





One of the most important things we do as Christians is prayer.

This booklet contains sermons on different aspects of prayer.

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## Prayer by Rev Alison Brown

Acts 2: 42-47 and Luke 11:1-4

Prayer is one of the most important things we do as Christians. One of the greatest challenges the church faces today is motivating the people of God, yes that means us, to engage in sincere, honest fervent prayer.

For many of us prayer is a lost art; we do not seem to know how to pray **and therefore do not**, for many of us prayer is a source of guilt, and just the mention of the word triggers a sense of failure and defeat.

Well I hope and pray that we will be able to get better at it, and want to do it, rather than doing it out of a sense of duty.

Prayer is a theological act, because when we pray it is as if we break into the reign of God to meet the needs of the present.

By praying we assume the willingness and power of God to act so any understanding of the working of prayer must appeal to the reality of God.

As I have already said I think a great many of us have difficulties when it comes to prayer.

The famous theologian Eugene Peterson argues that a shift took place in Western society and culture about 3-4 hundred years ago that radically disrupted our continuity with earlier civilizations, this shift has been labelled 'the age of enlightenment'.

The assumption of millennia..... that God or gods defined and accounted for the world and everything in it **was discarded** and replaced with the conviction that the human person was perfectly capable of running things on his or her own. Rapid developments in exploration and invention, learning and technology offered confirmation that we humans on our own could do pretty much anything we wanted to.

Consequently, God was shifted from the centre of man's thought process to the side-lines, and the consequence of this shift is that we no longer live in a praying world.

Therefore, if God is not longer central dominating all that is, was and will be, prayer atrophies into an occasional and spasmodic ceremonial verbal gesture or a desperate lunge for a miracle.

Prayer means dealing personally and seriously with God as the central reality of life.

So we need to take deliberate measures to counter the dismissal and trivialisation of prayer that characterise our culture.

Let's think about the book of Acts, the reading we heard earlier came from it. This book emphasises the role of prayer in the success of the early church.

Prayer opened the way for great advances for the gospel too.

Cornelius the first gentile convert heard the gospel because Peter was a man of prayer.

The routine life of the early church was marked by prayer.

The apostle Paul repeatedly reminded the readers of his epistle of the need for Christian intercession for the sake of missionary enterprise.

*Col 4:2-4 Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.*

There is a close relationship between prayer and renewal. If you study church history, you will discover that an awakening to prayer among the people of God has been the key to renewal.

The Welsh revival happened in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had its roots in prayer, religious leaders such as John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney who was an American Presbyterian minister and leader in the Second Great Awakening in the United States. All declare that

prayer was the basis for all that happened in **the world changing revivals** they led.

Remember all revivals are dependent upon God, but in revivals, as in other things God invites and requires the assistance of man. God alone can save the world; but God cannot save the world alone.

As Dr Wilbur Chapman once commented, '*revivals are born in prayer.*'

We can all participate in prayer; it is one of the tasks of the church that we can **all** do.

You don't need special status, financial resources or flashy spiritual gifts to be involved in this great endeavour.

What is really exciting about prayer is that the simplest and seemingly the most insignificant one of us can become a giant of prayer.

When we, Christian believers dedicate ourselves individually and then corporately to the task of learning to pray then our Lord can use us to change the world.

And guess what ..... prayer is learned by doing.

The disciples needed help with their prayers lives which is why they ask Jesus to teach them to pray.

Think of the matters of life and death, salvation and judgement, suffering and justice, peace and war, recrimination and reconciliation, all these things are being played out in our lives, the lives of our family and friends among our neighbours, in our nation and in the world we live in don't be a silent passive spectator to any of this.

Remember we are on the front line a place where **God's praying people** have always found themselves.

AMEN

## Why Pray by Christopher Dudgeon

### Matthew 6: 5-13

<sup>5</sup> 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

<sup>6</sup> But 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.

<sup>7</sup> 'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

<sup>9</sup> 'Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.

<sup>10</sup>Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>11</sup>Give us this day our daily bread.

<sup>12</sup>And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup>And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

*The year before last, my brother-in-law Keith was setting off on his bike one morning to go to work in the City.*

*As he was about to leave, it became clear that he couldn't remember what he was doing that day.*

*They went to A&E and at lunchtime they discovered that he had a brain tumour.*

*We prayed and prayed for Keith's recovery, for a miracle, but 6 months later he died.*

And even though I've seen numerous amazing answers to prayer over the years, this led me to think 'What is the point of this, what is the point of prayer?'

And this is the subject of our talk this morning - why pray?  
I've discovered afresh that Christian prayer is the most important activity in our lives.

It's the very purpose for which you and I were created - that is, to be in a relationship with the God who made us and loves us, and to know Him.

## 1. JESUS TELLS US TO PRAY

So why should we pray? In the passage we read earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says in verse 6: 'When you pray, go into your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father, who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

So a first reason why we should pray is because Jesus prayed, and he taught us to do the same.

He tells us to pray. He says 'When you pray', not 'if you pray'. Jesus modelled prayer for us. He regularly visited the synagogue, and we read that he prayed at least 3 times a day. We read many stories of how he prayed both publicly and in private and solitude. We read in Luke how on one occasion he went out to a mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God. I think that's what nowadays we call 24-7 Prayer!

Jesus obviously felt a compelling need to pray, and he prayed as if it made a difference, as if the time he devoted to prayer mattered every bit as much as the time he devoted to caring for people. He aligned with the Father's will through His prayers. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'

And in the Lord's Prayer, in verse 10 of our passage today from Matthew's gospel, Jesus taught us to say 'Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

Jesus had an uninterrupted relationship with the Father - His life was one of constant prayer.

## 2. PRAYER DEVELOPS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

A second reason then why we should pray is to develop our relationship with God.

Later in our passage from Matthew, Jesus tells us to start our prayers with the words 'Our Father in heaven'.

So prayer is all about conversation with our heavenly Father, who loves us more than we can imagine.

Jesus often used the word Abba when he prayed. Abba is an Aramaic word which is hard to translate but means something like 'Daddy' or 'dear Father'.

We may doubt or worry that we can really have this close a relationship with God our creator.

But because of what Jesus has done for us in dying on the cross, wiping away our sins and removing that barrier that separates us from God, he has given us access to the Father.

Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians: 'For through Him, through Jesus, we have access to the Father by one Spirit'.

*I recently read of something that happened during the American Civil War. As a result of a family tragedy, a soldier had been given permission to have a hearing with the President, because he wanted to request exemption from military service.*

*But when he arrived at the White House, he was refused entry and was sent away, and he went to sit in a nearby park. As he was sitting in this park, a young boy remarked about how unhappy he looked. The soldier found himself pouring out his heart to this young guy.*

*And eventually the boy said, 'Look, come with me,' and the dejected soldier went back to the White House. They went round the back, in through the door, and finally they came to the presidential office. The young boy opened the door, walked straight in, and there was Abraham Lincoln, standing in conversation with the Secretary of State. And the moment they walked in, Abraham Lincoln turned to the boy and he said, 'Todd, what can I do for you?' And Todd said, 'Dad, this soldier needs to talk to you.'*

*The soldier had access, through the son.*

As Christians, we have access to the Father through Jesus. And in prayer, we are able to draw close to God, to know Him better, and to develop and grow that relationship.

