

WEEK 1 OF A NEW FOURTEEN WEEK PROJECT: “FINDING JOY IN OUR PRAYER:”

THIS WEEK “USING VISUAL IMAGES TO HELP US IN PRAYER.”

Introduction: What are we doing this Lent (2024): entitled “Struggling for spiritual joy!”

We are sadly not living in easy times at the moment. Not only are there all the conflicts of the world and the whole ‘cost of living’ crisis, but I’ve just got back from a gathering where there was a very helpful talk from our local police officers about all the “Cyber Crime” and “Scams” that are happening at the minute, but it could easily leave someone totally mistrustful and suspicious of just about anyone and everyone.

Were we meant to simply “try and get through this life?” “Where has all the joy gone?”

Well, although this is a much bigger subject than we have time here to look into, we can choose to live this Lent “struggling for our spiritual joy!” In Nehemiah ch 8 verse 10 it says, **“the Joy of the Lord is our strength!”** Nehemiah’s time was in many ways not too different to our own. It also was a tough time, the people were just emerging from one of the most difficult moments in Jewish history, the great Exile of 587BC. When they returned their country was in tatters. And yet, the people were encouraged to look to God in such a time to find a source of joy, for **“in the rubble, He was there, with them.”**

We can take inspiration from this. We follow the same very REAL God, who lives amongst us in the very REAL mess and ‘rubble’ we and, what’s seems almost the whole world, is going through right now! And He can then, like in Nehemiah’s time, be the source of our Joy – but it involves us needing to look for Him, looking for the Gift, looking for the love and for the closeness of God, sometimes against all the odds.

So it can be a ‘struggle,’ inwardly, as well as outwardly, but we still do have a choice as to how we choose to see things.

How does the NEW Project “Finding Joy in our Prayer” fit in??

This is where this NEW Project of “Finding Joy in our Prayer” fits in. When I’ve been talking to people about these sorts of things, whatever their age, it is around the area of Prayer that I find I have some of the most heartwarming but also the most challenging and concerning conversations.

Overall, I would say, on mass, we lack confidence and indeed vision and therefore joy in our Prayer, seeing prayer as more of a ‘duty’ than a pleasure. I used the analogy of having to go and see an ‘aged aunt’ (and not all ‘aged – aunts’ are like this) but having to sit there through ‘high tea’ and polite, stilted conversation. Something you know you think you ‘ought’ to do, but really there was a hundred and one other places and things you would ‘rather’ be at and be doing, and are more fun!

Have we ever considered it maybe WE who have reduced our 'Prayer lives' to such a narrow and a low expectation? And maybe, it is WE who then need to open our eyes and our minds, to 'struggle' with ourselves to find again 'the Joy' of Prayer that maybe has been there all along ?



Peter, the disciple of Jesus, having the great vision of a "huge 'Picnic' in the sky" in Acts ch 10 – it literally changed the world.

Peter, the dejected and yet re-inspired disciple of Jesus, was, after Pentecost, up on the roof-top of a house at a place called Joppa (on the coast, just south of Tel Aviv) and there, in Acts ch 10, saw a vision of a 'great sheet' with every animal and food under heaven upon it. And God said, "Peter, eat!" "I can't Lord," Peter replied. God said, "Are you telling me, all I have created is not good? Eat!"

It can be the same in our Prayer lives, cutting our expectations back and narrowing what we understand prayer and relationship with God to actually be – certain sorts of food, certain manners of behaviour, a

clearly defined 'box' in which to put God and our understanding of possible 'outcomes' in terms of expectations.

Over the next fourteen weeks, I have asked many of those you will know, in many different roles connected to the life of the Church, to share with us where they get their "joy" in their prayer in the area that they serve – and would they be willing to share that with us so that it can inspire us too to see how God is maybe much bigger and His engagement much broader (and more REAL) than we had perhaps previously considered.

