



Ikebana is the ancient Japanese art of flower arranging. It is said that monks in the 6th century gathered flowers damaged by a storm and arranged them in a pot to display their beauty. The practice caught on and continues to the present day. The tallest flower points to heaven; at the bottom, hugging the soil, the earth; and in the middle, humanity. During the session we created our own *ikebana* to visualise the meeting of these three elements in our intercessions.

Prayer is something we all do and wish we could do better.

Karl Barth, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century when asked to summarise his theology in one sentence said: "*Jesus loves me this I know*". He summarised prayer as "*simply asking*".

Martin Luther writing in 16th century : "*May our dear Lord grant to you, and to everybody, to do it better than I*".

The OT scholar Walter Brueggemann describes prayer as "*a refusal to settle for what is*".

Richard Foster writes "*In the same way a child cannot draw a bad picture so a child of God cannot offer a bad prayer*".

What are we doing when we say we are praying? It sounds like a simple question but it isn't. We took a few minutes to chat to the person next to us about our answer to the question before watching a short video clip from NT Wright, the former bishop of Durham.

[the full video is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=be55Xqy1S-g>]

God is not remote and we are not alone in our reflections. Tom Wright said that prayer happens at the intersection of heaven and earth. Intersections are places where paths cross, where meetings occur. How might we approach this intersection? By *slowing down*, pressing the 'pause' button. *Anticipating* an encounter with the Living God, Father, Son and Spirit. And by *setting aside our own expectations*, ready to listen as well as talk. No wonder Tom Wright called these intersections *dangerous*.

We took a few minutes to start the flower arrangement by positioning the greenery to represent the earth.

One of the first intercessors we read about in the Bible is Moses. The children of Israel had escaped their slavery in Egypt but had not yet entered the Promised land. They grumbled a lot, asking Moses: "Is the Lord among us or not?" They were crossing the desert when the Amalekites, descendents of Esau (Jacob's twin brother) attacked them. Moses tells Joshua to lead the Israelites into battle. Moses, however, climbs to the top of a hill overlooking the battlefield with Aaron and Hur. As the battle progressed Moses raised his hands to heaven over the conflict. "Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed" (Ex 17:11). Notice that victory did not come immediately. The battle was long and Moses tired. Aaron and Hur were needed to hold up his hands until the Amalekites were defeated. This was intercession.

In the many situations we are aware of - devastating fires, floods, war, the ravages of disease - we are not on the front line like the firefighters, the peacebuilders, or the medical staff. But we can lift our hands towards heaven. Though the floods leave their devastation, disease progresses despite our prayers and the battle intensifies, yet we continue to pray together: "your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven".

We added the flowers in our *ikebana* to represent heaven.

Faith, Meg and Steve then spoke about their experience of leading Intercessions in our worship, sharing their sense of responsibility and how they prepare. They spoke about the variety of ways in which our intercessors shape the prayers, of the different dimensions - global, national, local and personal - that focus our thoughts, of the importance of paying attention to the news to ensure our intercessions are topical, and of the very practical everyday concerns that we bring to our prayers. And we acknowledged the Monthly Prayer Diary as a helpful guide to our private intercessions.

It was time to fill in the middle of our *ikebana* representing ourselves at the intersection of heaven and earth. Bright colours of yellow and white, some standing out amongst the greenery of the earth others reaching towards heaven.

We return, day by day, and week by week to pray for our broken world. Yet things don't seem to change. We pray and it doesn't seem to make a difference. Jesus tells us to "pray always and not ... lose heart" (Luke 18:1). At the intersection between heaven and earth we are faced with the depth of God's love, the intransigence of humanity and what Paul describes as the groaning of the whole creation (Romans 8:22). It is important to remember that God never compels. No one is forced into obedience. We may think, surely on this occasion, just a little push would make all the difference. But no. That is not the way of love. Love is patient, love is kind. Isaiah reminds us that God's way is like the rain that falls to the earth to replenish the soil.

"... as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."
(Isa 55:10,11)

So our prayers call down the gentle rain of God's grace and mercy upon our parched and broken world. This is hard in a society that expects quick results. Yet something shifts when we pray. We begin with heavy burdens. But when we come to the intersection, our burdens are lifted and we can see the horizon move. Before, all we could see was death and destruction. Now, by faith, there is resurrection. As we cry, like the Psalmist "How long, O Lord" we move to "I trust in your unfailing love" (Psl 13:1,5).

And one final thought. When we end the intercessions with the words, "accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ" the intercessions are not over. We carry them to the cross. The answer to our intercessions is in the Eucharist, not in the board room, battle field, hospital surgery or negotiating table. We pray in hope, knowing that "the whole creation waits with eager longing" (Rom 8:19). JB Phillips paraphrases this phrase as "the whole earth is on tiptoe" waiting for the coming of the kingdom and for the earth to be set free from its bondage (v21).

Our *ikebana* was finished. Arranging the flowers like this reminds us of the connection between heaven and earth and the intersection where we pray. It is also a reminder that like the flowers our prayers will soon wither and die. Day by day and week by week we again pick up the needs of our world and bring them to the meeting place between earth and heaven.