

*St. Mary's Church*  
*Langley*

**Sermon Series on**  
**Prayer**

**September 2007**

# Sermon 1

## ‘What is prayer? Why should we pray?’

**Readings:** Isaiah 63:7-9,15-16, Romans 8:15-17a,26-27, Luke 11:1-4

Jesus’ disciples saw him at prayer, and asked him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray’.

Over these three sermons I want to spend some time looking at this topic of prayer, not because I think I am an expert, but because it has been impressed on me again in various ways how vital prayer is, both for our own Christian journey and for the life and direction of the church.

A student at Princeton University asked Albert Einstein, ‘What is there left in the world for original research?’ Einstein gave this remarkable reply: ‘Find out about prayer; somebody must find out about prayer.’

We’re not setting out to write a doctorate on prayer, but to ask some basic questions: This week I want to ask: what is prayer, for a Christian, and why should we pray? Then, what difference should we expect prayer to make? And finally, how should we pray, what might be fruitful patterns of prayer, for the individual and the church?

What do we think of, when prayer is mentioned? Perhaps a shopping list of our desires and hopes for ourselves or others, which we go through without being quite sure who we’re talking to or whether it will make any difference or do any good.

Or maybe prayer is a kind of ‘magic formula’? Perhaps we were taught certain prayers as children. I think of A. A. Milne’s poem: ‘Hush, hush, whisper who dares? Christopher Robin is saying his prayers’, which are very simple: ‘God bless mummy, God bless daddy, God bless nanny, God bless me.’ There’s nothing wrong with this prayer, but as in other things we need to grow up in the way we pray

The other familiar aspect of prayer is prayer in a crisis, when there’s something we desperately want or don’t want to happen. When I was a boy, I used to hate injections (I still do) and I would pray fervently for something to prevent them happening; the strange thing is, I regarded myself then as an atheist, but I was still prepared to bargain with God or the universe to get myself out of a hole!

How do we feel about prayer? Are we satisfied and fulfilled, or frustrated, even desperate? Does anyone hear our prayers, or do they bounce straight back at us, unanswered; indeed, is anyone there at all, or are we just talking to ourselves when we 'pray'?

R S Thomas expressed it like this: 'Prayers like gravel, Flung at the sky's window, Hoping to attract The loved one's attention.' Does that ring true? We wonder sometimes if we are doing something wrong, and we long to pray better, somehow.

What is prayer, then, for Christian? Prayer is first of all about the relationship between us and God; prayer is the main means by which that relationship develops.

Think of any close relationship – a marriage or in a family or with friends – how essential good communication is! Poor communication is at the root of most marriage problems, and difficulties between children and parents often result from not talking or to listening properly to one another.

So too, our relationship with God will not grow and deepen unless we take time to communicate with him in prayer; and that will mean not only asking God for things – we need to learn also to listen to him.

We see this in the life of Jesus himself: Notice that Jesus did pray! Jesus had a perfect, uninterrupted relationship with God, yet he still needed to pray; in fact, Jesus' life was one of constant prayer and the Gospels are full of references to Jesus praying. He assumed his disciples would pray too; as we read today, when he taught them the Lord's Prayer, he said, 'When you pray', not 'If you pray.'

When the disciples saw how Jesus prayed, they said, 'we want to pray like that too'. So what was special about Jesus' way of praying?

The key is in the very first word of the Lord's Prayer, 'Father', or as it would have been in Jesus' own language, 'Abba'. Abba was the ordinary family word for father, something like 'Dad'. If you visit Israel today and hear children address their fathers, it is touching to realise that they are using much the same word that Jesus himself used to address his Heavenly Father.

Of course, we don't find this as shocking as we should; centuries of praying the Lord's Prayer have made it seem quite normal to pray to God as 'Father'. But Jesus was in fact the first person to dare to pray in this way. Take the Isaiah reading today: yes, God is recognised as being father to his people, but he is never addressed simply as 'Dad' in the way Jesus did. That was what was so remarkable about Jesus' prayer

For some of us, the image of God as 'father' is not a comfortable one. If our relationship with our own father has been difficult or painful in some way, it may be hard for us to trust God as our 'father'. Yet we do all have some idea of what a perfect father should be like, and one result of deepening prayer is to allow God's perfect fatherhood to heal our hurts.

So, Christian prayer is rooted in and modelled on the prayer life of Jesus, and his relationship with God as father. But he is more than just an example for us – the wonderful thing is that he invites us into the same relationship with God, as his children.

As we read in Paul's letter to the Romans, we have received a 'spirit of adoption', which enables us too to cry to God, 'Abba, Father'. That, amazingly, puts us in the same position as Jesus, as 'children of God', and it is from there that we pray as Christians.