### 3. PRAYER MAKES A DIFFERENCE

A third and final reason why we should pray is because it makes a difference.

In verse 6 of our passage today from Matthew, Jesus says '...Pray to your Father; and your Father ... will reward you.'

So what are the rewards of prayer?

Through prayer God changes things - He changes us, and He changes situations.

I often find that when I pray, I experience God's love and His presence afresh, that I am filled with an inexplicable joy. In Psalm 16, the Psalmist says 'In your presence is fullness of joy.'

Through prayer God transforms our anxiety in to peace. Paul says in Philipians 4 (v6): 'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

So God changes us, but he also changes situations.

*Going back to what I was saying earlier about my brother-in-law, we have continued to pray for my dear sister Philippa, his widow. And bit by bit, we are seeing amazing things happening. She was invited by*

*her church last year to give a talk on 'Hope'. Since then, she has started being invited by other churches to give similar talks. She is seeing God at work in her life and in the lives of many around her, in completely unanticipated ways.*

This appears to be a case of 'Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

So our prayers make a real difference!

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

So in conclusion, what do we need to do about all this?

If we're convinced of the reasons to pray - Jesus' command to us to pray, the way in which prayer develops our relationship with God, and how prayer really changes situations - we may want to think afresh about our own prayer lives.

We need to make time each day to pray, to do it!

We need to be bold in approaching God as our Father, who wants to have close and intimate conversation with us.

And let's be expectant, open to the possibility of God changing us, and the world around us, as we pray.

Amen

## Wrestling with Prayer by Alan Hoar

Genesis 32. 22 - 31. Mark 14.32 - 42

When I was thinking about this initially I found myself remembering schooldays when I often used to have tea on a Saturday afternoon with a friend and his family and almost inevitably there would be wrestling on the television; the likes of Mick McManus, Big Daddy, Jacky Palo grappling in the ring the crowd howling with rage when they did something underhand then strutted round whilst their opponent lay groaning on the canvas.

With that picture in my mind I was going to tell you that perhaps the most important thing was to actually get in the ring; I've been around long enough and spoken to enough people to know that in any congregation there will be those who pray a lot, those who pray a bit and those who don't pray at all - prayer has after all been described as the what we talk about most and practice least. I guess that over the years at various times I would have fitted into all those categories.

But is this wrestling with prayer? It has perhaps more to do with wrestling with ourselves a bit like the person who knows that 5 a day of fruit and veg are good for you; is full of good intentions but doesn't quite get round to having those five items. In any case when we get to pray is it really like wrestling or if we're honest is it something far more genteel.

You could probably characterise a lot of my prayer as simply sitting around thinking in the presence of God as concerns and people float into my consciousness and often it's where I do my thinking about preaching but wrestling? There's little of the brutality the violence which when the camera panned round the audience at those wrestling bouts would reveal ladies of a certain age on their feet screaming rip his head off - totally caught up in it totally absorbed in it.

There is something primitive about wrestling not so much with prayer as with God who is at the heart of our prayers - primitive because when we wrestle with God in prayer it is because something has driven us to it, something which in one way or another has touched us to the quick. Irrespective of whether you pray regularly, occasionally or not at all I would suggest that you will find yourselves wrestling at some point

with God in prayer because you won't be able to help yourself. It's a wrestling match which will not await the convenience of your prayer time but will intrude into a sleepless night or an unexpected moment of the day; at times you may not know that you are praying but in your heart you will be asking hard questions of God and if that is not prayer then what is?

The friend I used to watch the wrestling with all those years ago rang me up the other day indignant because Anglia Water who normally present him with a bill for £66 had come up with a demand for £1815.13. will he let it rest no he will not he will do everything he can to get to the bottom of it - that's what we want to do when we wrestle with God in prayer - get to the bottom of it try to understand what's going on.

What is going on we complain? Maybe instead of changing the lessons this morning I should have changed the psalm instead because the psalmists are often speaking to God out of their experience; whilst that experience is often positive at other times there is a raw honesty in their speech, why aren't you with us anymore, I've stuck with you why haven't you stuck with me, have you dropped off, can't you see the trouble that we're in. Whenever we pray like that it's not about a lack of faith, it's about a lack of understanding and if we continue to wrestle we won't win but what we may well do is win through. "Then you hid your face from me says the psalmist and I was utterly dismayed" but he continues "you have turned my mourning into dancing and have girded me with gladness"

I can remember praying and praying and praying for the daughter of some very good friends of mine who was grievously ill. In those days I was prone to migraines and I had one of the worst ones I'd every had and I was totally laid out and the Migraine and Margaret got mixed up together why have you hid your face from me I was asking - it seemed as if in the middle of all of this I was being taken to the end of the migraine when the pain would go and everything would be incredibly clear and it seemed as if I was being told it will be like that for Margaret and the next day I received a card saying M has passed through the valley of the shadow of death to be with the good shepherd.

So, we may come to understand how things are but equally in our wrestling we may come to understand how things might be as we ourselves are shown ways to become perhaps part of the answer to the problem we see how, you might say, to get a new hold on it so that out of our wrestling with God we begin to see how to better wrestle with the problem.

The Story of Jacob at Jabbok shows us that that if this wrestling can change our understanding then it can also change us. Jacob is the man who has hitherto lived up to his name and been the deceiver, the supplanter who has stolen his brother's birthright; the wide boy who will fiddle things if he can. At Jabbok he finds that he cannot go on as he is - he wrestles with God and he prevails - he does not win but rather he wins through to becoming blessed, the person God needs him to be; to live up to his new name Israel on whom a nation can be founded.

Sometimes that is our most intense wrestling not when things are not as they should be but when we are not as we should be when find that we can't go on unless the outcome of our wrestling is that we see the reality of who we are against the reality of who God is and as we wrestle with the difference we find ourselves being changed. There's a kind of a paradox because in the story Jacob/Israel goes on his way limping because his hip has been put out of joint and yet he will no longer have to limp through life less than he should be. Perhaps for many of us it's a struggle we shall return to again and again as time and again we need to ask God to bless us add something of his life to ours.

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus wrestles with God's calling and in the bible people do wrestle with their calling - is this right they ask - I'm only a boy says Jeremiah, I'm useless at public speaking says Moses, I've been left alone says Elijah. In the gospels we come across Jesus going apart to pray in this moment we are let into what lies at the heart of his prayer. I find it difficult to believe that until this moment he did not have an inkling of the cost of it all, that he did not question his Father again and again as he sets his face to go to Jerusalem.

