

**‘Hear Our Prayer’**  
**Lent Course 2025 Session 2**  
**Elijah – Ambitious Prayer**

Hello and welcome to session two of our Lent Course ‘Hear our Prayer.’ Last time we thought about personal prayer in the company of Hannah.

This time, though, we are going to crank up the volume. If you want peace and quiet, go back to last week or fast forward to some of our later sessions. This week we are in the presence of a loud-mouthed, provocative, controversial prayer monster. It’s time to bring on Elijah. And as we explore Elijah our theme will be ambitious prayer.

‘I have been zealous for the Lord,’ Elijah says twice to God, and it’s not a boast. It’s almost a confession. Has he overdone his zeal? Has he just gone a bit too far? Because Elijah was not one to hold back either in prayer or in the outworking of his prayer. The unfaithful King Ahab once greeted Elijah with the words, ‘You troubler of Israel!’ because the prophet drove him round the bend with his denunciations and warnings of doom. An extraordinary man of God but not I suspect an easy person to be with.

Elijah was someone who had no personal ambition whatsoever. But he had a massive and burning ambition for the Lord and for forming a people worthy of the Lord’s call. He simply refused to tolerate a nation that was at odds with God’s plan. And that ambition led him to the most incredibly colourful and dangerous life.

He would not tolerate the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel, and so at his prayer a terrible drought wracked the whole land and he had to take refuge first at the Wadi Cherith and then with the widow of Zarephath. He was not prepared to put up with the death of that widow’s small son and so stretched himself out three times over the child’s breathless body and raised him to life.

He could certainly not tolerate the unbelief of the prophets of Baal and so challenged them all to a duel. When the Lord proved his power by burning up the sacrificial bull, Elijah was so seized with righteous anger that he destroyed all of them and so incurred the murderous fury of the queen.

What a life! Elijah’s was a torrid, genuine, honest, open relationship with God. He could be in turns angry, frustrated, pleading, terrified or awestruck in God’s presence. And that drove his ambition in prayer and his thirst for God’s ways to be established in his nation.

It is not hard to see that same massive ambition in the praying life of Jesus. Jesus declared the kingdom – God’s world, God’s space, where those who mourn will be comforted, those who hunger for righteousness will be filled and those who make peace will be called children of God. It is the praying of Jesus that makes that kingdom accessible. His praying brings God’s world into our world.

So look what happened when in Mark 5 he went to the country of the Gadarenes and met a man terribly afflicted with numerous demons called Legion. It was not acceptable to Jesus that this poor man should be possessed in this way: living amongst the tombs as if already dead, outcast and suffering terribly. So Jesus prayed with ambition, the demons were cast out and went into the pigs, an unclean animal for the Jews, and then into the sea, which for the Jews was the place where monsters belong.

Or again in John 11, Jesus was called to the home of Martha and Mary because Lazarus had died. For a man to be bound for eternity by death was not acceptable for Jesus. This is not God’s plan. So Jesus prayed, ‘Father I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here so that they may believe that you have sent me.’ And Lazarus came out of the tomb, alive, and was unbound. Ambitious prayer triggers the amazing work of God.

So what do these examples, Elijah and Jesus, have to teach us about being people of prayer? They tell us, pray big, pray bold, pray with ambition.

All too often in a declinist western Church, our prayer is timid and tentative. We ask God to piddle about here and there, to reassure and bring comfort, to make us feel a bit better about ourselves. We seem to want a tinkering God who will basically maintain a safe status quo and leave that which is familiar largely intact. We ask small. Or often we don't really ask at all. Maybe we struggle to believe in a God who might actually intervene and change things. Because let's face it, it's much easier not to. It's much easier to have a God we can explain and manage.

But as Christians we have a monster, massive vision for how the world should be. It's in the Bible again and again, at Genesis 2 and Isaiah 61 and Isaiah 65 and Ezekiel 48 and Daniel 12 and Luke 4 and Matthew 5 and Revelation 21. That vision is the year of the Lord's favour when the poor hear the good news and the blind have sight and the sick are healed and the lame leap and sing and the oppressed are set free and prisons are thrown open and all live in right relationship with God and each other and with this beautiful creation. God says, 'For I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox. They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain says the Lord.'

That's not some dreamland imagined up by crazed idealists. That is God's plan for his world, a plan destroyed by human sin but set back on track by the saving work of Jesus.

Our prayer is that God's world and our world become one world. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, 'Thy kingdom come.' There is no bigger or more ambitious prayer possible than that. It asks for that day when the kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ. We long for that day, we yearn and pray for that day. We live now as if that day had already arrived.

