

# Help

Psalm 69 and Luke 22:39-46

We are in our series of services, based on the words for prayer suggested by Brian McLaren in his book Naked Spirituality.

This is about expanding our vocabulary of prayer, of enriching our relationship with God.

There are three words of simplicity

- Here, Thanks and Wow

There are three words of complexity

- Sorry, Please and Help

There are three words of perplexity

- When, Why and How

And there are three words, of harmony

- Behold, Yes, and a final word which is not a word, the final word is simply that of silence

So we have this rich vocabulary of prayer, some of these words will hopefully expand our vocabulary of prayer - how often do we think we can say "Why" or how often we forget to say "Thanks".

The word this morning is not like that,  
The word is a word that everyone one of already associates with prayer  
It's probably the most obvious word on Brian McLaren's list,  
And yet this word too, this word, which we will come to in a moment,  
Is a word that we too often forget to say  
Or fail to say.

## Two Stories

To think about our word this morning,  
We are going to keep company with two individuals  
The first one is Jesus  
And the second is someone who we may never have heard of.  
His name is Louis Zamperini.

Louis Zamperini was born in New York in 1917, but grew up in the Torrance in California.  
He was boy who was always full of mischief, and tricks,  
His biographer referred to his childhood as a one-boy insurgency.

When a teacher told him off in class, he let down his tires with tooth picks  
When a train conductor didn't stop for him he greased the rails  
He climbed up trees and fired berries through a pea shooter at girls as they walked past with their clean dresses on  
He once used piano wire to attach the local baptist church bell to a nearby tree, so that in the wind it would suddenly start ringing

A local scrap merchant was too late to realise that the wee Italian boy who kept bringing him copper had stolen it from his yard the night before.

His parents utterly despaired of this boy who would never stop getting into trouble,  
But every story of his usually ended with the same phrase  
“... and then Louis ran like *mad*”

Louis ran like mad, until one he realised that he was actually better at the running than he was at the mischief, so he began to run and run and run.

His distance was 1,500m - he ran in school championships  
He ran in state championships  
And in 1936, even though he was completely unknown, he ran in the Olympic trials, and to his great shock he was selected to represent the United States in the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

He ran the unfamiliar distance of the 5,000m, was well out of the final in the last lap, but found some grit somewhere and ran the last lap in an unprecedented 56seconds, the watching Fuhrer was so impressed that Louie had his picture taken with Hitler.

Come 1940, an Olympic year, Louie was now well known, and not only was he fancied for a gold medal at the olympics, but many speculated he might be the first to break the 4 minute mile.

All that was put to rest though, with the declaration of the Second World War.

In 1941 when the United States were pulled into the War with the Attack on Pearl Harbour, Louie found himself in the United States Air Force. The plane everyone wanted to fly was the B-17 Flying Fortress, but in 1943, Louie found himself flying as a bomb aimer in a plane called the B-24 Liberator, a four engined plane which was sometimes known to its crews as the flying coffin - designed to fly long distances, it was light, less well armoured, and if it landed, it's bomb doors would catch on the sea, and the plane would usually be ripped apart by the force of the water.

And it was in one of these planes, the Green Hornet, that on Thursday May 27th, on a mission to try and find another B-24 crew that disaster struck.... One of the engines on Louie's plane, Engine number 1, gave out.

But that wasn't the disaster. Even if one engine wasn't working, you could still fly a B-24. All you had to do was shut down the engine, what was called "Feather" the blades, and you could fly home.

Unfortunately, what happened was that the pilots made a mistake, and instead of switching off, Engine number 1, they switched off Engine number 2. And with that, the fate of the Green Hornet was sealed, as it started spinning towards the ocean.

The Liberator did what it always did, it caught on the water, sending pilots hard into a fuselage that was being torn apart. Several times, Louie was pulled down when his hand got caught, when he found himself against the top of the cockpit, when he got caught in cabling, and yet miraculously he managed to pull the cord of his life preserver, and to float to the surface, his lungs filled with seawater and oil.

But even here, he was far from safe,  
Sharks in the waters below began to turn towards the source of all this noise,  
Four of the crew had perished, the only survivors were him, his Captain called Russel Philips and a crew member they had only recently gotten to know called Mac.

They were thousands of mile from safety, low on water, and only had a bar of chocolate between them, which Mac ate without telling the other two.

It seemed that hope that was coming their way when the next day they saw another Liberator coming to look for them, they managed to fire flares towards it, but because of the shining of them sun, it never saw them and Louie, Phil and Mac were devastated when it turned for home.

The next day there were no aeroplanes, and the three of them knew they had been given up for dead. And so they lay on their life rafts, without water, and waited to be killed by the sharks, or to die more slowly through thirst or starvation.

On the fifth day after the crash, Mac snapped, he started screaming that they were going to die, Louie had to slap him to gain control, and then that night, Louie's biographer, Lauren Hillenbrand describes what happened...

*That night before he tried to sleep, Louie prayed. He had prayed only once before in his life, in childhood when his mother was sick and he had been filled with a rushing fear that he would lose her. That night, on the raft, in words composed in his head, never passing his lips, he pleaded for help.*

We don't know the exact words that Louie said,  
It is doubtful that he ever remembered exactly what they were.  
But those words had an essential summary, which is our word in prayer for today,  
And that word is..