Because these things are difficult we will revisit them again and again and if what we're called to do is of God - whatever that may be and a call is simply in some way being prompted by God to do something. We

find as we wrestle with it the call if it is from God is strengthened not diminished. People sometimes ask me why I haven't gone on to be a priest the simple answer is I've never been called to. I had a very strong sense of being called to be a Reader so clear I argued with God about it for a year. If the conversation had been about being a Priest it would have been much shorter - "You don't want me to do this do you?" Answer; "No."

We could go on for a long time but essentially the things we wrestle with most are the things which touch us most - things going wrong in our lives or of those we love, the sort of person we are, the things we sense God wants us to do. Jacob is alone at Jabbok Jesus is alone at Gethsemane and sometimes it has to be like that what we're praying about is so private.

But what is Jesus asking for In Gethsemane - he's asking for prayer partners for Peter, James and John to be with him in prayer and they go to sleep on the job, it must have been important to him he comes back twice to check up. If anyone asks us to pray for them it is an awesome responsibility. If you're struggling with illness it's great to know you are being prayed for by people in this church and from this Church. If you can find people to pray with you in body or in Spirit it's wonderful. I once had three people who I knew at a certain time of the day would where they were be praying with me about a specific thing - that's strengthening.

The danger with a sermon like this is that you can make it sound all too neat and tidy when wrestling is neither of those things and all you can do is continue to wrestle but never think never let anyone tell you that to wrestle to argue is about a lack of faith on your part - on the cross Jesus continues to argue - My God my God why have you forsaken me - to argue when you are in extremis is to have a very real faith.

## Does Prayer make a Difference? by Gordon Scutt

Whilst preparing this talk I was reminded of the story of a couple on holiday when they lost their way on a desert road, but worse ran out of petrol. Fortunately, when packing the car, the wife had included a chamber pot for emergencies. The man detailed his wife to go in search of petrol whilst he looked after the car. So taking the potty she went off (as one does) in search of petrol. After what seemed an eternity she found a gas station and filled the pot to the brim. Somehow she struggled back to the car with her precious cargo.

She held the potty very still and carefully poured the petrol into the tank. Whilst she was pouring the last drop of petrol into the tank, she was startled by a vast limousine pulling up in a cloud of dust alongside her.

A Sheik jumped out and said.....'Madam' I may not be of your religion, but I must say I do admire your faith'.

When we approach the 'subject of prayer' it sometimes seems we are indeed alone on a desert road.....does anything really happen?

It was helpful when I reread 'This Surprise of Wonder' a small book written for the benefit of the writers' grandchildren..... when I came across this remarkable fact.

The DNA is so narrow and compacted that all your genes in each of your body's total cells would fit into an ice cube: yet if unwound and joined together they would stretch from the earth to the sun and back more than 400 times!

Isn't that amazing.

We are indeed extraordinarily made.

No wonder He wants to use each one of us.

'History is the story of God giving away power' writes Philip Yancey.' After entrusting the human species with the gift of free choice God invited its representatives to act as partners, even to argue and wrestle with the One who created them. Yet virtually everyone God picked to lead a new venture - Adam, Abraham, Moses, David - proved

disappointing in part. Apparently God committed to work with human partners no matter how inept.

Jesus stayed on earth barely long enough to assemble a dozen followers (no less flawed) to whom he handed the keys of the kingdom of God. Against all odds this movement took off, and the human partnership has not stopped since. We are God's fellow workers', the apostle Paul said. We collaborate with God's actions in the world. And as God's co-workers we are encouraged to submit our requests, our desires, our petitions in prayer.'

So the Creator God has made us wonderfully well to be involved in His work.

Now that's rather encouraging, don't you think?

What a privilege?

But let's remember we are in a battle.

'Satan dreads nothing but prayer' wrote Samuel Chadwick.' His one concern is to keep the saints (that's you and me) from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks our wisdom but trembles when we pray.'

We are rather self-sufficient, isn't that a clue to our unbelief?

Or is it, that we think God is too preoccupied with 'others' and 'has bigger issues at stake' so won't listen to us?

Maybe a bit of both.

'There is an ambition in prayer which is well-pleasing to God' writes Oswald Sanders. 'He is not honoured by the presenting of minimum requests. Because we are coming to the throne of a great King, we should honour Him by bringing worthy petitions.

Granting them will not strain His resources'!

In Hebrews 11 the writer lists the men and woman of God, but only after these words...

'And without faith it is impossible to please Him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe He exists and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him'.

Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:13 is barren. She pleads silently before God and the old priest Eli thinks she is drunk, but God hears her cry from her

heart and answers her prayer. Samuel the great prophet is born 9 months later.

Nehemiah in Nehemiah 2:4 is serving the King with wine. The king notices he looks sad and when asked why he is so, Nehemiah sends an arrow prayer of faith to God. To cut to the chase, he is released by the King to go and rebuild the fallen walls of his beloved Jerusalem. They are rebuilt in a mere 52 days because 'God was with me' said Nehemiah.

Elijah is a brilliant meteor in Israel's firmament, but Daniel is a fixed star.

For over 70 years Daniel is Prime Minister under five kings of mighty Babylon, he wielded a prodigious influence. The divine record compresses his secret into a few words.' He kneeled before His God three times a day'.

He would not bow before the golden image of the tyrant king. He believed God would rescue him and he did. (Dan 10)

Paul advises us to pray constantly in his letters to the churches.

Jesus underlines the importance of prayer in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 6.

He was often up early to pray. He underlined the importance of prayer saying 'nothing happens without prayer'.

The Bible from cover to cover shows how prayer works.

It changes things.

'When I pray coincidences happen' said Archbishop William Temple 'when I don't, they don't'!

Sally and I have seen Him work in our own lives too.

May I give two recent examples:

From Sally's earliest days she has had a phobia about her eyes. Many of us would say we had phobias about something, wouldn't we?

16 years ago she prayed with a friend about this concern.

She had this tested to the full recently. She underwent two cataract operations, which were far from smooth going, but all her fears of the past had left her.

In previous years even a simple eye test would have been enough to give her a sleepless night, yet following the earlier prayer she was able to go through what proved to be complex and complicated surgery and remain completely calm and peaceful, something which would have been unthinkable in the years gone by.

Our eldest daughter, Sophie was diagnosed with a brain tumour two years ago in Nov.

We were given possible scenarios of partial paralysis to rather worse! So we prayed and sent an email to our friends. We were overwhelmed with the response. Dozens and dozens started to pray.

Meanwhile, life had to continue so Rebecca, our younger daughter, was out early Christmas shopping in Westfield Shopping Centre in London. It was choc a bloc. She was approached by a black security guard who said to her 'It's all going to be alright'.

Rebecca walked on and said to herself 'What did he say.' Retracing her steps and pushing through the crowd she caught up with him and said 'What did you say to me'?

With a beautiful smile 'Everything you are going through is going to be alright'.

She stood there stunned.

Then looked up and he'd gone.

Never seen him before or since. We believe he was a messenger from God, some might say an angel.

Sophie then had her op. 13 hours of surgery.

