

There's a story about a minister and a taxi driver who happened to die at the same time. They arrived together at the pearly gates and the taxi driver was taken to a fabulous palace, complete with fountains, vast lawns and an army of servants. Meanwhile, the minister was ushered down a lonely lane to a small one roomed house where he was to spend eternity. Noticing the discrepancy between the two rewards, the minister complained to St. Peter saying: *Look, I spent my entire life ministering to other people. If the taxi driver deserves a mansion, why didn't I get one?* St. Peter explained: *Well, up here we go strictly by results. When you preached, people slept. When the taxi driver drove, people prayed.*

Today, I ask you to join me in twenty seven days of prayer which takes us up to Easter Sunday. I ask you to pray daily for our church and our mission, as well as our people. Let's pray that every move we make and every decision we take, be an action of God that is directed by His will. Let me suggest three statements made by Jesus as a guide for our prayers together today and in the days to come:

1. Ask and it will be given to you. Jesus said in his instruction on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount: *Ask and it will be given to you.* Ask! Let your requests be made known to God. James 4:2 says: *You have not because you ask not.* God, in his divine providence, could give us all we need without asking, but God in His wisdom knows that our requests are often the only communication we have with Him, so He requires us to ask.

So often we limit our requests to God, our prayer requests are often limited by our imagination or experience, or more often than not, by our faith. I want to invite us to ignore human limitations when we are praying. Let our imaginations run wild in our prayers, may we realise that God can do anything because He is almighty. Let us be bold in our prayer requests, let us be demanding of God in our prayers. There is so much that we're unable to achieve, so may our prayers reach into the realm of asking for what we can never manage to do. If we can prayer to ask God to achieve what seems impossible for us, then we've begun to pray as an act of faith .

Bruce Wilkinson in his book, *The Prayer of Jabez*, tells of taking his five year old son, David, to a playground that was equipped with swings, monkey bars and seesaws. David was attracted to the three slides, which were small, medium and enormous. David went to the small one and climbed the stairs, slid down and waved as he continued to go again and again. After a few slides he moved to the medium slide. He hesitated a little as he looked up at the top but he went right up the steps. With a look of fear and excitement, he went down that slide with a big smile on his face that said: *I've mastered it!* Eventually he goes over to the enormous one. He confident now and he starts climbing up the steps. Half-way up, he literally freezes with fear. What's worse is an older boy pecking at his heels telling him to get out of the way. David yells to his father: *Dad you and help me!* Bruce said: *I was just waiting for him to ask for help. And with one simple request I ran to him, came up the steps behind him, picked him up and carried him to the top. I put my arms around him and we slid down the enormous slide together.*

Bruce Wilkinson reflected on this and said: *Many of us seldom pray because we have never been on the big sliding slide. We've chosen to live our lives in fears and doubts. We go through life needing to be in charge and we only attempt what is possible. After all, who needs God when we know how to do it ourselves? If we have life under control, we don't spend much time with the Lord. It's only when we get into trouble and struggle that we begin to exercise our faith and reach out to God.*

I've been guilty of limiting God to my own understanding and I lapse into periods where the worship is limited to my own experience of worship. I consider what has worked before and stick to it, which is ridiculous. I often work from a place of fear and stupidity: When I plan worship I look out at congregation and ask myself what would they like worship to be? And of course, everyone will have different preferences so it's impossible for me to please everyone all the time. My fear is of not pleasing people and my stupidity is shaping worship for the people instead of honouring God. I am praying and asking God what He wants our worship to be, for it is Him we are serving, not ourselves!

