

On Prayer

28 July 2013, Luke 11: 1-13

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The request was fair enough, though perhaps somewhat surprising. Here were men and women who had known Jesus quite well. You'd think that by now they would have been well instructed in the ways of the spirit and of prayer. Yet one of them said to Jesus, 'Lord, teach us to pray.'

Like many of us who have gone to church for many years – *saying prayers*, joining in corporate prayer and worship and all that – and yet still feeling a little lost when it comes to praying on a personal level.

How *do* you pray? Not how do *I* pray or the person sitting next to you or that beloved aunt or grandmother that you observed as a child. How do *you* pray?

If coming to church is your only experience in prayer, then your experience is poor indeed. And if the only way we know how to pray is to have a book in our hand, then we have much to learn. We may indeed find ourselves saying, 'Lord, teach us to pray.'

I am not saying that we should abandon the prayer book. In fact, the prayers that we have contained in this book are some of the most beautiful and most ancient expressions of prayer in the Christian tradition.

And there are times when we cannot pray, when we are passing through difficult times and we cannot seem to find the words that we need at that moment. We open our prayer book and find a psalm, a prayer, words that may be very familiar yet ever fresh, words that can help us to pray in those times.

We are verbal creatures and we need words – *sometimes*.

And at other times the beauty of our prayer book tradition can become a liability, because prayer is *not* just about saying words. There is a difference between 'saying your prayers' and prayer. Saying your prayers could very well lead to genuine prayer, but they are not the same. If they were the same, then this disciple would never have asked Jesus for guidance on the matter. He would have already known the prayers of his people. He could have undoubtedly recited many prayers by heart that he had learnt at home or at synagogue.

But obviously something was still missing. 'Lord, teach us to pray,' he said.

Prayer is not just about saying the words. Prayer is about acknowledging a Presence. And there are times when words become superfluous, when only silence can express the true intention of our hearts. This can be true of any relationship. And this is especially true of our relationship to God. After all, before there was anything else, before God spoke anything into existence, there was only silence. Sometimes the best prayer we can offer is simply being still, breathing deeply and being silent in the presence of God.

I suspect that there are about as many ways to pray as there are people. Prayer is a highly personal matter. I have known people who dance their prayer, people whose prayer is listening to certain kinds of music, people who draw or paint or sculpt their prayer, people who pray while running. People find all sorts of ways to enter the presence of God and to express their deepest longings to God. And each of us must also find our own path in the way of prayer.

More Words... but not just any words

Now having said this about the *wordiness* of our prayers, you could be struck by the fact that Jesus responded to this request by suggesting yet more words! He told his disciples, ‘When you pray, say this...’ and then he gives them the words that we know as the Our Father or the Lord’s Prayer.

Words – and yet not just any words. In fact, the term that Jesus suggested for addressing God in prayer would most likely have shocked his listeners. It is difficult for us – in our setting – to fully grasp what he was saying here, but the meaning of his words would not have been lost on those around him at that time.

Jesus spoke Aramaic to his disciples. He told them that when they prayed, they should call God *Father* – and the word that he used was a term of intimacy, a term that little children would have used to address their earthly father. He said, ‘When you pray, say *Abba*.’ It would have been irreverent at that time to call God by this familiar word.

What Jesus was saying was really *reaching beyond the words* that you would use in prayer. He was saying that in prayer we should regard God not as a distant and demanding deity; God is the very source of our lives, closer than our very breath, more imminent than our next heartbeat. And we should also pray in this way.

And then Jesus goes on to tell them a parable, one which you might find a little peculiar, even out of place here. He compares God to a man, who was in bed and asleep with his children all around him. Jesus was probably envisioning the sort of house in which the family slept side by side on the floor, so if the father got up at midnight to answer the door, the whole family was likely to be disturbed.

Now we mustn’t try to transpose every detail of this story. There are all sorts of ways in which God is *not* like this annoyed and father of the house, who refuses to get up and come to the aid of his friend in need. Jesus was really focusing on *only one point* of comparison.

He was speaking about *persistence* in prayer. He was encouraging a boldness in prayer that refuses to give up, like a sharp knocking at the door. He was saying that our prayer should be like that. Not just formal or routine.

Of course, there is a place for formalised prayer and liturgy, as I was saying earlier, but there must be more. There must be an insistence, a determination that you might use to rouse a friend from his sleep and get him to open the door and help you out of a tight spot.

This prayer that we say together is intended to be a bold prayer. That is why when we come to that point in the liturgy, the celebrant will often say: ‘and now as our Saviour has taught us, we are bold to say...’ It is not just a string of unrelated petitions; it is a prayer that assumes a certain relationship, as a son or daughter would with a beloved and trusted parent. It cries out Abba, Father – *Daddy* really. And it assumes that God has only good in store for his children.

Asking and receiving

For what loving parent, Jesus says, after being asked for a fish or an egg, would instead give his child a snake or a scorpion?

So ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock – in fact, knock hard and insistently – and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks will find and to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Because God is our Father and we are his children.

That doesn’t mean that you’ll receive everything that you ask for. God is not like Santa Claus or like a genie in a bottle that you can order around to do your bidding. But it *does* mean that we are loved. We are loved more than we can ever imagine or hope for. And it is in that assurance that we pray and it is in the knowledge that we are God’s children that we do so boldly.