vital to their well-being and sense of purpose - for others, me included - we are always watching out for a break in the norm so that we can add variety to our lives. We have been enjoying Pizza Thursday in our household during lockdown - it began as a response to the Lockdown boredom and feeling of being trapped... Joel gets on the App and orders Pizza and someone else cooks it and brings it round your house... great! Sure! Except I'm not even that secretly bored of Pizza Thursday - openly and vociferously bored and looking for ways to not have to do Pizza Thursday until the end of time itself... But there are members of our household who demand Pizza Thursday. Its a delight to them and they insist it continues - forever... Great!

I've not really come onto Youtube to complain about Pizza Thursdays - not really... it's a fairly inconsequential thing in the grand scheme of things... but it teaches us something of the value of routine and something of the limitations... We respond differently and yet there are somethings that even our personalities must deal with... the things that must happen perpetually otherwise we die - drinking water regularly... in some form (coffee, diet coke, juice, lots of tea or actual water ... we must take on liquid...) Or kidneys shut down, dehydration happens and we get really sick and die... Cheerful!

And breathing. In and out. All the time - not even knowingly, but simply as a matter of reflex - I think - we know we are alive because there is breath in our bodies. This simple life-giving activity has been under threat for the past months and it is because of COVID-19 that we still will not be meeting in churches for worship until September. People are still getting sick and dying from this terrible virus - attacking one of the most vital functions of our life... Breath. So I make zero apologies that you are not yet in Church. We will go back together when it is safe to do so.

No - no one gets bored of breathing... it oxygenates our blood which is pumped around our bodies by our heart - and similarly, no one gets bored of their heart beating. It is life-essential... Okay ... we've made the point that there are essential things and there are routine things and we get choice in some but not in others - otherwise, well, bad stuff happens in an extreme life-limiting way.

Paul writes to the people of Thessalonika with hope and encouragement... Our guiding verse at Sprowston for the year has been from the Bible Passage we have in front of us today: "Encourage one another and build each other up". Verse 11. Not for many, many years has it been so important for us to do this as it is now. We set out in September 2019 with this verse in mind to build up and tell positive stories about church and faith rather than to be miserable and complain about things from 'back in the day'. When we tell a story of positivity and love, it encourages us to be the people that we are spoken of... As a church, we have become better at sharing loving stories of companionship and fellowship, or how we have supported and strengthened one another during the time of isolation and other difficulties... the love and kindness has honoured the spirit of this guiding verse as you have made phone calls, stood in queues for prescriptions and groceries for each other and prayed for us throughout this time... this spirit of care and encouragement is a sea-change or a spiritual renewal, where we have shaken off the old, critical spirit and put on the Spirit of God. Much better.

These changes stop being effort and become our default position. We don't tell the out of date stories about when the church wasn't good - we speak of what God is doing and his power to transform, challenge and make us new when we feast on his word and earnestly and honestly seek his face... Its such a lovely face - it makes me want to see it break out in a loving smile as we make God happy!

So this is the difference between the effort of the Pizza Thursday - a ritual and routine that is arbitrary and has lost its focus and the things of God. Paul tells us to be encouraging, and we

do, because it is our nature... part of our saved lives... we no longer look at the current situation through yesterday's lens because today's lens is transformed by God's saving love in Christ and we have chosen to walk in a new way and see through the eyes of Jesus...

Now, to be clear, there is nothing wrong with Pizza Thursday, and the reason I began with it is because it reminds me of Paul's word to "pray Continually"... But here, I think it bears a bit more unpacking in the way that Paul meant it - less Pizza and more focus on Jesus...

