Introduction
Podcast from Christ Church Oxford. I’m Richard Peers and I’m the new Sub Dean having arrived here three weeks ago and I’m going to be talking about our readings this morning for matins from Ephesians 3 and Luke 7.

Ephesians 3:13–end
I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Luke 7:11-17
Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”
Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

Sermon
The letter to the Ephesians is often people’s favourite of the letters of the New Testament. It contains some of Paul’s most famous passages and ends, of course with the great image of the life of faith as being about donning God’s suit of armour. The whole letter is only six chapters and doesn’t take long to read all the way through. It would be a good idea to do this. As with many other books in the Bible. If we just hear the snippets of Scripture we are given in church, we can fail to notice key elements of what the actors intended.

The passage we have just heard is in fact the end of a prayer that begins in verse 3 of the first chapter of Ephesians with the famous canticle Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are various sections on non-prayer text within it but it is fundamentally one long prayer.

This is a genre that we are not much used to now but which has a venerable place in Christian tradition. St Augustine’s famous book his Confessions is sometimes described as an autobiography but really it is a prayer in which we listen in to the saint’s words to God.

As often, St Paul, in chapter 3 in the final section we are looking at, uses what amounts to a very long extended sentence; this can make it really difficult to work out exactly what is going on. The Jesuit, Oxford based, scholar Father Nicholas King has produced a fascinating translation of the New Testament; if you don’t know it, it is well worth getting hold of. It is not intended for public reading in church and I wouldn’t suggest using it for that; but it provides an excellent resource for study. I am going to read his version of today’s passage; you might want to listen while you have your own bible in front of you to see what he does with it. You won’t be able to see on this podcast but in the printed versions of his translation he arranges many of these long, complex passages in Paul so that they are presented as bulleted lists complete with the bullet points at the start of the lines. I find it really helps divide Paul’s sentences up and makes it much easier to see what he was doing.
Here is today’s passage again in Nick King’s translation:

Therefore, I beg you not to despair of my afflictions on your behalf which is your glory. For his sake I bend my knees to the Father from whom all fathering in heaven and on earth is named, that he might grant you in accordance with his glory to be mightily strengthened through his Spirit with regard to the inner person, that Christ should dwell through faith in your hearts, that you may be rooted and founded in love, that you may have the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, to know the overarching love of Christ which transcends knowledge, that you may be filled with regard to all the fullness of God. To the one who is able above all quite beyond all measure of what we ask or understand, according to the power that is at work in us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

I want to highlight two spiritual practices which emerge from this passage and I suggest might be useful for us as we all seek to assimilate the experience of the pandemic into our lives. We know that a long term crisis is very different to dealing with a short event. Adrenalin becomes low; there is a sense of hopelessness and depression can set in. The mental and spiritual effects of living in this time should not be underestimated. It is easy to feel as some of the Christians that Paul is writing to have; discouraged.

The first practice emerges from that first verse that we heard: “I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.” It is an interesting claim that Paul makes: he is suffering for others. In our highly individualistic age it is hard to imagine what this can mean. But it is quite fundamental to the Christian faith that we see how completely alien our contemporary individualism is to Christian faith and even, I would say, antithetical to it.

We believe, of course that Jesus suffered and died for us. What one person does, has an effect far greater than that person, that is not just because of Jesus’ divinity but also - and equally - because of his humanity. It seems to me that Paul understands this profoundly. Today’s verse is in relation to what he has to say in Colossians 1:24 “I am completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for His body, that is, the church”

And this is something that Christians have believed across the centuries that my suffering can be not just about me but about the work of redemption; the creation as Paul puts it in Romans is
waiting with eager longing, the groaning of creation is precisely our suffering, mine and yours and all the suffering of the world.

Sometimes people wish that the symbol of Christianity was something other than the Cross. Let’s face it, no advertising agency would suggest it! But the cross reminds us - as does the pandemic - that suffering is a normal human experience and is, of course, unavoidable.

So the first prayer practice I would suggest is one that is called in some traditions ‘exchanging self for others’; facing the suffering of the world square on and accepting it for oneself, for myself, and blessing those who suffer. One way to do this is to coordinate these thoughts with the breath. Breathing in I take on to myself and be quite specific about a particular suffering; and then breathing out kindness, compassion, blessing. It can seem counter intuitive to do this and that’s why it works. Exchanging self for others is what Jesus did on the cross. When we do it, it is to fulfil his suffering; to complete it; as St Paul teaches. When we do this it is immensely liberating. We can get so caught up in our own suffering, and this practice reminds us that it is the whole of creation that is groaning.

My second spiritual practice takes us to the end of this marvellous passage. It is easy to skip over these passages of praise, but they are essential to understanding Paul and his theology of glory. They are not just a way of rounding off the prayer. In this passage Paul tells us to go beyond what we can ask or imagine. In the Christian tradition there is a simple word for this kind of prayer and it is a word often misunderstood: adoration.

We are so used to praise. We praise God for making us, for the beauty of the world, for Jesus. But we are called to love God not for anything he gives us or has done but simply for being God. The writer Heather Ward puts this brilliantly: “Adoration is sheer wonder that God is, and desires simply to let him be. It is an attitude of awe, mixed with longing and love, in the apprehension of God as loving holiness.”

Imagine if God only received two modes of prayer from us: requests and thanks for requests granted. We all yearn to be loved for being who we are. Adoration is the feeling of looking at a new born baby who can give us nothing, do nothing, but whom we adore. Adoration is love felt. Adoration undermines our selfishness and self-centredness because it is about God and not us. I believe these two practices create great spaciousness in our inner beings, a spaciousness that will allow Christ, in Paul’s words to dwell in our inner being.
Intercessions

So, let us pray.

We pray for all who are suffering spiritually and mentally at this time; all who are lonely or isolated.

Healing God,
be a cooling balm to all who suffer,
in quietness and rest
may they know your presence;
in stillness and peace
may they find joy.
Grant that all who suffer
may join their sufferings with Jesus
our brother who suffered for us but now lives for ever.
Amen.

We pray for all in leadership at this time that they may grow in wisdom.

God who is above all things
and rule all things,
you give us the power of freedom
may we and all who make decisions
discern your will for us
lead us in paths of peace that we may work for justice for all.
May leaders seek the good of others
and not their own good
may they learn that true happiness
is in serving
not in being served.
We make our prayer through
Jesus our Servant-King.
Amen

We pray for ourselves that our prayer lives deepen and that our inner selves are strengthened by suffering; that we may find freedom in knowing God.

God of our deepest being,
you made us in your own image and likeness,
within us we reflect
who you are, our God,
may we spend time in prayer
and grow in holiness;
may we learn not just to ask
not just to praise for what you give us
but simply to adore you for you are our God.
Amen.

In a time of silence let us pray for wisdom, strength and understanding in our own lives.

Gathering our prayers to our gracious, grace giving God we say together the words of the Grace:

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all evermore. Amen.

And now the blessing.

May the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ
fill your innermost being with his presence
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always. Amen.