

15th October 2023 – Good News #7 ‘Prayer’ (Luke 11:1-13, Colossians 4:2-6)

Prayer is both the easiest thing *and* the hardest thing in the world. Anyone who’s ever tried praying for any period of time will know that both of those statements are true.

One of the amazing things about prayer for a follower of Jesus is that we can pray anytime, anywhere, about anything. We don’t have to use special buildings or special language. It is one of the only activities that humans can do that really does have no boundaries. Prisoners can pray in their cells and judges can pray in their chambers before presiding at a trial. Our late Queen can kneel at her bedside at the same time of day as any of her millions of subjects, saying final prayers before bed. I can pray silently in the office toilet at work during the day – which I did frequently, it was the only place I had total privacy – and can then join in prayer at a meeting at church with lots of other people in the evening. Prayer is the easiest thing in the world.

It is also the hardest thing in the world. Even though we can pray anytime, anywhere, about anything, we usually don’t. Why? Well, there are lots of reasons for this. The biggest of course is that any sort of prayer is **an exercise in trust**. We have to trust that there really is a benevolent divine being listening to us – one we can’t see, and will never see this side of the grave, even if we’ve accumulated years of evidence that reassures us that this Being is absolutely true, and real.

We also have to surrender control. That is what trust means. When we pray, we put ourselves or a situation into the hands of Someone else. Lots of us secretly don’t like being out of control – we prefer to manage a situation ourselves.

There’s also a mystery as to when, and how, prayers are answered. We don’t know if God will say yes, no or wait. And if the answer is wait – wait how long? And do we continue to pray in the meantime? All of which means that prayer is also an exercise in humility. We have to trust, not only that God is real, and that he is good, but also that he knows best – his wisdom is greater than ours. And we do this, also knowing that God doesn’t override human free will. My own personal observation is that the most frequent cause of what appears to be unanswered prayer is that we ask God essentially to force someone to do something against their will – and God generally doesn’t do that. We’d be much better to pray that a person’s heart will change, for what the bible calls ‘conviction of spirit’, than for someone to miraculously act against their own will.

And so, like the disciples, we come to Jesus and say, ‘Lord, teach us to pray!’ Let’s acknowledge at this point that the disciples would have prayed a lot before this point; they were not novices. They’d been raised in a very devout culture, where most people would pray at various points every day – in many Jewish towns and villages, bells would ring to remind them. They would also pray before every meal, and even at points in the night. These were people born into a culture which prayed. And yet, these disciples saw Jesus while he was praying privately one morning and something clearly affected them so deeply that they immediately asked him: ‘Lord teach us to pray.’ In other words: ‘we thought we knew how to pray, but we’ve just seen you doing it and we want to pray like *you* pray!’

This is the introduction to what we now know as the Lord’s Prayer. It’s the most famous prayer in the world, and one we use so often we lose sight of just how radical it is. Before we unpack it, let’s just acknowledge the difference between Matthew and Luke’s version – both agree on the main content, but Matthew adds three phrases: ‘in the heavens’ to the Father, the heavenly recipient of the prayer; ‘your will be done, on earth as in the heavens’ and ‘deliver us from the evil one’. This is actually brilliant evidence of its authenticity. Just like real eyewitnesses will give similar but slightly different accounts of the same event, so the fact that there are slight differences between the two versions gives it the unmistakable aroma of reality – this is a conversation that Jesus actually had, and teaching on prayer that he probably gave numerous times to different audiences.

So, accepting that this is the authentic voice of Jesus, what do we learn?

First, we learn that the heart of prayer is relationship. Jesus teaches us to relate to God as a loving Father, and to call him that. This is the greatest revelation of all, and the most important key to all prayer. The biggest block to prayer is thinking that we're addressing a God who is, say, a petty bureaucrat that needs the form filled in exactly or the request gets denied; or a tyrant, who won't do anything unless his ego has been placated by lots of flattery; or a grumpy old man who'll just say no because he got out of bed the wrong side and he likes being contrary.

No, Jesus insists, this God is a doting parent. Imagine your own relationships with your children, Jesus continues – if they ask for something simple and healthy, you won't give them something bad. In fact, you can push the analogy further – and this is good news for all of us who worry about mixed motives affecting our prayer. We all know that our children are nice to us when they want something. Don't you think God can spot that behaviour a mile off, too? But the point is, we usually give our children what they ask for anyway, even when we know they're being nice to get what they want – how much more, Jesus says, how much more will God give good things to us!

Second, if the heart of prayer is relationship, **the chief activity of prayer is request** – in other words, God wants us to ask for stuff. This is really the main sticking point for the disciples. Their culture has taught them that you can't really approach God like that. God is great and will do whatever he wants – we can adore, and praise, and humble ourselves – but don't whatever you do, *ask* for things. Images of Mr Bumble in Oliver Twist come to mind at this point: 'Please sir can I have some more?' 'More??!'

Extraordinary, then, that the prayer Jesus gives us – the Lord's Prayer – is basically one long list of requests. Yes, we acknowledge the holiness of God's name and the coming of his kingdom – but even then, we *ask* for God's name to be seen as holy, and for his kingdom to come. And then, of course, we get to the personal requests – for daily provision (and the word used here effectively means 'all that we need for today', not just physical sustenance), for forgiveness, and for strength under temptation or testing (the word can mean both).

And you can tell that the disciples are disturbed by this – surely, we can't ask for all this every time we pray? That's far too forward, too recklessly bold! That's the obvious reason why Jesus immediately needs to reassure his disciples that it's OK to ask for things, giving them (and us) two simple illustrations and one direct encouragement. Think of a friend who needs something at an inconvenient hour – even if they don't want to help, they'll respect your boldness and do it anyway. And that's a sleepy friend, not our ever alert and loving divine Parent, who loves to bless his children. So, **ask for things – and Jesus is so keen that we get this point he says it six times:** ask, seek, knock; ask seek, knock... Get the message?

Briefly, as I wrap up, what else do we learn from this amazing prayer? It's short and simple – we don't need long and fancy words. Luke version is 38 words in the Greek and only 34 in English. Even Matthew's extended version is only 57 words. Isn't that a relief?!

It focuses on God first, then ourselves – that's a good guide for us. Even though we don't need to impress or placate God, if we start our prayers with God and who he is, you'll find it much easier to pray.

Finally, we can see these phrases as headings – Matthew's version has Jesus telling us this is 'how' we should pray. So, you can pray the Lord's Prayer verbatim, or you can take each line and add what you need – personalise it. It's not an application form, it's a template – you could even say, it's a canvas.

As I close, let's remember that we're all novices in prayer. Pray as you can, not as you can't. But let's all be inspired again by this amazing, radical prayer. God doesn't make prayer hard – we do. Lord, teach us to pray!