A leading surgeon operated, it was too dangerous for any of his team to do it.

He took a cricket ball size tumour out of her brain. It was the first time he had seen the base of the brain.

Thus far she has made a brilliant recovery and has started at St Pauls Boys school as a nurse and has already been given plaudits from the teaching staff.

Does prayer work? Of course it does.

God, the Father on the Mount of Transfiguration speaks out of the cloud and says 'This is my beloved son listen to Him'.

As we listen to Him so He will inspire us with what He wants to see happen.

Amen.

## Being persistent in prayer by Christopher Dudgeon

### Luke 11: 5-13

<sup>5</sup> And Jesus said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <sup>6</sup> for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." <sup>7</sup> And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything."

<sup>8</sup> I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

<sup>9</sup> 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>10</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

<sup>11</sup> Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? <sup>12</sup> Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?<sup>13</sup>

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

In 1985, I was in the third year of my engineering degree at university, and I was due to go for 6 months industrial training to France. But as I arrived there it felt like the rug had been yanked out from under my feet. I spoke little French, and was based in a small town in a rather unfriendly hall of residence. All I had come to trust in back home seemed to have evaporated.

However by a very circuitous route I met an English family who lived virtually next door, who turned out to be missionaries. We got on very well and I spent much of the next few months with them.

At the end of my time there I finally realised how much Jesus loved me, what he'd done for me on the cross, and how he just wanted me

to put my trust in Him - and not all the things I'd relied on back home. And so I made a commitment to follow Him, and I've never looked back.

But here's the thing. Some years on I was discussing with my father about that time in France and how extraordinary the whole chain of events had been. And he reminded me of two of his maiden aunts, my great aunts, who had died some years earlier. And my father said 'Do you know, Aunt Kath and Aunt Zan used to pray for you and your sisters every single day, that you would become Christians.'

They had faithfully persevered in prayer, and God had brought about a remarkable answer to their prayers.

So our focus today as we continue our series on prayer, is all about persevering in prayer.

## 2. THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSEVERANCE

The first point we're going to look at is the importance of perseverance.

We've already discovered during this series, that Christian prayer is the most important activity in our lives.

It's the very purpose for which you and I were created - that is, to be in a relationship with the God who made us and loves us.

Our passage today is from Luke chapter 11. In the first few verses, Jesus has taught his disciples how to pray with the words of the Lord's Prayer.

Now He goes on directly to tell them this parable of the persistent friend, and the importance of persisting, of persevering in prayer.

So let's look at the parable itself.

Jesus tells us about 3 main characters - the friend, his visitor, and his neighbor. The visitor arrives unexpectedly, and the friend wants to serve him as best he can, but he has no bread. So he goes to his neighbor and knocks on the door, and asks him if he can give him some bread. But the neighbour stubbornly, and unusually for that culture, refuses his request.

And then Jesus delivers the punchline: *'But I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.'*

So this raises an interesting question for us. What do we do when it seems like there is no answer to our prayers? If you're anything like me, the temptation is to give up and stop praying. But we learn from this Parable that we should never give up, never stop praying.

Like the persistent friend, Jesus also wants us to be bold when we pray, and to shamelessly keep praying, without being embarrassed about how often we ask God to answer our prayer. We have this image of the friend banging loudly and relentlessly on his neighbour's door. So Jesus is saying here 'Make time to pray and don't give up.'

But at a practical level, how do we persevere? Elsewhere in the Bible there are numerous helpful instructions, and just one of these is found in Psalm 88.

Here the writer is clearly having a desperate time, everything is going wrong, but nevertheless he says: *'Every day I call on you Lord, I spread out my hands to you.'*

And in verse 13 he says *'But I, O Lord, cry out to you, in the morning my prayer comes before you.'*

So we need to make time every day, even if it's only 5 minutes, to keep company with God.

And making time and having a routine really helps us to persevere in prayer, even when things get tough.

### **3. GOD GIVES US GREAT GIFTS!**

So this brings us to our second point, which is that as we persevere, God promises to give us great gifts!

At the end of this story, Jesus underpins this call to persevere, with a reassurance that He loves to give us good gifts, and will always give us what is best for us, at the perfect time.

In verse 13 we read: *If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*

Jesus is saying that since we, as sinners, know how to give good gifts to our children, just imagine how much more God our Father will give to those who ask him to meet their needs in prayer.

But he's also saying much more than that. Jesus says here '*How much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!*'

So God promises to give us gifts that are way beyond what we probably ever imagined. From God's viewpoint there is no better response to persistent prayer than the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's own self.

And Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians (5:22), that '*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*'

#### 4. CONCLUSION

So what are we to conclude from all this?

Jesus tells us to persevere in prayer, and not give up. He tells us to be bold and shameless in our prayers, to bang on the door! And we need to make time and have a daily routine to help us to persevere.

And he reassures us that He will always give us what is best for us, at the perfect time. He even promises to give us His Holy Spirit, that our lives might be fruitful and fulfilled, and that we might bring blessings to others and glory to Him.

Amen

## Tips on how to pray by Lewis Scard

In setting out to pray what better a reference than the bible as a starting point. Is it possible to just open it at random and find something? I suggest not. Some areas, full of details of wars and people with very strange names are not the obvious catalyst for prayer.

Early experiences of a home group where open prayer was on the menu - feeling of awkwardness and failure - wanted it to feel like a comfortable, natural act. There are lots of resources to help us, our own friends and mentors, a lot has been written on books and besides people have been praying for many centuries.

There are in fact around 650 prayers in the bible which when taken together, as they cover such a variety of topics, form an excellent basis for our own prayers and learning how to pray.

Of course there is the prayer Jesus taught us, the Lord's prayer. For many of us this was learnt when we were very young, sometimes at school, and sadly I have probably said it many times with my mind elsewhere. This probably accounts for the majority of the roughly 41,000 times (that's about twice a week) I had said this prayer. So what I now do is what I do with all prayers and s l o w d o w n.

And then there are the psalms. What an inspiration for prayer they are. Again when reciting them do we really absorb what we are saying. In this Benefice about 5 years ago we lost a dear reader in his late 50s whose name was Nick Maude. Nick had inoperable cancer and we lost him over a three-month period. His faith was strong and he asked to be brought home to die. As his family gathered around he asked that they read the Psalms out loud to him as of all things he found this the most comforting passage of text in the bible. If I said the Psalms included fear, praise, anxiety, anger, love, sorrow, despair, gratitude, grief, doubt, suffering, joy, vengeance and repentance you would suggest if made into a feature film it would be smash hit.

So here might be a few lessons from Psalms that could help us in our prayers:

1. Work out your animosity towards enemies not by gossip or hostility but by informing God of their injustice and asking God how to put through right.
2. It's alright to express impatience to God seeking a rapid answer to prayer
3. Prayer sometimes involves talking to yourself. This is OK and often helps you articulate the thoughts and wishes rumbling around in your head.
4. Don't just focus on all the downsides, problems and unfairness in life but pray about all those other items that turn out well.
5. Project yourself into the future as a changed person. This is the "act as if" principle.

