

## Lord teach us to pray

A sermon preached by Revd Jo Coney on Trinity 6 28 July 2019 in St Peter's Wolvercote

Refs: Gen 18: 20-32; Luke 11: 1-13

In the Gospel reading we heard the disciples saying to Jesus, "*Lord, teach us to pray*" something I'm sure we all constantly ask. Jesus answers his disciples by giving them what we know as the Lord's Prayer – a prayer we use constantly and a prayer that may perhaps give us the pattern for all our prayer. For, if we look at it carefully, we see that the very first words 'Our Father' immediately sets the dynamic between us and God. He is our Father, in Hebrew Abba - Daddy. Thereby we are, to Him, his loved and cherished children.

The rest of the prayer can perhaps be seen in two halves reflecting the two great commandments, that we are to love God with all our being, and then love our neighbour as ourselves. The start of the Prayer is about God Himself and His Kingdom. It's not about us except that it draws us into lives lived at a deeper level with God as our supreme priority, and so with our horizon on eternal life with him. It's only after this focus is set that the prayer turns to the second half to how we are to implement living with God as our centre. Give us our daily bread, teach us to forgive, protect us from evil.

So how might we learn to pray in our own personal and private prayers, in our corporate prayer here in church, and in our intercessions, prayers for others, people who we love, people and situations we are concerned about.

Looking first at our personal private prayer. What are we looking for? what do we expect? and what do we mean when we say that our prayers are, or not, answered? Of course, everyone's personal prayer will be different. It is rightly personal and private. So we each have to work out what is best for us. What I say this morning can only be an amalgam of my personal experience together with listening to others about their experiences of prayer, and by extensive reading. It's always about our relationship with God. Just as our human relationships need nurturing and don't cease if we're not physically together, so with our prayer. Our relationship with God needs nurturing through our whole life, not only in our designated prayer times.

If we accept that prayer is involved in all that we are, all that we do and in all our human relationships, that it cannot, as it were, be switched off and put away, then perhaps rather than asking the question, "What is prayer" we might ask what part of me is not prayer?

I often wonder, as I'm sure many of us do, just who we are praying to, who is this relationship with? **Jesus** is of course both our example and our teacher. We know that **He** prayed to his Father and said to his disciples "*the way to the Father is through me*". He also said, "*Go into your chamber and shut the door and pray to the Father in secret*". We know that he frequently went apart by himself to pray.

Prayer, being a relationship, must always be more of a conversation than a monologue. So it will involve listening and expressing our thankfulness and expressing our love for him, accepting his unconditional love for us. Maybe it can be likened to a couple in love. The deeper love, the less need there is for words. It's not just something we do but something we allow God to do through us and with us.

What do we expect from our prayer. What are we looking for? What do we mean when we say it has or has not been answered? Bearing in mind that the answer may not be “yes”. It may be “no” or, more often in my experience, it’s “wait”.

In last week’s story about Mary and Martha we hear Jesus saying that Mary, sitting adoringly at his feet, had chosen the better part. But this too has its dangers. It’s all too easy to fool ourselves and romanticise the spiritual life. Just sitting there and having a wonderful time with Jesus and feeling good about ourselves. No. Jesus made it very clear that sitting at his feet and listening – true prayer - is hard work. It’s not easy and is always pure gift from God. Jesus himself goes into the mountains at night and struggles in prayer with his Father. He goes to pray ‘at night’, not just meaning by moonlight but perhaps indicating the darkness as a result of the absence of feelings and thoughts, absence of that precious gift of full awareness of the closeness with God.

It’s all too easy to believe that God is absent if we can’t ‘feel’ him. Perhaps this is what Jesus experienced as we hear him calling out from the cross ‘*My God my God, why have you forsaken me?*’ St John of the Cross also has a great deal of useful things to say about when prayer is empty and persevering is hard, what he names as “The Dark night of the Soul”. Prayer can indeed seem unrewarding at times. It can be dry, routine and empty. So if, on rare occasions, we find that amazing inner peace and feel his closeness to us, it’s a great and rare gift to be treasured.

**So then, what of our corporate** prayer? What we are doing here this morning, as we join together in the liturgy of the Eucharist? Liturgical prayer is both vertical and horizontal, vertical towards God and horizontal to, and with, one another. Our Praying together not only brings us closer to God but builds our Christian community, here and now, into the body of Christ in this place. It gives us mutual support and helps us live with our horizon set on the promise eternal life. It strengthens our faith, creates and sustains our ability to live for others, to love God and, because of that, to love our neighbours as ourselves.

**And finally what about** prayers for others, for the world and the church – our intercessory prayer. Interestingly this doesn’t feature specifically in the Lord’s Prayer, but is, I suspect, the prayer which features largely in our personal prayer as well as in our Liturgy. Further on in our Gospel reading Jesus says; “*Ask in my name* (meaning in accordance with my will) *and I will give it to you*”, and ‘*If human parents can give good things to their children – how much more will the heavenly Father give the holy Spirit to those who ask him*’.

Intercession surely must not be about giving God a shopping list of what **we** think **he** ought to be doing, what we want Him to do. We can only tell him of our concerns, laying our hopes, fears and worries before him. I don’t believe we can change God’s mind. Jesus himself prayed in the garden that God would take the cup of suffering from him – but also said ‘Not my will but thine be done’. If we could change God’s mind, this would mean we’re asking Him to directly intervene in this world’s doings, something I myself cannot believe he does because, if this were to be so, why hasn’t he intervened many times before to eliminate the suffering of the world, resulting in his removing his gift of free will from us, our freedom and responsibility for making our own decisions.

**We** cannot change **his** mind – but **he** can, and does, change our minds. If we let Him, he will guide our thinking, our values and behaviour towards those around us, and our life choices. He will teach us how we

may take responsibility for ourselves and for others, for our world, and all the tragedy and suffering around us, impelling us to do all that we can to change it for the better, to something closer to the building of his promised Kingdom. As St Teresa prays, "*Christ has no body now on earth but ours. No hands but ours, no feet but ours.*"

So Intercessory prayer is perhaps best understood as bringing our concerns to Him, laying and leaving our worries at the foot of the cross, and listening for his prompts how best to contribute to the furthering of his Kingdom here on earth, and our caring for those for whom we pray.

So in answer to the disciples, and our, plea to God to 'Teach us to pray', we may begin in a very small way to **learn** to put God at the centre of our lives, listening to Him by constantly trying to discern his will for us and for the world, to desire to know him better, and to seek him in all things, in all people and in all situations, and above all to teach us to Love Him and to accept His love for us, to be always centred on him and not ourselves, and to lay ourselves open to his will for us. Living at that deeper level, that part of us we don't share, our own deepest reality that only God knows. To hear Him say to us, "Be still and know I am God", and to pray always "Father into your hands I commend my spirit".

Amen