

Getting to Know Jesus, the Christ

Oct 12, 2014 – Reception of New Members

Maya Angelou's Prayer Pillow

Ps 99 & Colossians 4:2

(431, 449, 694, 468)

Maya Angelou is my kind of Christian –
prophetic, poetic, and practical.

She grew up black and abused in the American South.
Born in 1928, she was raped at the age of 8.
When her rapist, who served on day in jail upon conviction,
was murdered, she felt that her voice had killed him
and remained mute for 5 years.

During that time, she learned to listen and observe
in uniquely powerful ways,
a set of skills widely practiced among biblical prophets.

Her working career was varied –
street car conductor, singer, dancer, prostitute, actor,
writer, director, poet, civil rights activist, and teacher.
She spent the last 33 years of her life living in Winston-Salem, NC,
a university town in the American South,
where she was a member of Mount Zion Baptist Church.

It's website proclaims that it is dedicated to exalting the name of Christ,
meeting human needs and making real the Gospel in the lives of persons.

There is a now-famous interview with Oprah Winfrey
Angelou spoke, with tears in her eyes and a catch in her throat,
about the core of her Christian faith:

*"And finally I said, 'God loves me. God loves me.'
It still humbles me that this force that makes
leaves and fleas and stars and rivers and you,
loves me. Me, Maya Angelou. It's amazing.
I can do anything. And do it well. Any good thing, I can do it.
That's why I am who I am, yes,
because God loves me and I'm amazed at it.
I'm grateful for it."*

The reality of God's love for her,
in spite of everything that happened to her,
was the source of her ability to flourish with grace and faith.
She claims to have had many defeats,
but never to have been defeated,
all because of the amazing, awesome force of God's love for her.

That's the love that placed the prayer pillow beneath Angelou's knees.
That's the love for which she was so grateful.
That's the love that led to the poetry that inspired this sermon:

*Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel
to say your nightly prayer.
And let faith be the bridge you build
to overcome evil and welcome good.*
(Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer)

Colossians is a manifesto for the Christian community
in the midst of imperial power that is being used to manipulate and control.
It is a prophetic vision in poetic language
that lays out a practical plan for being different.
And at the centre of that practicality,
in terms of the vision of God's Commonwealth inaugurated in Christ,
is prayer that makes us alert with thanksgiving.

In the time of Paul, the dominant imperial power was Rome.
In our day, the dominant imperial powers are the United States,
Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia.
All these imperial powers, past and present,
make exclusive claims to providing the best ways of thinking
to ensure personal and social prosperity and well-being.

But Paul presents an alternative way of seeing power and well-being.
It is not based on a story of political and economic superiority.
It is based on a story of covenant and blessing.
It is based on the story that made Maya Angelou cry on Oprah.
It's a story of God's covenant with a people to be a blessing
by overcoming the evil of empire
and by welcoming the good of God's Commonwealth.
It's the story of that people's forgetfulness and betrayal of the covenant.
It's the story of God's steadfast and constant faithfulness to the covenant,
culminating in the work, witness, and victory of Jesus Christ.

To live in that story, the Biblical story,
Paul says the most practical thing you can do is pray.

It's an interesting take on prayer.
It arises from gratitude,
as with Angelou, primarily for God's love for us.
And it makes us alert for those situations in life
where this love is being ignored or violated,
where evil needs to be overcome and good welcomed.

That's interesting syntax from someone
(Maya Angelou) who is so careful with words.
It points to the reality that goodness comes from God,
that good is present as gift in every situation, no matter how hidden it may be,
and that good is to be revealed and welcomed through prayers of gratitude.

If we, in our time and place, are to be practical
about the poetic prophesy that is the main story line of the Bible,
then what must we do?

Prayer is the first thing.
It's conversation with this God who loves us,
this God who brings us to our knees with tears of gratitude
for loving us in spite of our continuing confusion
about how to respond to the divine initiative.
In prayer – open, honest, authentic conversation with God –
we find the courage to change according to the Gospel.

Christian community is the second thing.
God godself is a community for Christians,
the Three in One of the Holy Trinity,
strange and difficult to grasp as that is a lot of the time.
But, at very least, it is a powerful symbol
of the centrality of relationship in being fully-flourishing human being
who acts faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly in the events of their lives.

The Commonwealth of God is the third thing.
As we grow into our relationship with this God of Paul and Maya,
we see things differently.
The empire's standards are found to be dismissive of human worth and dignity.
The commonwealth's standards are found to be nourishing us to flourish.
That's what we learn to be alert to with thanksgiving
in our daily conversations with God in prayer.