

## Sermon 24 July 2022 Prayer

### Luke 11:1-10

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'll come back to that in a moment.

In our Gospel reading Jesus taught the disciples what we know as the Lord's prayer, a prayer which has been the cornerstone 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: *'Father, hallowed be your name.'* 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. *'For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes those he accepts as his children.'*

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!'* 1 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 child reaches for our hand, so we put ourselves into God's hand as we come before him with our petitions and our concerns.

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 anyone 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 day or 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 these 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.'*

There are many aspects to prayer but I can't help feeling that this is probably the most important aspect. Persistence shows that we mean business. Persistence shows that we are sincere. Persistence shows that we have a strong faith. 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. Listening is perhaps the only activity where multi-tasking is not befitting. So a very important aspect of prayer is to be quiet and still in the presence of God. Just listen; just revel in his presence. 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 Jim Johnson who was given the job of saving a failing hotel. Other managers had tried, but unsuccessfully. The hotel was in a now-or-never situation. Jim decided to try something different. Each night he drove to the top of a hill overlooking the hotel. He parked his car and sat there for the next half hour – praying.

Jim prayed for the hotel guests. He prayed for the employees and for their families. He prayed for those who did business with the hotel. Finally, he prayed for the city and its people. Night after night, Jim drove to the top of the hill, he parked his car and he prayed.

Soon the situation at the hotel started to improve. A new confidence radiated from its employees. A new warmth welcomed each new guest. A new spirit permeated its operation. The hotel experienced a remarkable rebirth. Norman Vincent Peale, well-known Christian author who tells the story, credits the hotel's rebirth to Jim's nightly prayers.

The other point is this – it is easy to think that God is not listening to us because he has not answered our prayers in the way we expect. Well, God invariably will not answer 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 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, as 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 replied, 'You're right! But somewhere out there is a seventy-year-old man who has been resisting God's will for about fifty years!'

Perhaps that story is about listening as much as expectations.

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