

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Texts: Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:6-15 and Luke 11:1-13

The assumption that prayer is difficult is one of the greatest impediments to Christian discipleship. But in our gospel this morning, the apostles make exactly that assumption.

They watch Jesus praying, and when he's finished, one of them pipes up: 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'

Lurking behind this request is the idea that there is a special knack to praying: the idea that you need to adopt a particular form or words, or cultivate a particular mental attitude, or even undertake a particular physical discipline, before you can pray properly.

This assumption that prayer is a quite complicated business is deeply rooted in many faithful people, I think. And it is only reinforced by the constant babble of well-meant spiritual instruction that pours out in countless retreat centres around the country. Franciscan spirituality; Celtic spirituality; Ignatian spirituality; Evangelical spirituality; you name it: almost every kind of devotional fashion is catered for somewhere or other.

As a historian, of course, I can only approve when the disciples of today find nourishment in the practice of the Church's past. Ignorance of the Church's history and of her long-established patterns of devotion can only impoverish her life in the present.

Even so, I do worry that, by making prayer the kind of thing you go on a little course for, we are at risk of turning it into an esoteric and complicated activity, which only initiates can really undertake. And there can be no better way of ensuring that people don't pray, than that.

But in our gospel this morning, Jesus makes it clear that prayer is perfectly straightforward. The disciples may have been looking for some recondite spiritual instruction; but Jesus's answer is entirely down to earth.

He has three things to say: pray simply; pray persistently; pray expectantly. Let's deal with each in turn.

First, pray simply. 'When you pray,' Jesus tells us, 'say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

If the disciples were anticipating an elaborate liturgical blueprint, they were sorely disappointed. Jesus confounds their expectations with a prayer that is direct, concise and utterly uncomplicated. Five brief petitions and it's over. How unlike the prolix and tedious intercessions, which are one of the great plagues of modern churchgoing!

Of course, Jesus is not giving his disciples a formula, to be precisely repeated, but an example, to be broadly followed.

It's not that there's anything wrong with using a set form of words. As Anglicans, of course, we have long contended that prayer, which uses a

set form of words, is likely to be rather more thoughtful, and certainly no less heartfelt, than the spontaneous utterances of our Nonconformist brethren. That said, no special sequence of words is ever necessary in prayer, however helpful it might sometimes be for breaking the spiritual ice, as it were, in our conversations with God.

Taking the Lord's Prayer, then, as an example, it does provide some useful guidance about prayer in general.

First, the form of address: 'Father.' To a First Century Jew, that was a scandalously casual way to speak to God. And many devout people today might be more comfortable with something more formal, and for perfectly good reasons. God is infinite in majesty and power, far greater and far more holy than anything in the universe which He has made. So it is fitting for sinful creatures to approach God with awe.

But by inviting us to address God simply as 'Father,' Jesus is encouraging us to participate in his own relationship with the Almighty. As Paul reminded us in our second lesson, God has forgiven 'all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside nailing it to the cross.'

As a result, we now stand beside Jesus, as his brothers and sisters through faith, and we may address his Father as our Father. We can dive, in other words, into the stream of love that flows endlessly between the Father and the Son.

Secondly, then, the balance of Jesus's prayer: two things particularly stand out here. It is a prayer that starts with God's agenda not ours; and it is a prayer that is honest about our own shortcomings.

As we heard, the opening petitions of the prayer are 'Hallowed be your name' and 'Your kingdom come.' The prayer that God's name be hallowed, is a prayer that God's nature be known. It is a prayer that God's boundless goodness and mercy might be recognised by all the creatures who are capable of understanding it, and that they might, in turn, respond with wonder and adoration.

The prayer that God's kingdom may come, is a prayer that God's purposes might be accomplished within the world he has made. It is a prayer that God's just and gentle rule might extend to all people, bringing peace and reconciliation amongst human beings, as well as between human beings and God.