Nothing is more important than for us to grasp this starting point in prayer. Otherwise prayer remains the hopeful – or desperate – gesticulations of a creature trying to attract the attention of its creator, and not the humble, confident approach of a beloved child to its father.

If that's our starting point in prayer, what then? How do we get started? What are we to say or do?

Back to Romans again: Paul says, we really don't know how to pray – yes, we knew that! – but help is at hand, for God's own Spirit dwells within us, who intercedes 'according to the will of God', 'with sighs too deep for words'.

There will be more to say about how we may pray, and what good we might hope it would do, but there is a caution to us here already not to expect anything too organised and predictable: prayer is not a mechanism but a mystery, an entering into the mystery of God; it is not a set of techniques or routines to be learned and applied, where we do this or say that, and get the results we want.

To pray is to begin to let go of our own hopes and fears for ourselves, or for others, and to allow God himself to shape our understanding and desires.

So, our first prayer should be, ‘Father, help me to pray’, ‘give me a desire to pray’, for the desire to pray is the desire for closeness with God, the kind of closeness that Jesus enjoyed. Yet he never took that for granted, but knew that it needed to be nurtured and sustained through the discipline of prayer – of which I will say more later.

When we feel frustrated by a lack of answers to our prayers, when we wonder whether it’s really worth carrying on praying, just remember that Jesus never gave up on prayer, he always thought it was worthwhile, even in the most desperate of circumstances.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, ‘Through Jesus we have access to the Father by the Spirit’ (Eph 2:18). What an amazing privilege is ours, to be able to enter the throne room of God himself, because Jesus has opened the way, and the Holy Spirit guides us.

‘Through Jesus we have access to the Father by the Spirit’: This is the heart of what Christian prayer is, and our prime reason for praying – to draw near to God as our loving Heavenly Father.

## **Sermon 2**

### **‘What difference does prayer make?’**

**Readings:** Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Philemon 1-21, Luke 14:25-33

In the first sermon we asked, ‘What is prayer?’ and ‘Why should we pray?’ We found that there was really just one answer to those two questions: Christian prayer is addressed to God as our Father and the desire for that relationship is our main motivation for praying.

Now we ask: What difference does prayer make? What good does it do?

A while ago, I came across this headline: ‘People Who Pray Are Happier And Healthier.’ The article continued:

‘Research into the power of prayer shows that prayer causes real effects in the real world. According to this research, people who pray lead happier lives and people who are prayed for heal more quickly

‘For example, a study of nearly 1000 heart patients found that they fared better if someone was praying for them. Half were picked at random to receive intercessory prayer, without being told about it. On average, the patients prayed for had 11% fewer complications during their stay in hospital.’

Well, that’s nice, for those 11% at least, but it leaves us with some very awkward questions: For if this is really God answering prayer, we begin to wonder, are we happy with the idea of God as a kind of heavenly ‘slot machine’, into which we just need to put the right prayer ‘coin’ to get a result? And, more importantly, why is it that some prayers are answered and others, equally pressing, are not?

It is wonderful, of course, when a cancer is healed, or someone survives a serious road accident, or the lava stream from a volcano narrowly misses a village. But a lot of the time God seems deaf to our pleadings, even in the most ‘deserving’ of cases

A simple answer is that God ‘knows best’; we should be glad that God does actually know, far better than we can, what will ultimately be for our good, and that he does not in fact answer every prayer that we utter. Ruth Graham, the wife of Billy Graham, says, ‘God has not always answered my prayers. If he had, I would have married the wrong man – several times!’

But that still leaves us questioning: Every day the parents of sick children pray for healing, starving millions beg for rain, and children plead to be spared abuse, apparently to no avail; their prayers are not answered, though these are all good things to pray for, surely?

God does answer prayers, sometimes, but why is he so inconsistent, so capricious, about it? Why indeed should God give me a parking space and not protect a poor family from a hurricane? It is all so terribly unfair – there seems to be no sense to it!

Can anything be done about it? Can we change God’s mind by twisting his arm, can we manipulate him or persuade him with our fervent faith or good behaviour, can we grab his attention by praying louder or longer than anyone else?

I frequently receive circular emails asking me to pray for situations or individuals, the implication being that if more people, in more countries, pray for a particular outcome, that prayer is more likely to be answered; it's even suggested that we should all pray at the same time, as though God were deaf or asleep and needed our united, simultaneous shouting to rouse him to action!

This is not Christian prayer, and it does not square with the way Jesus prayed, and taught us to pray; yes, he did tell us to persist in prayer – and we'll look further at that next time – but not that our efforts can somehow force God's hand and get him to do what we want.

How then should we pray, and what sort of answer may we expect? We need to go back to where the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and he said, 'pray like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done ...'