So prayer must be motivated by a total, point blank refusal to accept that which is against God's plan. We won't tolerate these things. We won't tolerate a world being destroyed by human greed and oil-fuelled consumption. We won't tolerate a nation in which 5 million children are being brought up in poverty and in which young people in a privatised care system care have been turned into monetised units. We won't tolerate unspeakable conflict in the Sudan or Ukraine or the Holy Land. We won't tolerate gender based violence or abuse. We won't tolerate sickness and suffering and pain. We won't tolerate a nation in which the lives of so many people are so unbearable that they seek escape through ketamine or gambling or cheap vodka. We won't tolerate the worship of false gods or faithlessness or ignorance of the Gospel. We can't tolerate these things because they run counter to God's plan for his people.

You may think you are powerless to act in world of injustice. Let me tell you, you are not. You have a power greater than the greatest army, mightier than the most powerful tyrant, more valuable than the greatest offshore investment account, more influential than X or TikTok or Meta or Apple. It's called prayer.

So pray big. Pray big. Our Director of Ministry, when asked in church to pray for five people to come to faith, put at the top of her list Kim Jong Un, the President of North Korea. Why not? He won't come to faith if no one prays for him. Pray big, bold, ambitious prayers. Pray for your friends to be healed, not just comforted in sickness, but healed through the work of the Holy Spirit. Pray for there to be a cessation of conflict and for the men of war to fall to their knees in penitence. Pray for food for our nation's hungry children and justice for those who work hard but can't make ends meet. Pray for our schools, that this covid battered generation of children might rise and claim the gifts that God has given them

Pray for your church to grow. Pray that through its ministry, men and women and girls and boys might come to faith in Jesus Christ. Pray for the renewal and revitalisation of our churches. Pray for a return to

Christ across our nation. Let these prayers and many more come out of your mouth. Jesus says 'Ask and it shall be given you.' So why are you waiting? Ask!

Because ambitious prayer triggers two things. First it triggers ambitious living of the Christian life. Pray these big, bold prayers and you will find that God is using you and your life in ways that you could never previously imagine. The Holy Spirit will stir up gifts in you that you never knew you had. You will find a fresh confidence in sharing the faith, a renewed joy in service, a richer delight in generosity.

And even more, ambitious prayer triggers ambitious answers to prayer. God will act in ways that we cannot possibly understand or hope to explain. Two years ago a small group of churches in this Diocese started to pray for growth. For half an hour a week, they met to pray for growth in depth and in number. Those churches have grown by an average of 6% per year. And do you know the really shocking thing about that story? It's that it surprises us. It's that it's even worth telling. 'Ask and you shall receive.' Why are we surprised when Jesus keeps that promise, given that he keeps all his other promises?

But I need to stop at this point and issue a warning. It comes from the story of Elijah at 1 Kings 19. Elijah, having seen prayer answered, is on the run from Queen Jezebel. And he is utterly exhausted. 'It is enough; now O lord, take away my life,' he prays. Be warned, ambitious prayer is exhausting. Sometimes it can even feel hard to get the words out of your mouth, because there are powerful forces who don't want you to pray with ambition and they need to be overcome. The devil loves to stop Christians praying. As Elijah shows, there is a battle to fight and you will need to push out the ambitious prayers through a conscious effort which can be hard.

But prayer is hard. Prayer is not a feelgood activity or part of the self-care industry. We don't pray for our own benefit at all. We pray for the benefit of the world. Prayer is not comfort for self. It is obedience to God and gift to others. So do that praying and God will send his angels to tend to you.

If you want inspiration in this, some of the great heroes of the Christian faith have prayed with ambition. One of my favourite examples is St Cuthbert who was an extraordinary man of prayer. Bede tells us how he would pray all night in the sea and he longed for nothing more than an eremitical life in which he would live for prayer alone. And as a result, God used Cuthbert's life in remarkable ways. He led countless people to faith, he healed the sick and fed the hungry and on one occasion we are told he was even able to change the direction of the wind to save a village from fire.

Or a more contemporary example would be the Bishop of Liwolo, Bishop Joseph. Those of you who are part of the Diocese of Blackburn will recognise that name as Liwolo is one of our link Dioceses. He recently called his people to 40 days of prayer and there is such rich ambition to what he wants them to pray for – nothing less than the transformation of a war-battered and divided nation. These examples show that bold ambitious praying makes us available to God for him to use as he wishes to declare his Kingdom.

Ask and you will be given, Jesus says. So what has he put it on your heart to ask for? This week let Elijah be your example. Pray with boldness, pray with ambition, pray without fear. Pray for God's kingdom to come.