

Chapter 23

Sorting out priorities

Words can hurt or heal. A badly behaved twelve year old told how, six years before, his father had left for work with a cheerful, ‘See you tonight’. Sadly the child added, ‘But he never came back’. He blamed the abrupt departure on his quarrels with his sister, the sense of guilty responsibility affecting his behaviour. The retrospective memory was made worse by the father’s untruth. In contrast, an uncomplaining little girl with leukaemia recalled her mother saying, ‘I love you, darling’.

One memorable word can linger for years. How much more significant over the centuries have been words spoken by Jesus, who was himself known as the Word of God.¹ How may his words and ways affect us as we follow him today?

Jesus lived and died for others

The cross of Christ is the best known Christian symbol, reminding us of Jesus’ great sacrifice as he offered body and blood in order to present us back to God, cleansed and renewed. The truest symbol is when the tomb is empty, for he rose again from the dead and through his Spirit is still alive to strengthen and inspire us.

The logo of the International Christian Dental and Medical Association (ICMDA) is an empty cross with a bowl and towel in the foreground. The empty cross speaks of Jesus’ sacrificial love for all, its horizontal bar reminding us that if he is truly to be our Lord, our capital ‘I’ will need to be crossed out. Like his, our arms should stretch out in compassion, ready to serve others. ‘Service’ and ‘worship’ have the same Greek root and in his letter to the Romans Paul defines worship as the sacrificial offering of our whole selves in response to God’s great mercy.² Although many may consider our church services to be our major acts of worship, at the exit of the church I go to there is a notice facing us with the reminder, ‘You are now entering a time of worship,’ that is, all the time there is!

Jesus worked hard, became famous but stayed humble

For most of his first 30 years Jesus probably did the heavy, creative and valuable work of a carpenter in the family business at Nazareth, no doubt doing it well, and reminding us to be loyal to our earthly families. When he later returned to his home town as a popular teacher and healer, instead of being proud of him the locals took offence, so he quietly took his teaching to the villages.³ Later, on his last night with his disciples, he set an example of humble service by washing their feet.⁴ His help is still on hand whatever our occupation, reminding us to do it humbly and whole-heartedly as a worshipful offering to him.⁵ Humility is not always the first impression given by some who hold important positions, including a variety of health professionals. The bowl and towel of the ICMDA logo is a reminder that however hard working and even famous the members may be, they should be marked by the same humble attitude as was their Lord's.

Jesus knew and loved God's word

As a child, Jesus would see the scrolls of ancient Scriptures unrolled in the synagogue and listen to the readings, learning the timeless stories and singing the Psalms. Mary and Joseph would no doubt help their little son to love and learn the Scriptures by heart, so that later in life he would quote relevant verses, as when answering the tempter in the wilderness.⁶ Some of his words from the cross came straight out of Psalm 22, drawn upon to strengthen him in his agony. To hide God's word in the heart gives any of us a source of strength and encouragement for life, and also in death.

In her youth a senior nurse I knew had been made to learn by heart passages of the Scriptures, sometimes rather unwillingly. However, many years later she became a respected Bible teacher as well as an outstanding leader in her profession. Just ten days before she died, by now almost 90 years old and seriously demented, she could still complete verses of much loved passages as they were read to her. We, too, need to get to know and love our Bibles and to teach young people to do so. Thought patterns and attitudes will be shaped for the rest of our lives when we prayerfully digest a daily portion, perhaps

with the help of a new translation or study notes. God's Spirit speaks through his word, often with a thought exactly right for the needs of that day.

Jesus practised the presence of God through prayer

As well as meditating on the written word of God, Jesus was nourished at all hours by two-way conversation with his Father. He taught disciples (then and now) to address God as 'our Father', and encourages us to be specific and persistent in prayer, trusting our heavenly Father to know the best answers.⁷ When we find ourselves lost for words, the Psalms offer a great resource and often remind us to put praise and thankfulness ahead of a list of requests. We need to approach God with proper reverence. Some find it helpful to structure prayers using the mnemonic ACTS, standing for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Keeping a little notebook will help to remind us of individuals or concerns needing special prayer and is a place to record the outcome. The Lord's answers often surprise and encourage us.