What Jesus is teaching us with these petitions, I think, is that prayer is not primarily the assertion of our own wants and needs, but an attempt to align our wants and needs with God's redemptive purposes. As Christians, we acknowledge that our own preoccupations, no matter how pressing they are, exist in a wider context of God's saving action in the world; and our prayers should reflect that.

The second thing that stands out is the prayer's honesty. Jesus wants us to come to God, not hiding our shortcomings, but confessing them. We are sinners who have been forgiven, but we are still sinners. And we cannot progress as disciples unless we wrestle daily with that fact. That is

why Jesus wants us to come before God confident in His mercy, but not trusting in our own righteousness.

Jesus makes the same point later on in Luke's gospel. 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee was praying thus, "God, I thank you that you are not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." I tell you, this man went down to his home justified, rather than the other.'

So: pray simply. Now, pray persistently.

Jesus underlines the need to keep praying with a story about a man who wakes his friend up late at night. '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.'

It's important not to get the wrong end of the stick here. At first glance, you might assume the story means that, if you keep on praying, God is more likely to change His mind and do what you want. A little reflection will show you why that must be wrong.

First off, God is omniscient, so we cannot present him with any information He wasn't aware of, or suggest a plan which He hadn't considered. Secondly, God is perfectly good and that goodness guides all his actions and all his decisions. So even if we could persuade God to change his mind, we would only be persuading him to do something less

good than He had originally intended, and that wouldn't be desirable at all. Finally, as if all that were not enough, God is eternal, entirely outside time. And since God is outside time, there is no such thing as before or after in Him, as a result, there is no possibility of change.

It follows that the persistence in prayer cannot be about persuading God to do something which He wouldn't otherwise have done. It's rather that repeated conversations with God, enable us to understand his nature and purposes better, and to reconcile ourselves to them.

This can be seen, I think, in our Old Testament reading. Here is a classic example of prayerful persistence. And a casual reading of the story might leave you with the impression that Abraham kept on at God, until God agreed to do what he wanted. That isn't what's going on at all.

As we heard, Abraham gets told of the impending destruction of Sodom, so he intercedes for the people there. 'Far be it for you to slay the righteous with the wicked! Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?' God then answers 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' Abraham keeps praying, and on each occasion, God answers in a similar way, until finally he tells Abraham 'For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.'

Now this might sound as though Abraham has haggled God down to a good bargain. But if you look carefully, there is no suggestion here that God ever changes His mind. Abraham simply expresses the trust that God is just, and God confirms that He is; so just, in fact, that if even a handful of good people can be found in Sodom, the city will not be destroyed.

In other words, the thing that changes in this story is not God's decision, but Abraham's understanding of God's nature. Repeated conversation with God enables Abraham to grasp the full extent of God's justice and mercy, regardless of subsequent events.

And that is precisely why we must be persistent in prayer as well. We should persist in prayer, not for God's benefit, but for our benefit. Prayer brings us into conscious contact with God, and enables us to perceive as Paul puts it 'the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God.'

So, pray persistently. And, finally, pray expectantly.

Jesus concludes his teaching on prayer by telling his disciples to expect a response. 'Is there anyone among you who, if a child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 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.'

So Christians can pray in the confidence that their prayers will be answered.

That answer may take a form that they anticipated, or it may not. The job may be offered, or it may not. The sick relative may recover, or she may not.

But in all cases, prayer strengthens the Holy Spirit's presence within us. It strengthens the Spirit's presence not intrinsically, of course: because once the Spirit begins to dwell in a believer, He never departs. Instead,

prayer strengthens the Spirit's presence, extrinsically, in terms of the gifts which the Spirit has bestowed on us.

In other words, prayer strengthens those precious qualities mentioned in Galatians, 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.' And it does so precisely because, as I have said, prayer is an immersion in the love that flows endlessly between the Father and the Son. And that love is, of course, none other than the Holy Spirit.

So, inspired by the words of Jesus, may we all learn to pray more simply, to pray more persistently, to pray more expectantly. And may we discover through that prayer, the living embrace of the Holy and Undivided Trinity.