

In this week’s Gospel reading the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, as John the Baptist had done. This reading could not have come at a more appropriate time. Because tomorrow at 11 am in the church hall, Joan Facey is going to teach us how to pray. Hope you can make it!

We Anglicans are sometimes chastised for being ‘book people’ – many folks find it very difficult to say a prayer in public without the assistance of the BAS (Book of Alternate Services) or the BCP (Book of Common Prayer). Many of our evangelical friends have no such problem – they just go ahead and talk to God or Jesus as though talking to a friend – because Jesus is indeed our friend. But some people worry that they have to ‘get it right’ otherwise God or the Church will not be happy. Or they simply get tongue-tied and splutter something out that sounds trite.

What then were the disciples asking? How to say prayers? That’s puzzling, because all twelve disciples were Jewish, and were required to say set prayers from their prayerbook, the Siddur, daily. The word "siddur" itself means "order" in Hebrew, referring to the fixed order of prayers within the book. In the Siddur there are three prayer sets each weekday and a whole bunch more on Shabbat, the Sabbath. So why were they asking for another prayer? Were they asking for words of a simple prayer, or how to pray? So, Jesus answers the disciples’ question about how they should pray, in two ways. First, he gives them his form of extemporaneous prayer. A simple prayer, that can be said at any time. It’s ironic then, that the Lord’s Prayer as we know it, has become one that we are taught to remember.

There was a book written by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite Brother Lawrence, called, ‘Practising the Presence of God.’ His work at the monastery was washing the dishes, yet through this, he discovered some insights into prayer. The most effective way Brother Lawrence had for communicating with God was to simply do his ordinary work. He did this obediently, out of a pure love of God. He thought it was a mistake to think of our prayer time as being different from any other. Throughout his work, he prayed a simple prayer. All our actions should unite us with God when we are involved in daily activities, just as our prayers unite us with God when we have an intentional prayer time.

So, when someone asks if you pray, we can say yes, I pray all the time – when I’m brushing my teeth, making breakfast, walking the dog or driving the car. The key is to be aware of God’s presence in everything we do. Jesus clearly did this. Even though we are told in the gospels that he often withdrew to pray alone, all his life and actions were prayers to God.

So, what exactly is the Lord’s prayer? It’s a short and simple model of a prayer. Something that can be said at any time. Some know the acrostic ACTS as a way of creating a prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. (It can be remembered as Wow! Oops! Thanks! Gimme!) The Lord’s Prayer, though, in Luke’s version is made up of just two parts - first petitions involving adoration of God and then supplications asking God for our needs. There is no confession or thanksgiving. To simplify, we say:

May our Father God’s name be holy.  
May your kingdom come  
May your will be done on earth.

Then:  
Give us food daily  
Forgive our sins  
Don’t let us be tempted.

The second thing Jesus teaches the disciples is how to be persistent in prayer. This is not about how to pray constantly whatever we are doing, as Brother Lawrence suggested, but how to pray in supplication – asking for something persistently. That’s a trickier one.

The parable example that Jesus gives, is of a neighbour who keeps asking his friend for a loaf of bread to serve to an unexpected guest. It was very important to receive the bread as lack of hospitality towards a guest was seen as shameful, not only for the host, but for the whole village. The neighbour keeps asking until the friend gives him the bread. We might assume from this story, that if we pray to God persistently, we will get what we truly need. Jesus says, “For everyone who asks receives” (v. 10). But we know from experience, this is not so. Even Jesus, on that dark night at Gethsemane, prayed ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.’ And on the cross, he cried out ‘My God why have you forsaken me?’

So, what is God’s response to our prayers? Are they answered? Maybe not always in the way we want or expect, or in the time frame we hoped. Can our persistent prayers change God’s mind? Philosophers would say that as God is transcendent, unchangeable and eternal, there is nothing we can do to change God’s mind. Even though Abraham did manage to change God’s mind in the Old Testament story of saving the righteous few in Sodom.

The key to understanding what Jesus meant in this parable lies in the last line of our reading, “.... how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (v. 13). Even at our most downhearted and disappointed, the Holy Spirit is in us, and we receive that same Spirit every time we pray. Jesus said at the end that he would send the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, as a helper, guide, and teacher for his followers.

It’s surprising to come to the end of this teaching on prayer, to hear Jesus saying that God will give ‘the Holy Spirit’ to those who ask for it. Why does Jesus conclude with mentioning something that has not cropped up before in this teaching?

If God always gives the Holy Spirit to those who pray, then even when a prayer goes “unanswered,” God has provided a deeper response after all. If it’s the Holy Spirit we receive in and through all our praying, then we can understand Jesus’ words about persistence in prayer a little better. It’s not an easy truth to hear that we will not always receive all we ask for – especially if we have prayed for someone’s life and health.

In all our praying, asking and pleading with God, we will know that in fact we do receive what we ask for. We receive the indwelling Holy Spirit who enters our hearts. The Spirit assures us that no matter what happens, we serve a loving God who will always care for us. And through our persistent prayer we are building up a relationship with the God whom we love and trust, and who loves us unconditionally in return.

The love of God is not less because something did not come. The proof of that abiding love comes through the gentle ministry of the Spirit, assuring us all that the gospel is still true, the hope of the resurrection is still real, and Jesus remains in our hearts by his Spirit.

Thanks be to God.