Many of the Psalms model honesty in prayer, giving us words when feeling confused (Psalm 73), depressed (Psalms 42, 43), rejected (Psalm 74), at the end of our resources (Psalm 77), grateful (Psalm 18) or just filled with praise (Psalm 136). Sometimes we will just keep silence before God as we contemplate his greatness. His Spirit will put into words what we find it hard to express.⁸ Like Jesus, we always need to keep our prayer line open as we practise the presence of God by quick prayers at any time. Prayer with others is especially encouraging for Jesus has promised to be with us and answer prayers made in his name- that is, by praying as he did, seeking God's purposes and not trying to bend his will to ours.^{9,10}

In the years when Albania was officially an atheist country religious practices were forbidden, so the believing grandmother of a troubled eight year old told her that she could pray to God but must do so secretly to avoid trouble for them all. The child went to her bedroom, prayed in a whisper, and found that her prayers were answered.

Jesus regularly attended a place of worship

It is good to establish the habit of attending public worship when duties (and regimes) allow. Like Jesus, some will be able to take part in the service. Even the way that a lesson is read can show that the reader knows and loves the author.

When Albania eventually opened up, the girl who had learned to pray came to Britain. Now a teenager she was asked to tell her story at her first ever church service.

Someone was present who was ashamed to have neglected so often what for her was so precious. He mended his ways and found out how much he had been missing. It can be hard to go into a new church alone, so it is good to join or take a friend and when possible find a smaller home group to attend during the week. When I was in training and outside activities were cut back by a heavy on call rota, others would join me for coffee and Bible study, first in my hospital room and later at home. Some who came were not churchgoers and a few held different beliefs but we all found those times valuable as both faith and friendships grew stronger.

Jesus enjoyed the company of others

Jesus gladly entered into social occasions, such as a wedding or dinner party, using every opportunity to honour his Father in deed and in word.^{11, 12} At one of these parties a much despised gatecrasher showed him such gratitude and devotion that he openly drew the contrast between her actions and those of his neglectful host. There is a time for speaking out about injustice or prejudice, whether in private or public places, even if it brings the unpopularity that Jesus often faced.¹³ He had a better welcome at a home in Bethany where he could both relax and be a great help to the host family.^{14, 15} Whenever possible we too need to find friends in whose company we are refreshed, remembering other lonely people who may need our support. Jesus knew the importance of a quiet break¹⁶ and with his companions must often have walked, talked and no doubt laughed together.

The companionship of like-minded friends is a priceless treasure, even more so when united in faith.¹⁷ Jesus found companionship with friends, not in marriage but he also knew the pain of being let down by his inner circle.¹⁸ It would be good if we can have (and be) the kind of friend Paul had found in Philippi where some shared his troubles in practical ways.¹⁹ Wherever in the world we go there are Christian brothers and sisters to be found who will offer mutual support and shared prayer in times of pleasure, problems or pain.

In a residential care home near me some of the carers are from different ethnic backgrounds. The work is not well paid and often hard. Two have Indian and African origins and one of them told me, 'It makes such a difference being with another Christian, even if we don't talk much. It's not the same as being with friends who don't believe – you have a different level of fellowship.'

Jesus not only saw needs, he also met them

The prime aim of health professionals is usually to restore and maintain physical health, whereas Jesus brought healing to the whole person. He also cared about those whom others despised or neglected, a point made by his asking for a drink from a woman of doubtful reputation and segregated race. The same principle held in his story of the Good Samaritan's great kindness to a Jew in trouble.^{20, 21}

In our turn, to buy a sandwich for a beggar could be wiser than to give money likely to be spent on drugs and certainly better than looking the other way.

It seems that Jesus had no spare cash but as his life was one of self-giving, we too can give to our local church or other agencies that show the love of Jesus in practical ways. All that we have is God's gift to us anyway. Young people often need teaching, perhaps by example, to work out priorities and give what they can, even if it means buying fewer cups of coffee (or more).

A doctor friend of mine has a calling to visit orphaned children in her homeland. One day she went to a remote place and was immediately surrounded by dirty, smelly children with runny noses and head lice.

She was at first revolted but sent up a quick SOS prayer and was amazed to be filled with Jesus' love for little children, clean or not so clean.²² She was also able to try and find practical help for them. Those of us who live more comfortably need to remember Jesus' simple lifestyle²³ and ask him to share with us the grace of giving.²⁴

Jesus' delays were always for a purpose

There are several recorded occasions when Jesus seemed to delay over something that others thought urgent. Jairus was no doubt very frustrated when Jesus stopped to attend to a chronic invalid instead of hurrying to his dying daughter. When accused of being slow to help his sick friend Lazarus, Jesus later amazed his critics by miraculously bringing the dead man back to life. Over the centuries countless others have learned to trust God's timing despite his delays.

