

Aspects of the Lord's Prayer

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church on Sunday, 3rd January 2010, by the Rev'd Pauline Main, based on the **Bible readings:** Romans 12: 9 – 21; Luke 11: 1 - 4

During this Vision4Life prayer year I thought that on communion Sundays we might focus on prayer in different ways. We need to be careful during the year that we don't just talk about prayer, but that we try to develop our prayer lives, as a church and each of us.

The scriptures can guide us –

In the gospels, especially in Luke's gospel, we read several times of Jesus praying – often at significant moments in his life –

- before the start of his ministry
- in Gethsemane
- at times when he feels drained by the constant pressure of giving out to the people

He takes "time out" – he is not afraid to leave everyone behind in order to recharge his batteries through prayer.

Paul, in the reading from his letter to the Romans, about *The Marks of the True Christian*, urges us to persevere in prayer.

The example of the psalmists encourage us to be honest with God. They cry out in pain as well as in praise.

There are plenty of modern books and resources to help us also. One recommendation – *How to Pray – A practical handbook*, by our own John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford. It does what its says on the tin.

We'll start today by looking at the Lord's Prayer and how it can enlighten our own prayer. I've been helped here by some material on the Vision4Life website (www.vision4life.org.uk/) written by Peter Brain, who was at one time national Social Responsibility officer for our URC, and later a Synod Moderator.

This will not be the "final word"! I'm sure we'll return to the Lord's Prayer again.

Background

There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament – the one we heard was the shorter form from Luke's gospel. Another, longer, version in Matthew (Matthew 6: 9 – 15).

Jesus may well have expressed the prayer differently on several occasions – so different versions were passed down, and perhaps used differently in the different Christian communities to which Luke and Matthew related.

We tend to use the longer form in churches – and it can become a “formula” that we say without thinking, which is why it's good to look again sometimes and look in different ways.

But also worth noting that just as in the early church there are all sorts of versions of the Lord's Prayer in use today – in our worship we in this church tend to use the traditional “Our Father which art in heaven” ; our Anglican friends use the modern “Our Father in heaven”.

With the children in mind, we've tried the Lord's Prayer with actions. Using “signing” is a way of sharing in the prayer together, being inclusive.

Also, people reflect, try to express the prayer in their own way. Here's a version done at a children's camp in North India –

*Dearest Father who lives in heaven,
may your name be kept pure.
Let peace reign and everyone be equal on earth as in heaven.
Provide us with our daily needs as well as our spiritual needs.
Please forgive us the things we have done wrong
as we will forget the bad things others have done to us.
Help us not to be tempted to hurt you
and keep Satan away from us.
Because you made the earth and heaven and everything in it
and you are all powerful and we should give you glory
through all eternity.
We all agree with this!*

This is something we could try ourselves – at home, or perhaps during a session in church, or at our church Awayday.

Something we could also follow up sometime is to look at the way the Lord's Prayer is rooted in the Hebrew scriptures which were so familiar to Jesus

*you, O LORD, are our **father**;
our Redeemer from of old is your name. (from Isaiah 63 part of v16)*

Psalm 119 is all about God's will being done
Daily bread echoes God's daily provision of manna in the wilderness ... and so on.

The Lord's Prayer – God our Father

Jesus begins with **God** – Our Father ... hallowed be thy name ... thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.

This is a good model for our own prayer – **to start with God** rather than ourselves and our needs.

It is something we generally do in the structure of our worship – we praise God, we listen to his word, we respond.

So – start with God.

And – in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus addresses God as **Father** – he begins with the assumption that God loves and cares for us.

The Aramaic word is "Abba". Some time ago scholar Joachim Jeremias suggested this was similar to the English "Daddy" – I'm sure we've heard that before. It emphasises the intimacy of our relationship with God.

More recently another scholar, James Barr, has suggested that Abba corresponds rather more closely to "papa" – giving a sense of distance/respect as well as closeness. I like that!

We start with God – who loves and cares for us like a father – we are children of God, not his servants or slaves;
not forgetting God is **holy, other** - one whom we respect – whose name we hallow.

The Lord's Prayer – Praying in solidarity

Elsewhere Jesus tells his followers "whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret" (Matthew 6:6), but the Lord's prayer is full of plurals – Our Father; our daily bread; forgive us OUR trespasses ...

We can see the "us" in the prayer as referring just to "us" – the Christian community, but Peter Brain in his notes feels the "us" is more far-reaching than that –

Though Luke does not have the opening 'Our' to go with 'Father', the whole thrust of the Prayer in both Matthew and Luke is to establish a unity with all in need, all who might be included in the 'our'.

Strangely perhaps in this Prayer there is nothing that we might categorise as 'intercession' ... instead you are invited to pray in solidarity with everyone who can be included under 'we' or 'us'.

*When we pray for 'our' daily bread who can exclude the starving of famine-stricken regions?
To pray for our deliverance from evil must surely include all manner of oppressed people, including prisoners and asylum seekers on every continent.*

In the 'Church of the Pater Noster' in Jerusalem it is moving to find the text of the Lord's prayer in over 60 human languages and dialects. [?more]

Who does not belong within the 'Our'? If you ask where might Jesus draw the line around those to be included in the blessings prayed for, you will soon discover that 'our' and 'we' and 'us' embraces all whom the Father has made and loves.

So – starting with God; praying in solidarity with others, not just our own circle.

The Lord's Prayer – Prayer as covenant

Thirdly, the Lord's Prayer implies a covenant with God, a **relationship** which requires both parties to fulfil their promises.

The essential point of this prayer and all Christian prayer is that God is worthy, worthy of our praise and trust and thankfulness - because God keeps his promises, keeps his side of the covenant.

So our part – obeying his commands – is a response to God's grace, not an attempt to procure God's favour by our good deeds.

So our bread is 'daily' - depending on a continuous relationship with God – like the manna of the wilderness years of the people of Israel.

Jesus says that our forgiveness by God again is two-way – our part is to forgive others – to be fatherly to others as he is to us.

There is nothing in the Lord's Prayer that we might categorise as 'confession'. God is ready to forgive - we do not need to list our faults but only to ask for mercy, like the tax-collector in the Temple.

God knows, God loves, God is merciful, God is great - is the message.

Conclusion

I have only set down a few fundamentals:

- start with God - make thanksgiving the basis of your prayer
- pray in solidarity with others - only pray for yourself what you are willing to pray for others
- trust in God's love and mercy.

That would seem to be at the heart of what Jesus taught about prayer. And as John put it "It is God's only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known".