In prayer when praying to God try and behave as if you were talking to a person. Don't treat prayer as a kind of duty but treat it as a safe outlet for whatever you are thinking or feeling

For many Paul's Epistles are more familiar territory than many parts of the Old Testament. Paul himself included prayers in all his letters except one, Titus. Paul's depth of prayer would literally go at times to a far higher plane. To the Ephesians he would pray for the "struggle against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms". So when we pray are we in danger of being a bit trivial, of dumbing down? Yet Paul too prays for practical matters, for sick friends, for travel plans and requests for boldness and safety. There is no right and wrong in praying, it really is all about communicating with God with whatever seems important.

So does it matter if the prayers are spoken spontaneously or should they be written down? Some churches consider written down prayers as unspiritual. "How could a prayer be sincere and heartfelt if someone read it from a piece of paper" Um that doesn't commend the prayers from Psalms and Paul then? Low church rebellion against the Anglican church saw Puriton John Milton scorn the majestic prayers of the Anglican Prayer Book as "cuckoo notes". On the other hand C.S. Lewis preferred fixed prayers for his private devotions because they kept the

focus on permanent things rather than 'contemporary problems'. Indeed Lewis opposed revising the Book of Common Prayer, 'the more up to date the Book is the sooner it will be dated'. Using written prayers from others can have the advantage of being compiled by people sensitive to both spiritual and literary concerns, and they have often stood the test of time.

The purpose of prayer is to spend time with God, not to follow some sort of legalistic procedure. If a system helps achieve that goal then fine. If not then try something else. Moods change, life goes through seasons, personalities differ, one size does not fit all! Each person who prays will need to find a rhythm or method that fits, for each of us has a unique privilege of offering love and attention to the One who made and sustains us. The fact is God will hear our prayers no matter how eloquent or prosaic.

So what can go wrong and stop the prayer process.

1. Think you are **unworthy** to get the attention of God. Nobody is unworthy. God listened to the prayers of a short fused Moses, a puerile Samson, the sailors who threw Jonah overboard and those of the murderer and adulterer King David.
2. Be **distracted**. Just find the right time, place and pray for what you really want. If you pray for what you feel you ought to pray for you open yourself up for distractions
3. There is no right and wrong. If it works for you and you feel comfortable and relaxed then that is how to pray. Whether you kneel, sit, stand or pray on the move it is whatever suits you

So, prayer is a way of relating to God, not a skill set like double entry book-keeping. We relate to other people not according to any rule book but freely, as individuals who possess a face, body, intelligence and emotional make up shared by no one else on earth. Far more than any person, God knows who we are, and why. It should hardly surprise God that we respond in a way that reflects our true self.

In words taken from Psalm 139: O Lord, you have searched me and you know me, you perceive my thoughts from afar, you are familiar with

all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely. Amen.

### Extra Tips on how to pray by Rev Alison Brown

I cannot express how important it is to pray.

Without prayer we can run the risk of avoiding issues that may lead us to self-destructive thoughts, feelings and behaviours .....not making time to pay attention to your soul each day is rather like driving around with God in the back seat of the car.....with the music turned on so loud that you cannot hear a word he is saying.

Henri Nouwen the great spiritual writer said of prayer that 'nobody has to prove to me that prayer makes a difference, without prayer I become irritable, tired heavy of heart and I lose the Spirit who directs my attention to the needs of others instead of my own.

Without prayer I become cranky, and spiteful and often I experience resentment and a desire for revenge.'

So this morning the title of the talk is tips on how to pray.

My first tip would be to remind you of what Chris Dudgeon said last week about being persistent in prayer and not giving up.

Try and find a time and a place daily to pray.....which will become part of your routine.

Here is a simple way of praying that is popular.....based on the letters

#### **ACTS    this involves 4 elements to our prayer time**

**Adoration**.....use the psalms if you are stuck as to what to say.....Psalm 95 which we heard earlier is a great example of praise and adoration to God.

Praise God, no mystery confounds God.

Praise God for his omnipresence, he is always with us.

When we feel inadequate or guilty, praise God for his mercy.

When we are in need, praise God for his providence and power.

Praise God for being faithful.

Focus on God's greatness.

God you are worthy of our adoration.

*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us,  
that we should be called children of God. [1John 3:1]*

### **Confession**

Name your sins don't just heap them together in a tidy pile of sin.  
Have the courage to name your sins in total honesty.

*As far as the East is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.  
[Psalm 103:12]*

Pray for strength to renounce or give up that sin.

*If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation,  
the old has gone the new has come. [2 Corinthians 5:7]*

### **Thanksgiving**

Thank God for answered prayers

Spiritual blessing

Relational blessings and material blessings

*Give thanks in all circumstances,  
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. [1 Thessalonians 5:18]*

### **Supplication**

Asking for help, nothing is too big for God, or too small for him to handle.

Be persistent in prayer. Don't give up, pray earnestly and regularly.  
If you bring a thimble to God he will fill it, if you bring a bucket he  
will fill it, if you bring a tanker he will fill it      AMEN

## When God is silent by Peter Moore

Job 23 : 1 - 10

2 Corinthians 12 : 7 - 10

In this series of sermons on prayer the subject allocated to me today is 'When God is silent', and I have had some difficulty preparing what to say because when I turned to God for guidance he didn't respond. So if this sermon doesn't make sense, please don't blame me.

I have, however, been considerably comforted by the realisation that when other people pray, God is quite often silent. I am not alone.

There are any number of encouraging texts about prayer, which makes it seem very easy: '**Before they call I will answer**' (Is 65:24); '**Ask and it will be given you**' (Mt 7:7); '**Ask and you will receive**' (Jn 16:24). But we know that it isn't always as easy as that.

I have a close fellow feeling with Job. True, he is a fictitious character, but he is a fictitious character created by an anonymous author of deep spirituality and great wisdom in a book which Luther described as "magnificent and sublime as no other book in Scripture".

The book of Job is a vast poem superimposed on an ancient folk legend in which God is challenged to a wager. There is a pious, prosperous man of great faith called Job. Suppose he were to lose everything—possessions, family and health—would he not then lose his faith and curse God?

Well, he loses everything. His friends argue that this must be because he has sinned, but Job protests that he is innocent. But he does not curse God. Why will God not leave him alone? Or why won't God just finish him off?

Above all, Job wishes that he could have it out with God. But try as he will he just cannot get through to God. '**Call, and I will answer,**' he cries to God, '**or let me speak, and you reply to me**' (Job 13:22). '**Oh, that I knew where I might find him. . . On the left hand I seek him, but I cannot behold him; I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him**' (23:3,9).

In all Job's troubles, God remains stubbornly silent. At least, that is how it appears to Job.

But when we read on to the climax of the book we find that God has not been ignoring Job. He has in fact been listening very carefully to him, and has his interests very much at heart.

