

Why do we pray?

It's a big question. But I think some of the answers can be found in this passage which is known as the Transfiguration. I'd like to read it again and to have a couple of volunteers to help me. Now I want you all to listen carefully because at the end of this I would like each of the children to draw a picture of what happened in the transfiguration.

So as we heard, Jesus took his friends Peter, John and James went up onto a mountain to pray. While Jesus was praying his face started to shine like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. He is transfigured or to say it another way he is transformed.

He is then joined by Moses and Elijah. Now Moses and Elijah had died years before and they were thought of as being two of the greatest Jews to have ever lived. Moses had been given the 10 commandments by God and led his people, and Elijah was one of the greatest prophets from the Old Testament who kept telling people about God even though a wicked Queen wanted to kill him to stop him speaking out. Now both Moses and Elijah are there and we are told they too appear in glorious splendour and they start to talk to Jesus.

Now Peter and the other disciples are very sleepy but they wake up at this point and see the glory of Jesus with Moses and Elijah.

Now Peter knows that this is an important moment. He sees that Moses and Elijah are leaving and he wants to do something good. He wants to honour them and so he shouts out 'Master, it is good for us to be here – let us put up 3 shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.'

Building a shelter for each of them is reminiscent of the feast of tabernacles and shows that he really wanted them to stay. The problem is that he forgot to pray. Instead of praying, he went to sleep after the long walk up the mountain, and on waking up, he is rushing to take action.

This is bad because if he had his way and went to gather building materials for the shelters he would have missed the most important moment of all. The moment God himself says: 'This is my son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.'

The moment that God reminds us why we need to pray – because prayer opens us up so that we are ready to listen and see what God is doing. The disciples had seen Jesus do many miracles, he'd brought a dead girl back to life, he had fed thousands of people with a few fish and loaves of bread, he'd even walked on water but here they learnt that Jesus truly was God's son and how important it was to listen to what he said.

And it's this prayer and listening which is at the heart of everything the mission agency I work for does. We work with the church across the globe to put faith into action and share the love of God in practical ways around the world. And we've been doing that for over 300 years because we want to see lives and communities transformed. Now because we know the importance of listening, our work looks different around the world, because every church, every community and every country is different, but it is all about sharing the love of God and participating in God's transformative mission.

In Sierra Leone and Guinea this has been responding to the ebola crisis and helping to rebuild these communities, in Brazil it's helping to prevent children from being vulnerable to trafficking, in the Philippines it's enabling communities that used to struggle to have enough food and money for health care and education to be able to provide for themselves and help others who lost their homes in the cyclones.

Ok – now Matt is going to hand out some paper and pens so that you can draw a picture of this meeting of the sleepy disciples, Jesus, Elijah, Moses and God, and whilst you do that I am going to tell another story about light. This time it is a story of the church in Greece and the work they are doing to transform situations of darkness and despair.

As you will all be aware, since the outbreak of war in March 2011 an estimated 9 million Syrians have fled their homes and taken refuge in neighbouring countries or within Syria itself. Indeed, the number of people killed and displaced in this conflict makes this one of the largest humanitarian disasters ever. Many Syrians have settled in refugee camps in neighbouring countries like Lebanon but as the strain of receiving so many refugees becomes evident and countries start to restrict entry, those who are now fleeing the violence in Syria are being forced to embark on the more difficult journey to Europe. And the increase in conflict and tension across the Middle East and beyond means that they are joined by refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and beyond, making the total the number of migrants entering Europe last year over one million and this number continues to rise.

The vast majority of these refugees are arriving into Europe via the islands around Greece, in crowded boats without enough lifejackets or anyone with the knowledge of how to sail the boats safely. As a result, many misinterpret the warning light of the lighthouses and actually sail towards the rocks rather than away from them. Those who do survive the journey arrive in acute need of medical support as well as food, water, clothing and hygiene supplies as they set off on their journey through Europe to try and rebuild their lives in safety. They don't speak the language, many have lost family members, there are lots of human traffickers who are preying on the vulnerable and 1 in 5 are children.

When looking at the scale of this problem it would be easy to feel overwhelmed. Thousands of refugees arrive each day and night and the austerity crisis means that the Greek government are really struggling to provide for the Greek population and cuts have been made to the organisations which were helping the refugees.

Though it is a small church, the Anglican church in Greece were determined to do more. And so they prayed and they listened. And they realized that one of the main needs was coordination because there was lots of good work being done but there was duplication and also massive gaps.

so with the help of Us they brought representatives from all of the different churches and the different agencies like UNHCR together to discuss the situation. They recognized that if they wanted to make a real difference they needed to work together and ensure that they had both short and long term plans which showed the refugees both dignity and love. These plans are continuing to develop and it is still a huge challenge but it is already making a big difference.