What is your prayer routine and what happens if you have set times? Ooh! I think here we can tie ourselves properly up in knots about prayer. I have never been able to maintain a set time of the day 'quiet time' and I can hear all the air being sucked between your teeth now... I know! How can I even qualify as a Christian?? And while we are in the spirit of the Confessional now I'll let you into another little secret as long as you promise not to tell anyone - okay? I'm going to need some whispered 'yesses' at this point... I don't use the Methodist Prayer Handbook. I know. Awful. And for years I had massive guilt about this... proper Christians do these things and I don't, maybe I'm just not good enough as a Christian? I don't see prayer like this any longer - prayer is the oxygenated lifeblood of the Christian. The heart of prayer pumps faith and the presence of God into every situation. The breath of prayer constantly in and out is so often done without conscious effort, except for when we are working our prayer muscles extra hard and bringing BIG THINGS to God - like School Places, like health needs, like family difficulties or fear over work or relationships, addictions or finances... now, the effort of prayer is big and hard work and can cost us dearly to trust God with them...

Each day, we open our eyes and with them our hearts of faith. We commit each day to the Lord and he is with us - unless our prayer life is under attack by the undermining of creeping secularism and a self-can-fix-it attitude... The nature of our existence of faith is dependent on us being closely attuned to God's heart, and to adjust our actions and attitudes in the same way that we adjust our balance to remain upright if we are on slippery ground or high heels or a skateboard - or in waders in deep river water fishing.

The continual nature of our prayer life is such that everything is given to God, constantly and without pause for wondering if God can actually be bothered with me being able to get the lid off the jam jar when I'm on my own - guess what? God can! (I nearly said Marmite then and stopped to ponder whether God would rather you left the lid ON the Marmite after all?) Without this constant and continual acceptance of God's authority and guidance, his power to uphold and advise, challenge and change us - we become lifeless. Lacking the spark of faith that is our life, our light and our salvation. These prayers can be added to well by that daily quiet time and a lovely prayer manual, but these points punctuate a prayerful life and are not it entire...

Our faith is one of rejoicing, of seeing the light of God when there is apparently nothing to rejoice about. It is then to hold that light for others to find the way. Faith isn't something we have to feel for it to be real - it can be hard sometimes to feel the embrace of God that we long for and in these times, we need the prayer equivalent of Pizza Thursday - the routine and regularity of faith activities to remind you of who you are and to whom you belong. Sometimes it is the routines of prayer that can re-ignite the faith that had eroded and lost confidence over the years...

One thing is clear, when we choose to sit down hard on the Holy Spirit's prompting either as a church, a denomination or as individuals, it will have the same consequences as the ample proportions of Mildred - or Magnus Boggins for that matter sitting down hard on a tiny gerbil that Nelly accidentally left on her chair. It will have a devastating effect on the life and purpose of the church, the individual and all concerned. "Hold onto what is good" says Paul. Don't crush the life out of the church by being miserable or too scared or mean to move forward... This is all far less likely when we have a life where the Spirit is involved in everything, in our continual life of prayer which is an intrinsic part of who we are.

I gave up the guilt. Different people have different things that suit them. And Thursday will be Pizza Thursday which I won't make a fuss about because it is important to members of my household! I realised that God will give me his answers and his challenges in accordance with the

way he made me - and my intention is that I use the way he made me for his Glory... you know what? You can too! Whether you are 9 or 10; or a growing teen or a 'what in the world is happening?' student. Whether you are a parent with huge demands or a person whose work is never-ending- someone who is scared about their future or someone who is sitting in the comfort of their chair bought for the aches and pains of old age... can I just let you know that you are amazing and wonderful! Can I remind you all that God is with you right now... all of you - even those who are only listening with half an ear... Can you start by being encouraging about your church and tell good stories about it! Then be brave and strong to see what God is doing and to go with it... because after the Pandemic, even mid-pandemic in September when a small number of you will want to go to church again, it will be different. We must keep God's life as close to us as our oxygen or else Church will die if we crush out the new thing that the Spirit is leading us into... We can do this. And to do it well, we must allow the Spirit room to speak. Are you ready??

Keep praying, its the breath of life to your faith.

Amen