All comes right in the end, though Job must accept God on God's own terms.

When we pray, we can see things only from our angle, as Job did. From God's angle, things may look very different.

Paul had some disability—he called it “a thorn in the flesh” or “a stake in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7). Nobody knows what it was, though there have been plenty of suggestions: physical ugliness, temptations, epilepsy, prostrating headaches, partial blindness, recurrent malaria?

But he prayed for relief from whatever it was, and God was silent. Well, according to Paul, God said to him, **‘My grace is sufficient for you, and my power is made perfect in weakness’**, but that amounts to silence so far as answering prayer is concerned.

This silence on God's part can remind us of what Jesus frequently did. Time and again people would ask Jesus a question, and his response would carefully avoid answering it.

The most notorious example is when the lawyer asked Jesus, **‘Who is my neighbour?’** (Luke 10:29).

In a lengthy response in which Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan Jesus doesn't tell the lawyer who his neighbour is but tells him instead to whom he should himself be neighbour, which is not the question that was asked.

On the cross Jesus himself experienced the loneliness of those to whom God is silent. **‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’** he cries, quoting the opening words of Psalm 22, which goes on, **‘Why art thou so far from helping me? . . . O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer, and by night, but I find no rest’**. So we are not alone.

But where does all this get us, in practical terms? I pray to God, and nothing happens. God is silent. Am I banging my head against a brick wall? What has gone wrong? Well, what are the possibilities?

Teresa of Avila, a 16th-century Spanish Carmelite who wrote much about prayer, suggests that when we think that God is silent it is really we who are deaf.

Do we pray expecting a particular result, and when the result is something different fail to recognise it and think that nothing has happened?

Or are we in fact praying for the wrong things (as Paul did)? My mind is small and narrow. God sees the big picture. He knows far better than I do what is best for me, so the chances are that if I pray for myself I will pray for the wrong things.

Again, is our timing wrong? We are frequently in a tearing hurry, but God has all the time in the world. **'Draw near to God'**, wrote James, **'and he will draw near to you'** (4:8). But he won't necessarily do it immediately. One of my daughters lived for some years in a native American reservation in Arizona, and found that the Navaho Indians were notoriously laid back. Tomorrow would be time enough, but the day after would be better. Perhaps God is like that? **'With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day'** (2 Pet 3:8). Yet **'the Lord is not slow in keeping his promises'** (v9). So we mustn't be impatient.

God's apparent silences may, then, be illusory. Or it may be that our praying is at fault, so that we have not formulated a prayer to which God can properly respond. We are all inevitably self-centred, and we need constantly to guard against the temptation of creating a God in our own image instead of letting him be himself.

Years ago I took a young collie puppy of ours to a dog training school, and at first we didn't find it very easy and we didn't do very well. I learnt an important lesson when the ferocious lady who ran the classes came up to me, wagged her finger in my face, and snapped, 'It's not the dog who's stupid—it's you!'. It is a lesson which over the years has served me well in a wide variety of fields, and I think it may help me with my prayers.

## The Problem of Unanswered Prayer by Johnny Langdon

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, 39-40

This morning I want to explore a question that came out up when I was part of a small group when living in London about 10 years ago. I want us to consider our response to this question. "What would you ask Jesus if he was sitting with you alone or around the dinner table perhaps?

Perhaps that question might be - "Why do we pray for something year after year, something that ought to be part of God's will, and nothing happens?"

I believe that this is a question that most Christians ask at some point in their lives. Why was God not there when my university friend had a terrible car accident and died at the wheel? Why has God allowed my friend's child to contract a cancerous brain tumor? Why was God not there 50 years ago when 117 children and 28 adults died in the horrendous mining disaster in Aberfan? The list is potentially endless.

We can't help but ask what kind of God, who has the power to save a life or heal a disease would sit on the sidelines despite urgent pleas for help? Phillip Yancey writes in his book on prayer, "In a sense every war, every epidemic or drought, every premature death or birth defect stands as an accusation against the teasing promise of prayer."

### Threat to Faith

Unanswered prayer poses an especially serious threat to our faith. After all, we read in Matthew 7 - "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you". Many people's faith dangles on the threat of unanswered prayer. Some blame themselves, thinking that if they were 'better' Christians they would achieve desired results. Some, seeing the upsides, point to the positive side-effects of prayer - relatives or friends brought to faith or a church united and growing in number. Others simply give up, concluding prayer doesn't work.

### The Problem of Inconsistency

I think one of the biggest problems underlying unanswered prayer is inconsistency. God seems to intervene in some cases and not in others.

An Asian couple were in the the World Trade Centre during the terrorist attack - both escaped alive, each of them from one of the two different buildings and they deemed it a miracle and converted to Christianity. Why did God spare them and not the 3000 others? I am sure many of you are like me when you thank God and rejoice when a prayer is answered, but you are uncomfortably aware that God doesn't heal everyone as requested. I don't doubt that God answers prayers. It's the inconsistency that is a struggle.

There is no way around the fact that God heals some people and not others. It seems to me that we must respond to God's answering our prayers with sensitivity. We must live and speak with thanksgiving, but not in such a way that we ignore others whose prayers have been unanswered. There is a level of mystery surrounding prayer we can't escape.

However, the bible does provide us with some answers to the mystery of unanswered prayer. There aren't any "one size fits all" answers, but there are several that are mentioned.

### 1. Frivolous Prayers

Some prayers go unanswered simply because they are frivolous. To give an example "Lord, please give me a sunny day on Friday to play golf," trivializes prayer when there are farmers praying for rain so they can grow their crops and feed their families.

The New Testament highlights several such foolish requests made directly to Jesus. James and John, along with their ambitious mothers, once asked Jesus to reserve prominent positions for them in his new kingdom. "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus responded. And that is one reason prayers go unanswered. They are not in accord with the will of God. If we're going to be serious and seek God's help, we need to, first of all, ask God to reveal our sin and those areas of our lives that are getting in the way.

### 2. Blessing of unanswered prayers

But sin is not always the problem. Another reason prayers go unanswered is that God is blessing us without an answer. It is in our

interest that God does not answer as we have requested. Think about it. What would happen if God answered every prayer? God would in effect, abdicate all sovereignty to us. What if all our requests were granted? History has already revealed how we humans handle the limited power given to us: wars, genocide, pollution, unjust political systems, concentrated pockets of wealth, widespread poverty. I don't want to think about what kind of world we would have if we humans had more power than we have already.

One of my favourite films is *Bruce Almighty*. The actor Jim Carey plays a television reporter called Bruce who says, after a series of mishaps, "God could fix my life in five minutes if he wanted to." So God, played by Morgan Freeman, reveals himself to Bruce and gives him the power to be God for one week. Bruce uses his power to clear a path in traffic for his new sports car and gets his dog to use the toilet correctly. In short, the character, Bruce Almighty, learns an appreciation for the complexity of prayer as well as a new humility and sense of inadequacy.