One example of this is in NE Lesbos in the area called Korakas meaning Crow, where one of the lighthouses is situated and lots of the refugees are landing.

A report from the group helping there says this: 'Since our first night in early November we have had a team out at Korakas every night. The immediate effect of providing help to those arriving at night was obvious, but our presence also meant that security in the area was tighter and slowly all the 'opportunists' left the area. Also, because of our night time presence, the team during the day could start working on infrastructure, knowing that theft is no longer a problem.

In the space of a less than eight weeks the Korakas area has been transformed from a horror story for anyone landing there to being welcomed and received by a dedicated team of volunteers and medics. An example of the importance of the Korakas operation came on December 22nd. This is an account from Brendan Woodhouse a firefighter and one of the volunteers who was present that night:

At 05:50, I was in lookout duty at Korakas lighthouse, when I saw a refugee boat turn its lights on, maybe 200m from land. I woke the others up, and went with our team leader to identify the boats location. It hit the rocks beyond the lighthouse, and the rubber dinghy burst on one side, capsizing and flipping all 35 people in to the sea, 30m from the shore.

I took off my coat and dropped it on the floor as I ran down to the sea, zipping up my wetsuit on the way. I put my helmet on as I entered the sea which was as black as the night sky above.

The sounds within that sea will haunt me forever. People were frightened and screaming for help.

I swam past the first people bobbing up and down in the water, to where I could hear children crying, their sounds were distinctive. I reached a family of 5, all huddled together in their lifejackets. In the middle of them was a baby, less than two years old. I could see with my head torch that he was taking on water, and I swam, towing them back to the shore. The fear on their faces was palpable.

Eventually, I was able to put my feet on the rocks below and I told them that they could stand. I looked back and could see a sea of people behind me. Most were in their ill fitting lifejackets, but some were without. Empty lifejackets bobbed in the water, causing confusion. I swam out again.

I swam past people screaming for their lives. I was a tough call, but I could hear a haunting sound that I'll never forget. It was the sound of a mother who had lost her baby.

While everyone else was facing the shore shouting for help, she was facing out to sea, helpless in her lifejacket. She shouted to me, pointing out to sea. Maybe another 15m away, I could see a little black dot, bobbing up and down in the water.

Eventually I reached it. A 5 month old baby girl, wrapped in a blanket, face down in the water, with no lifejacket at all. I grabbed her and looked at her face. She was as white as can be, and she wasn't breathing.

I swam backstroke, with her on my chest, facing the stars. I kicked with my legs as fast as I could. With my left arm I paddled and with my right arm, I pressed up and down on her chest as I swam.

I swam past people screaming for help. I swam with everything I had and more.

Eventually, I reached down with my feet and my foot touched a rock. I balanced as best as I could and went to give her 5 rescue breaths. After the second breath, she sicked up the water from inside her lungs and started to cry. It was the most beautiful sound in the world.

As I got to the medical emergency room, some of the team were getting blankets and clothes. The baby was taken out of her clothes and I helped the doctor put IV fluids inside of her after warming them in a pan of water. The baby was in respiratory distress, so we were giving her assisted breaths. One bag of fluids was used as a hot water bottle and the other to put warm fluids into her veins to overcome the hypothermia.

She could have died twice this morning, without the calm actions of an obviously incredibly experienced doctor. Eventually, we stabilized her and drove her to meet with an ambulance. Then she was taken to hospital where she has recovered well.

We left the ambulance and headed back down to the lighthouse where another boat, with another 35 people on board was approaching. This was a solid hulled boat which boomed as it crashed in to the rocks.

This time, the people stayed on board, and by now, it was light. We followed our procedure, calming people down and helping them from the boat.

This kind of event is happening again and again and I find it so encouraging that this is taking place in Lesbos. I don't know how many of you have visited Lesbos but before this, it was always quite a sleepy place, best known for its bird watching opportunities and in a way it reminds me of Bethlehem. We are told that no-one expected anything good (never mind the Messiah) to come out of Bethlehem – it was so quiet and yet, as we know God used that place powerfully. And here again God is using a quiet, sleepy place to change lives.

So I'd like to challenge you today to remember that prayer is transformative and challenge you to sign up today for our magazine and prayer diary to help you pray for the work we are doing around the world or to the guide to our overseas placement scheme to see if you might like to climb your own mountain and see how God wants to transform you.

Let's end in prayer:

Lord God of wilderness, wave and wind,
you travel with the wanderers of the world.
Stay close, we pray, to all who live
with loss, in terror, and adrift,
and spur us on to build a world
where there is truly room for all.

Lord Jesus, you came among us
homeless, and as a refugee.
Shake our complacency,
rekindle our compassion,
and help us challenge our leaders
to forge a common strategy
that is both truly just, and fair.