

## Sermon 28 July 2019 Prayer

### Luke 11:1-13

I want to start off by saying that, in terms of our relationship with God, prayer would have to be the most important consideration; that in fact, without prayer we simply don't have a relationship with God. Prayer is the primary method by which we communicate with God, and as with any relationship – no communication, no relationship. That in itself raises one or two issues with regards the way we pray, but I will come back to that in a moment.

In our Gospel reading Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's prayer, a prayer which has been the corner stone of our prayer life ever since. I don't have time to go through each sentence but I would like to look at how Jesus opens this prayer – '*Our Father, may your name be honoured.*' This is very important because it makes a statement, right at the outset, about our relationship with God.

Jesus uses the Aramaic word, *Abba*. The word carries a sense of intimacy and, at the same time, respect. If we think about it, that surely conveys just what a father should mean to us. I often think that a father's role is something of a balancing act between being a friend and, at the same time, a disciplinarian. After all, law and order must be maintained! There is a pertinent passage, Hebrews 12:6-7, which illustrates this rather well.

But most importantly, there is a sense of security and comfort that is hopefully engendered.

This is invariably illustrated when a little child reaches for your hand as you walk along.

In the end, there is undoubtedly a deep feeling of love that is implied and this is just what

Jesus wants us to feel for God. John describes this beautifully, '*See how very much our heavenly Father loves us, for he allows us to be called his children, and we really are!*'<sup>1</sup>

John 3:1. So this is the tenor for our approach to God when we begin our prayer with, '*Our Father...*' Yes, there is respect, but at the same time there is a deep love. And just as a little child reaches for our hand, so we put ourselves into God's hands as we come before him with our petitions.

A very important aspect of prayer is highlighted by Jesus in this passage, and that is the issue of *persistence*. Jesus begins with the story of someone going to a friend's house at midnight, knocking on the door to ask for three loaves of bread. The initial reaction of the friend is to tell them to go away, they are all in bed and he doesn't want to wake everyone up. Remember that the custom was for the whole family to be sleeping together so if he got up, he would disturb everyone.

Now the laws of hospitality in the ancient Middle East were very strict, and if a traveller arrived needing food and shelter, no matter the time of night, you were expected to provide it.

So Jesus, once again, draws on the culture of the time as he makes his point. But the real point of the story is that if you persist, you will get what you want. This is pressed home in the following verses where he says, '*And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened.*' Persistence shows that we mean business; persistence shows that we are sincere.

Our prayer is not just a petition that is thrown out there in the vague hope that something might happen, that someone may hear us and act upon it. This is a genuine relationship we are talking about. This is something and someone we believe in. This is faith, and faith will bring results.

I mentioned earlier that prayer is about communication. A very important part of communication is listening. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if listening is not taking place, then genuine communication is not taking place. So a very important aspect of prayer is to be quiet and still in the presence of God and just listen. As the psalmist says, '*Be still and know that I am God.*' Psalm 46:10.

There is just so much more I could say about prayer. It is such a vital and integral part of our walk with God. But I want to finish by making two more points. Prayer does work. The power of prayer is very real, but only if we are genuine, in other words, we pray with faith and integrity.

There is the story of a bar that opened opposite a church. The bar had some rather rowdy patrons which moved the people of the church to pray against the bar business. After a few days of prayer, the bar was struck by lightning, caught fire and was destroyed. The bar owner sued the church for the cause of its destruction, as it was, according to him, an action brought about because of their prayer. However, the church denied all responsibility.

The judge, in summing up the case, commented, 'It's difficult to decide the case because on the one hand we have a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer, and on the other hand we have a church that doesn't believe in it!'

The other point is this – is easy to think that God is not listening to us because he has not answered our prayers in the way we expect. Well firstly, God invariably will not answer our prayers in the way we expect. His mind works very differently to ours. And we also have to be careful that we don't expect God to manipulate people or events to our own personal ends.

Let me finish with another story.

An elderly missionary was discussing prayer with a small group of women. She explained that when she first went out into the mission field, she was quite lonely. She saw that other missionaries were married and had families. In her loneliness, she prayed to God that he would pick out a husband for her. She told how she prayed and prayed, and was sure that God would answer her prayer.

One of the women in the group exclaimed, 'But, you've never married! You're still single!'

The elderly missionary said, 'You're right! But somewhere out there is a seventy-four year old man who has been resisting God's will for more than fifty years!'

Perhaps that story is about listening as much as expectations!

Rev Warner Wilder