Someone asked Mahatma Gandhi, "If you were given the power to remake the world, what would you do first?" He replied, "I would pray for the power to renounce that power."

Jesus is the only one who has handled that power well. His life, in fact, shows the delicate balance required when supernatural power comes into play in humanity. This was the unparalleled wisdom of Jesus. The immature Bruce Almighty and the mature Mahatma Gandhi soon realised they lacked the wisdom to balance the power of the almighty and the free will granted to humanity. And we, too, must come to grips that our prayers may sometimes go unanswered because our request, while it may seem reasonable to us at the time, is not in the long-term perfect will of God.

### 3. Contradictory Prayers

Another set of prayer requests simply can't be granted. If two Christian nations are at war with one another, whose prayers for victory will be answered? If 10 people are all praying for the next senior role within the clergy, whose will be answered? We, finite human beings can never fully and perfectly know the will of God. It is important that we pray,

not demanding that God carry out our wishes, but be more diligent in asking God to help us carry out His wishes.

#### 4. Living with the Mystery of God

This whole matter of finite humans calling on an Almighty God is at the heart of many unanswered prayers. We may call on God to change the behaviour of our troublesome children (not me of course as mine are angelic), or asking God to heal the cancer in our friend. And still, we can't understand why God doesn't respond to us.

It helps me to know that many biblical characters lived with unanswered prayers. To give an example, Paul prayed three times that a "thorn in his flesh" be removed, but God never removed it. God answered some of Paul's prayers, why not this one?

This prayer was not answered when it was prayed. But this doesn't mean God wasn't at work in the life of Paul. Paul never had that thorn removed, whatever it was. But he did come to grips with what God was doing in his life. He recognised the thorn was given to him to keep him from becoming conceited. God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." So Paul concluded, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Cor. 12:9).

You see our unanswered prayers may, in fact, be part of God's larger plan of redeeming the world and redeeming us. As humans, we are looking for immediate answers, but God is working on a larger plan. We are seeking strength and God may be making us weak so that his glory would be magnified. We're seeking good things to surround our children and God may be using trouble or suffering for a greater outcome. The mystery of unanswered prayer is simply a part of the gulf that separates our understanding of life from the Infinite Mind of God.

Today's reading, several verses from the 11th chapter of Hebrews, is an important clue to the problem of unanswered prayers. The chapter is a long list of biblical heroes who have finished their work on earth yet none of them lived to see all the promises of God completed in their lives. The writer says, "They were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, God had planned

something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect”

The beauty of God’s plan is that the delay is intended to allow us all to share in the final glory of God together. Imagine watching your favourite football team win the Premiership all on your own? What kind of experience would it be if we all recorded the same game and watched it on different days? The thrill of victory is experiencing it together! The Bible is telling us that all God’s promises will finally be fulfilled when we are all together.

So if God doesn’t heal the person you’re praying for, remember, this is not the end. Life is not over when our pleas are not answered. When we see wars, tsunamis, terrorist bombings, and other venues for death, suffering, and evil, we should remember there is a final judgment when all wrongs will be made right.

Yes, I know this whole answer may leave us open to ridicule. Non-believers will say this is a cop out, that we are closing our eyes to reality and grasping at straws. Yet, we must wait, and be tolerant and be faithful. We will not forget that with God a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day.

And so we intend to face the problem of unanswered prayer with determination to allow God to shape us, as we wait. We ask God to let us be patient when we face disappointment, be thankful when we succeed, persevere when we are in trouble, and endure when we feel pain.

Amen

## What do you pray for? by Peter Moore

1 Chronicles 29: 10 - 14

Luke 11: 1 - 19

What I miss most since my wife died is the times we spent together. Not the things we did together, and the things we talked about together, but just the times we spent together. The relationship was complete without action, without words. And I grow more and more convinced that our relationships with people are gifts of God intended to show us in miniature what our relationship with God can and should be.

God created us in his own image to be like him and to be with him, and he shows us what this relationship with him can be and should be by allowing us to create relationships with other beings of his creation. Now our relationship with God is perfected in prayer. It is in prayer that we come close to him. And just as our human relationships do not depend upon what we do together or say to each other, so too our relationship with God is complete in our just being together. We may do things with God; we may talk together with God, but all that is ultimately necessary is for us just to be with God. And when we pray, we are with him. So petition or words may assist prayer, but they are not essential.

If I have learnt anything about prayer (and I freely confess that I haven't learnt much, because I haven't worked at it long enough), it is that the 'shopping list' is the least important part. So (in the terms of the title of this address), 'What do you pray for?'

When we compose ourselves to pray we are, as it were, dialling God's number on a divine telephone and waiting for contact with him to be established. To continue the analogy, we may of course find that there is no answer or that the number is engaged—we have looked at that possibility in earlier addresses—but let us assume that God answers, and that communication is established. Then what happens?

A wise soul once commented, 'For one person who exclaims, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth", there are ten who say, "Hear, Lord, for thy servant speaketh"'. Well, if you really need to get something off

your chest, blurt it out. Tell God. You'll feel better for it. But that isn't what prayer is really about.

Someone has suggested that in prayer we create space in which God can act. God can't act if we go prattling on. 'Be still, and know that I am God', wrote the Psalmist. 'The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge' (Ps 46: 10, 11).

Prayer has been called 'diligently waiting upon God', and this implies an expectant silence. The silence is spent not in indolence or vacant musing, but is an eager reaching out after God, in an obedient spirit, sensitive to the slightest divine manifestation. Silence is not an end in itself, but a means to a higher experience. It is the opportunity for the unfolding of truth and the realisation of the divine presence (Quaker epistles 1884 etc).

'He who has ears to hear, let him hear', said Jesus (Mt 11: 15). But we can't hear if we are talking. Someone once wrote a book called 'Wasting Time with God', which reminds us that over the centuries countless monks and nuns have spent their whole lives effectively wasting time with God. It won't hurt us to waste a few minutes with him each day.

We have, of course, got a perfect blueprint for our prayers in The Lord's Prayer (Mt 6: 9-13; Lk 11: 2-4) which Jesus taught his disciples when they asked him how they were to pray. 'It covers all that a son needs to say to his Father. Before he comes to his own personal needs he shares the Father's larger concerns and plans' (G S Caird: *St Luke* 152).

So he begins, 'Father, hallowed be thy name'. God's name encompasses his whole nature and purpose, so 'the first petition is primarily a prayer that God will act to display his holiness and love' (Caird). In Ezekiel God cries, 'I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations ... and the nations will know that I am the Lord' (Ezek 36:23).

In King David's prayer acknowledging God's glory and majesty (read as our first lesson this morning) the king blesses the Lord as the historical God of Israel our Father, and praises his greatness, and power, and

glory, and victory, and majesty, for (he says) 'all that is in the heavens and in the earth is thine; thine is the Kingdom, O Lord' (1 Chron 29:10, 11).

Which neatly leads us into the second petition, 'Thy kingdom come'. 'God's kingdom is his rule of righteousness and love, and it is established by his free, unconditional grace—but it is also a demand for man's faith and obedience' (Caird).