I hope there is something for each of us to discover as we share this project, a bit like hearing different people sharing how different food and different ways of 'cooking' speak to them. I hope you can join in and can enjoy.

Matt Thomson

(there is a very good song based on Nehemiah ch 8:10 called "Joy" by a band called Rend Collective. We could do worse than play it to ourselves at various points this Lent:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDiETOLBvxA>)

WEEK 1 OF "FINDING JOY IN OUR PRAYER:" USING VISUAL IMAGES IN OUR PRAYER.



Our Vision Logo from our 2024 Vision: "The Tree of Life" – from Genesis ch2:9 and Revelation ch21:2-3.

Visual images have had a long ‘chequered’ history in the Bible and in our story of faith. Some parts of the Church would still hold that anything visual somehow ‘limits’ a God who cannot be ‘limited’ – see how all the Churches had their walls white-washed at the time of the Reformation.

However, the Bible is full of ‘pictorial’ imagery and there is much in our Church history that has inspired and encouraged people to see deeper into their faith (the whole basis of what we call ‘Icons’ – these days better known on computers than in Church came originally from the world of religious art – meaning not just to “double-click,” but to look into, or look ‘deeper.’)

Being a ‘visual’ thinker (someone who thinks and sees in pictures) it is this second understanding of ‘Visual Images’ that can help me in my Prayer.

Take our recent Logo from our Vision as a Church launched at Christmas. At its centre is a Tree – the “Tree of Life” from the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis ch2:9). It is the ‘other’ tree, from which we could have eaten, but instead we chose the “Tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” (in other words – power) with all its history and repercussions.

Then I think of when the Tree of Life appears again, right at the end of the Bible, almost it’s last page (Revelation 21:2-3), where we are told God’s future plan is for a

“new heaven and new earth, and a new Jerusalem” from which will flow the “River of Life,” and from whose banks will be “The Tree of Life” again, and it’s leaves “are for the healing of the nations.”

And I see the colours of the leaves in this tree – vibrant, and playful, and I see how they expand ever outward through the words surrounding the tree, carrying their same colours through them – “second chances,” “love,” “hugs,” “fun,” “forgiveness,” and many more.

And I dream that one day our world be bathed in such colour and where these words will be the ‘banners’ by which we as a whole world will truly ‘live;’ for my children, for your children, for the grandchildren, even for me.

And then I think of another Tree that figures so prominently in the Bible – the “Tree of Calvary,” the ‘tree’ on which Jesus died. Surely, that ‘tree’ should be dark or black by contrast, with ‘ashen’ skies, ‘drawing’ as it does, like a black hole, all the hurt and pain and violence of our world to itself, including from me?

And yet, and yet, it is also a deep spiritual mystery that all three trees are one and the same – the “Tree of Eden,” “the Tree of the Future,” “the Tree of Calvary,” they never change. Even at its

darkest and its most costly, Calvary still resonates all these colourful and beautiful words, “second chances,” “real love,” “God’s Word,” “forgiveness,” acceptance that I make “mistakes,” the ability to hope again, the ability to be the ‘ME’ I want to be, again.

And I then find myself wanting to “pray,” to “believe,” to be “really loud” (in other words, to ‘sing, again’) – full of thankfulness, full of praise, to my “Three Trees” God, who will overcome, and who is always with me, in me, believing when I can’t believe, hoping when I can’t hope, praying and bringing colour even when I can’t, or even when I choose not want to see it.

“Way Maker, Miracle worker, Promise keeper, Light in my darkness,... That is who You are! That is who You are! That is who You are!”

Lord, open our eyes and our hearts to see your artistry at work all around us, even in these difficult days. Amen.

Matt Thomson

(“Way Maker” was originally released by a Nigerian Gospel singer called, Sinach, in 2015. It has been recorded by numerous artists, including an arrangement by Nicola and our own Worship Group here – played at the Deanery Service of Light in Banwell Jan 2024, and is a much loved classic: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJCV_2H9xD0)