Prayer must start with that word, 'Father', in our approach to God as his beloved children; but then 'hallowed be your name' immediately puts God at the centre of our prayers, not ourselves, or our needs, or even the needs of the most 'deserving' or those suffering the worst. Unless we put God first, our praying will be unbalanced; instead we must learn to pray, with Jesus, 'your kingdom come, your will be done'

That is, rather than asking God to be on our side, we try to understand what it means to be on his side, and to see things his way. To pray aright, therefore, requires a real effort from us, as we try to work this out, by listening to God and studying the scriptures.

Take today's readings: You may have noticed that there was no mention in them of prayer, yet they should still have something to say about it, because prayer should not be not isolated in a separate compartment by itself, but connected to everything else.

If we want to pray, 'Your kingdom come', we need to have some idea of what God's kingdom is like. Philemon gives us some clues for that prayer:

It's the touching story of a runaway slave who had somehow met up with Paul in his imprisonment and come to faith. Now Paul is appealing to his former master, Philemon, to receive him back, and allow him to make amends for any wrong he has done.

Here are the values of God's kingdom – love, generosity, forgiveness, freedom and justice – and so these are the things we should ask for as we pray, 'Your kingdom come'. All these are particularly appropriate as we mark Racial Justice Sunday today – and that's just one example of how we can bring together our awareness of the world around us with our reading of scripture, in praying, 'Your kingdom come'.

What does it mean to pray, 'Your will be done'? In Deuteronomy 30 Moses presents the people with a choice, whether to obey God and follow him, or to succumb to the temptations of idolatry: 'Put God first' says Moses – and that's not so different really from our first prayer, 'Hallowed be your name', which puts God at the centre.

But it's not easy to stick with that choice – the Israelites found it nearly impossible – and in Luke, Jesus warns us to count the cost of following him, comparing it with a major building project or setting out to war; and he asks, are we prepared for that cost?

Living, and praying, faithfully, 'Your will be done', is not a simple matter; many things will try to deflect us, there will be temptations to give up, to seek other paths, when we don't get what we want, and God doesn't seem to be paying us any attention.

A dear friend of ours, Sue, was diagnosed with cancer of the spine, and immediately the whole congregation got into gear, with prayer vigils in the church, looking for a miracle of healing. As the weeks passed and Sue got worse, we began to question – what was God doing? Eventually, a message came from Sue, 'Please stop praying – I am ready to go.' Our prayers needed to change, and we began to ask for a good and peaceful death – and that prayer certainly was granted.

So, what about those people or things that are on our hearts – are we still allowed to pray for them? Yes, of course, and God does promise to answer our prayers, but not that every prayer will be answered the way we hope or expect.

But, most importantly, prayer changes us. As we spend time with God, as we bring our lives and concerns before him, as we seek his guidance and perspective, he shapes our desires and our priorities, and then in turn our prayers change too.



Look at Jesus and his prayer life: he prayed constantly – were all his prayers answered? No! in the Garden of Gethsemane, before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus prayed earnestly to be spared this suffering, and he asked, ‘Isn’t there some other way to do this?’ But his ultimate prayer was one of submission to God, ‘Not my will, but yours be done’

It’s not an easy road to take, and the workings of God’s will may often remain a mystery to us. God is not a celestial slot-machine, and there is no ‘formula’ for getting answers to our prayers. All we can do is to come to God with our hopes, fears and desires, and wait on his answer, in his time.

### **Sermon 3**

#### **‘How should we pray?’**

**Readings:** Exodus 32:7-14, 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

Over these last two sermons we have been wrestling with some tough questions around the subject of prayer, especially last week, ‘What difference does prayer make? Does God really answer our prayers?’

I liked this cartoon in the Church Times, showing a sign in the back of a car: ‘I prayed, and I’m in front of you!’ That’s probably not the way we should expect God to answer prayer, by us getting ahead in the traffic!

All our thinking about prayer should of course be shaped by the teaching and example of Jesus, in particular by the pattern of the Lord’s Prayer, and that’s where we started:

We began with that simple word, ‘Father’, that Jesus dared to use – and teaches us to use – in prayer. That tells us where we stand, and how we may approach God, as children of a loving Father.

Praying ‘hallowed be your name’ puts God at the centre of our prayers, rather than our needs, or the needs of the world. Then ‘your kingdom come, your will be done’ tells us to consider what matters in God’s view of the world; and we discover that as we bring together our reading of scripture, our knowledge of the world and our attention to God’s guiding Spirit. Then we can begin to grasp what it might mean to pray for his kingdom and his will, here and now.

With those thoughts as our framework, we now turn to some of the practicalities – when, how, and what of prayer. I know that many people struggle with a sense of inadequacy in prayer – they feel that they don't know what to say or do to pray 'properly'.