Of course in one sense the kingdom has already come. It is present in Jesus himself, and is growing in his disciples, but it needs to go on growing and spreading.

Then comes what I call 'the shopping list'. Having addressed God's concerns the petitioner can now turn to his own needs. 'Give us this day our daily bread'.

God has promised to give us whatever we properly ask for. 'Do not be anxious', said Jesus, 'saying "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we wear?". For the Gentiles seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness (--we've just done that) and all these things shall be yours as well' (Mt 6:31-33).

Here, then, is our opportunity to confess our failings and seek God's forgiveness, to pray for our needs and the needs of others, to pray for those who are sick or sad, to pray for our families and friends, our community, our nation and our world, and to lay before God the problems of today and tomorrow.

There's no need for me to prolong this list; each of us could fill a book with our own shopping lists. And, anyway, as Jesus said, 'Your Father knows what you need before you ask him' (Mt 6:8).

And finally we pray that we will not be led into temptation and will be delivered from evil: that we will be protected from any trial that would prove too much for our strength of character.

Paul tells us that everyone is assailed by temptation, so we are not alone, which is comforting. But he encourages us that 'no temptation

has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it' (1 Cor 10:13).

The forces of evil are all around us, and, indeed, are even within us. They are tied up with our temptations, and we need to be able to recognise them and guard against them. The closer we are to God the weaker is the power of evil, for the light of Christ shines in the darkness of evil and the darkness cannot overcome it (Jn 1:5).

So there is a pattern for our prayer, a menu as it were: hallowed be thy name; thy Kingdom come; give us our daily bread; deal with our temptations; deliver us from evil. To all of which we say Amen.

## Intercessory prayer by Rev Alison Brown

Romans 8:26-28, John 17:1,6-19

Today is the last in our prayer series, I have really enjoyed listening to all our speakers talking about different aspects of prayer.

I do hope that you the listeners have been encouraged and perhaps even enthused by the talks you have heard to persevere in prayer.

Here are a few points to encourage you all to pray  
I read somewhere that;

A lifestyle magazine encouraged its readers to be spiritual because it said that it lowered stress and blood pressure, boosts the immune system, fights depression, makes you more efficient.

Today the aspect of prayer I am going to talk about is intercessory prayer.

What is intercessory prayer?

One of our former archbishops Michael Ramsey says that 'to intercede means literally not to make petitions or indeed to utter words at all but to meet, to encounter, to be with someone on behalf of or in relation to others'

Thomas Merton describes intercession as 'an act to unite with God those who are unable to be united by themselves'.

Or to put it very simply, it is praying for others.

Here is a somewhat naïve way of understanding intercessions, [I wonder how many of us think this way?]

Bringing requests to God, that he may not have thought of and then talking God into granting those requests.

Our prayers should not seek to manipulate God into doing our will; it should be quite the opposite, our prayer should enable us to enter into

the pool of God's own love and allow those ripples to radiate outwards into our worlds.

Perhaps a more mature way of understanding intercession is an increase in awareness, so when we pray for another person we are praying for God to open our eyes so that we can see that person as God does [and as I hope we all are aware that God is love] then we too can enter into that stream of love that God is already directing towards that person.

Here is a great quote from one of my heroes, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.  
*'Christ stands between us, and we can only get into touch with our neighbours through him'*

A good example could be a relative who has a drug problem, by praying for them may enable us to see past their irresponsible behaviour that they display on a regular basis and view them as a wounded desperate soul.

I have been meeting with 4 other women for the past 15 years to pray for each other.

This has been a very bonding experience, before we started our prayer group we were just coffee morning/school gate friends. But once we started meeting and praying for each other our friendship deepened and also our faith was strengthened, as we witnessed over the years prayers being answered.

But what about public intercessions? the sort of thing that goes on in this church every Sunday? Bishop John Pritchard has written an interesting book called the intercessors handbook.

Here are a few of his arguments as to why he believes that the work of intercession is so central to the life and health of the church.

We should intercede because it is one of the deepest instincts we have and at the heart of this instinct is love, if we truly love people or care for them, we want far more for them than we can possibly give. We want their well-being in every respect and so when we hear of someone's difficulties we pray for them. It is saying to that person, 'I

care for you enough to take on the serious task of holding you daily before God.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> reason he argues why intercession is a vital part of being a Christian is that there is a consistent expectation in the bible that we will bring our needs and the needs of others to God, think of the example in Luke 11:1-13 of the man waking his friend at mid-night and asking for food.

When Jesus is faced with human need he just turned to his father God and asked for healing the example in Mark 7:31-5 of the deaf and dumb man, or in Mark 5:30-44 for food to feed the 5,000.

In the gospel reading we heard from John 17 we hear how Jesus prays to God his father for his disciples. This prayer is said by Jesus on the eve of his death. Jesus is entrusting those who he loves back to God.

This prayer also is a wonderful example of the intimacy of Jesus' relationship with God. Jesus is close enough to God that he can lay his petitions and intercessions before the Father in the confidence that he will be heard.

Jesus is audacious with his prayer. I wonder if we are able to be like that too? or are you fearful and too polite to be audacious with your prayer?

The good news for us tentative and nervous prayers is that we have the help of the Holy Spirit.

*'We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us'* Romans 8:26

Let's believe that the Spirit will interpret and mould our confused prayers so they correspond with the loving purposes of God.

And finally the 3<sup>rd</sup> reason Prichard argues why we should intercede is that intercession has always been at the centre of our public liturgies. The church has always seen it as a holy duty to bear the world to God in regular prayer.

So I wonder if we all now understand what intercession is and why we do it?

**But really the most important point about intercession is not to understand it.....but to do it!**

Lord,

My soul is so dry that by itself it cannot pray'

Yet you can squeeze from it the juice of a thousand prayers.

My soul is so parched that by itself it cannot love;

Yet you can draw from it boundless love for you and for my neighbour.

My soul is so cold that by itself it has no joy;

Yet you can light the fire of heavenly joy within me.

My soul is so feeble that by itself it has no faith;

Yet by your power my faith grows to a great height.

Thank you for prayer, for love, for joy, for faith;

Let me be always prayerful, loving, joyful and faithful.

*Guigo the Carthusian*

## The Lord's Prayer

### **Our Father**

You are God's child and he love you.

### **Who art in heaven**

He is sovereign, majestic, omnipotent, nothing is too big for Him

### **Hallowed be thy name**

Not a wish list, worship and praise him

### **Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven**

Put God's will first in your life, submit your will to God

### **Give us this day our daily bread**

Give God all your concerns big or small

### **Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us**

Confess your sins.... receive forgiveness .....live with a forgiving spirit towards others

### **Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil**

Pray for protection from evil and victory over temptations

### **For thine is the Kingdom the power and the glory**

End prayer with worship, acknowledge that everything in heaven and earth is God's.

*[adapted from Too busy not to pray, B.Hybels]*