

Sermon 28 July 2024 Prayer

Ephesians 3:14-19 Matthew 6:5-8

In our Gospel reading, Jesus gives us some advice regarding prayer. It is impossible to do justice to the subject of prayer in one sermon. There are so many issues, so many aspects, so many different forms, so many ways of approaching prayer. Prayer is an exercise which is undertaken by the devout, by the not so devout, and in fact at times, as I pointed out two weeks ago, by those who in the normal course of events, would not profess to have a faith. This would usually be the case in times of stress or extreme need, which I will allude to later.

Prayer is vital to our relationship with God; in fact, without prayer it would be impossible to have a relationship with God, with Christ. This sentiment lies behind Paul's words in our reading from Ephesians: *'I pray that you may have the power to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'* Essentially, prayer is how we communicate with God, as we all know, without communication, you just cannot have an effective relationship.

Prayer is such a vast topic and encompasses so many strands that it is quite hard to know where to begin. I will focus on two questions – what is prayer and how do we pray?

So what is prayer? Let me begin with some background by referring to our Gospel reading. Prayer was a huge part of Jesus' life. He grew up within a culture of prayer. Probably no religion ever ranked prayer higher on the scale of priorities than the Jews did, and remember Jesus worshipped as a Jew. As far as the Rabbis were concerned, if they could pray all day, every day they would. There was a prayer for absolutely everything in Jewish life, from using new furniture, to receiving good news, for fire, lightening, rain, the sea, rivers, lakes and so on.

The devout Jew has set times for prayer. The hours are 9.00am, midday and 3.00pm. Wherever he is, a Jew is bound to pray. However, there is a danger that prayer becomes such a ritual that it becomes all too easy to rattle off without really thinking about what you are saying. Now I don't think the Jews have that on their own. I am quite sure we have all been guilty at times of saying the Lord's prayer while our minds are elsewhere!

It is through prayer that we communicate with God. A good way of thinking about prayer is to think of it as a conversation with God, and to approach it in a similar way you would a conversation with anyone else. The elements are in many ways the same. So, this leads on to the question of how we pray.

Firstly, I want to make the point that we can pray anywhere, any time. We can pray sitting in a bus, driving a car, walking along (though not a bad idea not to keep your eyes shut while walking, or for that matter, driving your car). However, I would suggest that it is also a good idea to have a set time and a quiet place where you can have what I would call quality time with God. This is what Jesus is recommending in our gospel reading: *'Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'* By having a set time and place it becomes a habit, and that's a good thing because then we are not praying just when we want something from God.

I go back to what said about approaching prayer in similar way to a conversation with anyone. If the only time I spoke to you was when I wanted something from you, would that be the basis of a good relationship? Hardly. Well, it is exactly the same with God. There's the story of a boy who was going off to bed. He announced to his family, 'I am going to bed. I'm going to be praying. Anybody want anything?'

By all means, personal requests to God are fine, but also on the agenda should be thanking God for our blessings, chatting to God about our day, and especially requests to God on behalf of others. In fact, this should be the most important aspect of our prayer. I don't believe God is going to take any notice of our prayers for ourselves if our first priority is not the welfare of others.

A very important part of any conversation with anyone is listening. Communication is a two-way thing. You simply cannot have a relationship in which communication is one-way. It just doesn't work. It is just the same with God. A lovely way of praying is just to be quiet in the presence of God. One of my favourite verses in the Bible is Psalm 46:10: *'Be still and know that I am God.'* Just enjoy the presence of God, listen to the presence of God, soak up the presence of God.

Another very important element of prayer is faith. Believe that God is listening. If we throw out a few requests in the hope that God might be listening, a kind of 'nothing ventured, nothing gained' attitude, I don't believe that God will take us seriously and so the odds are that our prayers will go unanswered. As with any conversation, we must mean what we say and what we are doing, we must be genuine.

I remind you of the story of a prayer meeting that was called by the people in a certain country in Africa, which was in the throes of a terrible drought. The meeting was held in the afternoon, the sun blazing, not a cloud in the sky. A twelve-year-old girl walked into the meeting and she was carrying an umbrella! That is faith.

I want to finish by emphasising two points. Firstly, prayer should be an integral part of our lives, and here we can take a lead from Jesus. Time and again we read how Jesus withdrew to a quiet place in order to pray. Just one example: *'Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray.'* Mark 1:35. Jesus spent a huge amount of time in prayer, and if it is good enough for him, it is surely good enough for us. Martin Luther said, *'To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.'* That's certainly spelling it out for us.

Secondly, prayer works. Interestingly, God invariably answers our prayers in a way we least expect. How often have we thought that God hasn't heard our prayers and then all of a sudden it dawns on us that he has indeed heard and responded but in a way we never contemplated.

There is the story of the man who takes this issue of God answering our prayers to another level. He had started a new diet and he altered his drive to work in order to avoid passing his favourite bakery. On this particular morning, he accidentally drove by the bakery and noticed that in the window were a host of chocolates, doughnuts and cheesecakes. He felt this was no accident and so he prayed, 'Lord, it's up to you. If you want me to have any of those delicious goodies, create a parking place for me directly in front of the bakery.' And sure enough, on the tenth time round the block there was the parking space. Isn't God good!

In terms of God answering our prayers, we need to remember this, God has a very different understanding of time to what we do. When you have been around for as long as God has, a few weeks, months are nothing. There is a lot of truth in the expression, 'All in God's time.' This point, this lesson has certainly been brought home to me over the past few years with regards our build. I have said this before, when it come to an understanding of time, God and I are on a different planet!

There I so much more I could say about prayer, but for now, let's remember to make a practice of prayer, to pray with faith and perseverance, to pray for others before we pray for our own needs, and let's not forget to be still in the presence of God.

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