I found some encouraging advice in Bishop John's new book, 'The Life and Work of a Priest', concerning being 'good at prayer':

'Success and failure [in prayer] isn't the right language. It's the direction of gaze that matters. A wise spiritual guide said to me, "ask for the gift of prayer; the request is always granted; what follows *is* our prayer; it may not be what we expected or intended, but it is 'us' at prayer'"

So, in our prayers, what matters is not our eloquence or the depth of our theology, but 'the direction of our gaze'. When we pray, which way are we looking? Are we looking at God, our Father, desiring to honour his name, to seek his kingdom and his will? Or is our attention elsewhere, are we distracted by other things? This kind of prayer does require hard work and self-discipline – which are not popular words these days. We'd prefer to find some sort of 'quick fix' instead!

Henri Nouwen writes: 'The paradox of prayer is that it asks for a serious effort, while it can only be received as a gift. We cannot plan, organise or manipulate God, but without a careful discipline we cannot receive him either.'

What pattern of prayer is right for us? When we look at how Jesus himself prayed, we discover that Jesus prayed: by himself, early in the morning, during the day, and at night. He prayed with the disciples, and in the synagogue. He prayed before major decisions, for his disciples, and for those he ministered to – that sounds like a pretty full 'programme' of prayer!

Of course, we don't all have to pray exactly the same way. Prayer is a reflection of our relationship with God, so it will depend on the kind of people we are. Different personalities will pray in different ways, and that's ok!

I'm much better at praying in the morning; I find it harder to pause in the middle of busy day and take time out to pray; and by the evening, if I close my eyes in prayer, I am most likely to fall asleep!

For some of us, there are small children or others who need our attention first thing in the morning, so we have to pray at some other time. Or we may live in a busy household, where it's hard to find a quiet space for ourselves – God knows our situation, and is not judging or comparing us with others.

What's important is to find a time and a place for prayer that suits us and our circumstances, and that does mean making prayer a priority, and perhaps giving up something else to make room for it.

For example, if we can find half an hour to watch the news at 10 in the evening, maybe [and I'm talking to myself here!] we should also be able to spend the next half hour praying over that news, and over the day that is ending, rather than remaining slumped before the TV!

Yes, of course, we can and should pray anywhere, any time – at work, in the car, in the bath, on our beds, doing the washing-up – but, as in any close relationship, we do need to set aside definite times to communicate, just as we need to in a marriage, or with children.

Philip Yancey writes in his book on 'Prayer': 'Prayer is like sex (people's ears always prick up when I say that!). Most people imagine that everyone else is doing better than them, and all the books and techniques don't seem to produce the amazing instant results they promise.'

The point is that good prayer – like good sex – is rooted in intimacy, which only comes with time and trust. There are no 'quick fixes in prayer. So we need to persevere in prayer, and not give up! Note too that our prayer changes as we grow older and our circumstances change. If we find that the old ways of praying don't work so well any more, we need to try something new to refresh our prayer life. Above all, we must never give up on prayer!

And how are we to pray? There are thousands of books about prayer, and books of prayers, which may help. But why not use the Lord's Prayer as a basis? We must resist the temptation to rattle through it by rote, but rather dwell carefully on each phrase:

We've already seen how the opening phrases give direction for our prayer. Then, under 'daily bread' we may pray for physical needs; when we pray for 'forgiveness', we can bring all our relationships before God; and when we ask to be delivered from 'evil' & 'temptation', we seek to walk more closely and faithfully with God. In this way the Lord's Prayer provides a framework for us.

There are some practical guidelines, very briefly. But what if we find prayer a real struggle? Does that mean we are doing something wrong? I was interested in the response to the revelations of Mother Teresa's struggles with her faith: 'Vatican officials said 'Moments of crisis felt by great saints are normal and in line with the Church's tradition.'" So, it's official, it's ok to struggle then!

For a better answer, we turn briefly to our readings, with their theme of God's patience with sinners: at Moses' pleading, God does not give up on the Israelites, despite the incident with the golden calf. Paul calls himself 'the foremost of sinners', but saved by the grace of God in Christ.

And Jesus, hearing the 'religious' people complain that he 'welcomes sinners and eats with them', tells these parables of lost things – sheep and coins (and the Prodigal Son to follow) – and of the joy of the one who finds them again.

Whenever we feel 'lost', that we're far from God, or he from us, that we're unworthy of God's attention, hold on to this thought: That God, in Jesus, is the Good Shepherd, who seeks us out and welcomes us home, and that there is rejoicing in heaven when we do come back.

To sum up, never give up on prayer; and, if you want to pray better, don't wait till you understand all the answers to the difficult questions, just get on and give it a go!

Woody Allen is supposed to have said, '80% of life is just turning up'. Philip Yancey says the same is true for prayer: '80% of prayer is just turning up.'

Or as Mother Teresa puts it, very simply: 'If you want to pray better, you must pray more!'

*Robin Grayson, September 2007*