HELP!

Help is the word that summarises our Psalm today

*"Save me O God,  
For the waters have come up to my neck*

*I sink in deep mire  
Where is not foothold  
I have come into deep waters  
And the flood sweeps over me*

*I am weary with my crying  
My throat is parched  
My eyes grow dim  
With waiting for my God*

*More than the hairs of my head  
Are those who hate me without cause  
Many are those who would destroy me."*

I could see how those words would apply to Louie Zamperini

He is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean

*"I have come to deep waters"*

He has run out of water  
*"My throat is parched"*

He is floating towards the Japanese army, air force and Navy  
*"Many are those who would destroy me"*

And Louie Zamperini's testimony is that God heard his prayer...  
Somehow he survived....

**Always Pray this prayer**

And I think the first thing I want to say is simply  
No matter where you are, pray this prayer.

It might be literally true that you we are in deep water,  
But for most of us, the deep water is symbolic

Just as it was for the psalmist - Israel was a very dry country  
The water was always symbolic  
It was always the thing where you were out of control  
Or the thing that threatened to stop you breathing  
Stop your body breathing  
Stop your soul breathing

That is the first thing  
Pray this prayer,  
Just say to God  
I am in trouble here

How rarely do we actually say this,

I find it amazing that Louie Zamperini had to wait until Day Five until he prayed this prayer.  
Why wait so long,  
And yet that is what we do.

And simply tell God the problem  
It might be one word - Help

Or it might be a whole list of complaints, pains, upsets,  
What is the full nature of the flood.

Tell God  
Tell God where the waters are getting too deep  
Tell God where the enemies are too many.

Sometimes we almost want to wallow in the mire  
But telling God, is about wanting there to be some kind of possibility of something different happening  
Of recognising that we are not breathing properly where we are now.

Tell God,  
Say Help  
Don't wait until Day 5.

You saw that in the garden with Jesus,  
He went straight to the Father

The disciples fell asleep  
Couldn't pray with him  
But Jesus went straight to God in prayer as the old hymn has it  
And we will sing later on in the service

Don't wait until Day 5  
Go straight to the Lord in prayer

### **The Answer is often different**

How did God answer Louie Zamperini's prayer...

Well it wasn't an instant answer, that's for sure

Instead of a Liberator appearing out of the sky,  
Louie, Mac And Phil  
Had to drift for a few more days.

They had read a Time Magazine Article which celebrated the crew of a pilot called Eddie Rickenbacker -  
they had a terrible ordeal, which had last 24 days

They didn't actually know, but the record at that time for a raft on the Pacific was 34 days

Louie, Mac and Phil actually were on the raft for 47 days - that's almost seven weeks, surviving sharks,  
Typhoons and attacks from Japanese bombers.

That was some answer to the prayer that Louie made  
And then after that he spent over two years in the hell of the Japanese prisoner of war camp system,  
receiving some of the most brutal treatment  
What kind of answer to prayer was that...

And even after the war, Louie's biggest battles came inside  
He had fought to get to the olympics  
He had fought to survive the Pacific  
He had fought to survive in POW camps  
But one of the biggest battles he ever faced was at home, and against his addiction to alcohol which  
really was about his pain and his fear for any kind of future.

It wasn't until September 1949, that Louie Zamperini, at a Billy Graham crusade,  
Felt the full answer of his prayer for help on the raft  
When he felt the presence of God  
The gift of God which is life in Christ  
The forgiveness of sins,

That he felt the fullness of that prayer being answered.

When we pray the prayer for help  
God often doesn't give us an instant answer  
He gives us a story.

A story that will stretch us to breaking point  
But a story in which we will see God at work.

And once again it was the same with Jesus.

He prays for help  
The first part of the prayer is  
"Lord take this cup away from me"  
But then  
"Not my will but yours be done"

When we pray the help prayer,  
We are forced to see that God's path through our difficulties is not the one that we would choose  
But ultimately, somehow, the one that leads to us having a better understanding of God,  
Of knowing God,  
Of being changed by God  
Of doing the thing that God needs us to do.

Because Jesus went to the cross,  
Our sins were forgiven  
Our salvation was purchased.

Through the ordeal that Louie Zamperini went through he led reconciliation efforts with Japanese guards, even running with the Olympic Flame past one of his old camps when the Winter Olympics came to Japan.

When we pray the prayer of Help,  
We are changed,  
And the world is changed

In being helped  
We also become those who help

In being rescued  
We become rescuers

In the place of being desperate for God  
Is where we discover the presence of God - just as Jesus was comforted by angels in the story we read.

All manner of different things happen when we pray the prayer of help...

So today I urge us

Say to God - "Help" don't wait five weeks, to say it

Say to God - "Help" and watch the story that unfolds

Say to God - "Help" and see how you are changed, so that you become the help to others

As the Beatles sang

As the Psalmist sang

As Jesus said

As Louie Zamperini cried out

Let us do the same

And simply say to God

"Help"

AMEN