Last year is past and it was challenging for us, and I am praying that God will be doing a new thing this year. I am praying that we see miracles in our midst, and that we recognise God working in and through what's around us and among us. I believe in the God of miracles which is why I pray. I hope we all pray to the God of miracles! When we pray to God we are making our request to a good Father, this is what Jesus tells us. Good Father's want to do everything they possibly can for their children. God wants nothing less than the best for His children, but we have to believe this. Jesus reasons about prayer: *What parent would offer stone for bread or serpents for fish? If we know how to do that for our children, how much more will our heavenly Father grant what is asked by his children?* God is like a heavenly parent who wants to be engaged with his children. Ask and it will be given to you. We must get into the habit of asking with real faith in our good Father.

The second phrase in this trilogy of sayings of Jesus about prayer is: ***Search and you will find.*** To seek is to pursue, to delve into, to explore and try to discover. There are a couple places I want us to do some searching between now and Easter. The first is within our own heart, in our own homes and in the places that are really close to us. In Luke 15; Jesus tells a story about a woman who misplaced a coin. She is so bewildered by the loss that she lights a lamp, sweeps the floor and searches carefully until she finds it, because something important has been lost.

Have you lost anything? Perhaps you've misplaced your keys or an important document you need. Have you lost your passion for the Lord? Have we lost the sense of fire burning within us for the Holy Spirit? Maybe prayer alone will help you find it, but I sense that it's time for us to seek down deep in our souls. It is time to seek the unexpected, and to dream about possibilities and potentials that we haven't thought about for a long, long time. Mary and I have been doing that recently because we are seeking God's guidance for the remaining five years we have left here at Thornliebank. We are not ready to just coast to retirement so we're prayerfully seeking God for a new vision. May I invite you to join me in seeking God for a new vision for Thornliebank please! May I invite you to seek God for a new vision for your personal relationship with Him.

What does God have for us? Is God inviting us to join Him is a new venture? We'll never know unless we spend time praying and seeking God's will for our lives. What dreams have we still to fulfil for the glory of God? What more could we do for the good of others? Where is God taking us over the next five years to build the kingdom of God in this place? Seek and we will find. I have watched people seek before, and I can guarantee they find.

The third trilogy of Jesus about prayer is: ***Knock, and the door will open for you.*** The doors of opportunity will open for you. *The angel says to the church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3: Behold, I set before you an open door which no one can shut.* The angel might have written that about Thornliebank Parish Church. Our potential is there but it needs activated. After five and half years here, there are doors that have opened that I could never have imagined. God isn't finished with Thornliebank yet. He has things for us to do and dreams for us to fulfil. It's time to step through the door of opportunity!

Nothing's ever achieved without work, and we have a choice over the coming five years. We can roll our sleeves up or we can plan for decline. Our choice is as stark as that. We can work to build this church but if we don't want to put the effort in then I fear it will be a case of last out, turn off the lights. We need to be willing to work. There have been times recently where I've prayed; *Lord, could you make it a little easier?* The Lord spoke to me about those prayers almost as directly as the Lord has ever spoken to me and said: ***Mike, if you'll get the 'T' out of the middle of easier, I'll replace it with a 'T'. You won't have it easier, but you will have Easter, so let's get on with what I have for you!***

God is waiting for us, and His door is open. It's up to us to ask, seek and knock for God is waiting. What will make this church grow is not our programs, though our programs are good. It's not our friendship clubs or our pastoral care although they are so important. The key to make this church grow is that we have to make a decision. Do we ask, seek and knock on God's door, and then walk through to receive what God has for us, even although it mean commitment, or do we remain in our present stage which means defeat? I hope our answer is the former and not the latter.

Let us step out in faith together, to ask for more of God in our personal lives. To seek God's will for ourselves and our church, and to knock on God's door of opportunity to grow and prosper as God's people. I know this will be challenging for some, but what is the alternative? Stagnation, closure and the death of this church that's stood since 1855.

So I ask us today to pray fervently between now and Easter, for God to reveal Himself to you personally. For God to reveal His will for us as a church. And for God to reveal the vision and work that He has for us to do in the place He has set us. Pray with me that the whole will of God would come to be, and that we would resolve to do the will of God, now and forever. *Amen*

(1958 words)