Most of us have times of uncertainty in life but as we put our trust in God the way can eventually clear. After leaving Uganda I searched for a settled home in Britain for over a year and began to wonder whether I was in the wrong place. Then at last I found a house that said 'Yes!' Confirmation came from a framed verse left on one of the walls saying, 'The Lord shall guide thee. Isaiah 58:11'. Over 30 years later, I still live there! Tested faith grows stronger as we hold on in faith for his promises to be fulfilled. His timing is perfect.

Jesus always demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit

As the Holy Spirit is the same as the Spirit of Jesus, it is clear that our Lord must constantly have shown the Spirit's fruit. In our busy lives we regularly need to ask for his help to stay gracious, loving and fruitful, as Jesus was.

A friend and I visited a famous church that was about to close over lunchtime. A churchwarden with a big bunch of keys hurried us out and there, in pouring rain, stood a photographer. He had come from a distance so had made an appointment for this precise time to photograph the inside of the church. 'Well you didn't speak to me', retorted the warden coldly, locking the door in the visitor's face. It is

easy to criticise without knowing the inside story, but those who are Christ's learn to ask for more of his love and long-suffering, even under pressure. He said quite clearly that the kind of fruit we produce shows up our relationship to him.²⁵

Jesus had a missionary heart

Jesus' last instructions to his disciples sent them into the world as his ambassadors, making and teaching new disciples. Wherever we live and whatever our work, we will regularly meet spiritually hungry and thirsty people whose greatest need is to know him. As in Jesus' day, some will make a direct approach, but more commonly we'll need to stay tuned, ready to speak a word for him. We'll be thinking more about this in chapters 28 and 29.

I'm not up to all that!

We have been looking at just a few of Jesus' priorities to point to ways in which we may follow in his steps. If you are left thinking that this is beyond you, take heart – on your own, it is! Help is at hand, though, for Jesus not only said, 'The Spirit of the Lord is on *me*' but he also promised the gift of that same Spirit to all his disciples.^{26, 27} We need not look anxiously at a checklist, for he will lead us to what is ours to attend to and give us all needed wisdom, strength, sensitivity and supportive friends as he does so.

Remember, too, that Paul said how he *had learned* the lessons he was handing on.²⁸ As with other kinds of learning, some lessons can be hard, or take a long time to sink in and even longer to put into practice. Yet the end makes it all worthwhile.

For further thought

- Are you inspired or discouraged to think about Jesus' priorities?
- Try looking at your own priorities and see how closely they match up with his.
- Where you know they don't match up, ask for Jesus' help in becoming more like him.

Further resources

- Martinez P. *Praying with the grain: how your personality affects the way you pray*. Oxford: Monarch Books, 2012
- Yancey P. *Prayer: does it make any difference?* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008 (new edition)
- Stott J. *The grace of giving: ten principles*. Oxford: International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, 2012.
- Sider RJ. *Rich Christians in an age of hunger: from affluence to generosity*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005

References

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| 1. John 1:1, 14 | 15. John 11:1-6, 14, 41-44 |
| 2. Romans 12:1 | 16. Mark 6:30-32 |
| 3. Mark 6:1-6. | 17. John 1:12-13 |
| 4. John 13:2-17 | 18. Mark 14:32, 37-42 |
| 5. Ephesians 6:4-9 | 19. Philippians 4:14 |
| 6. Matthew 4:1 -11 | 20. John 4:9 |
| 7. Luke 11:1-13 | 21. Luke 10:29-37 |
| 8. Romans 8:26-27 | 22. Mark 10:13-16 |
| 9. Matthew 18:19-20 | 23. Matthew 8:20 |
| 10. Luke 22:41-42 | 24. 2 Corinthians 8:7 |
| 11. John 2:1-11 | 25. Matthew 7:20 |
| 12. Luke 7:36-50 | 26. Luke 4:18-19 |
| 13. Matthew 9:9-13 | 27. John 14:25-26 |
| 14. Luke 10:38-39 | 28. Philippians 4:11 |