

Proclaimed at Bethlehem, Flinders St on 25 March 2020 by Pastor Thomas Pietsch

Introduction

In recent years, sociologists have studied the connection between levels of education and religious commitment. One thing the studies have found is that the better educated, middle class, are more likely to be members of a church, and to come to weekly worship, but they are less likely to pray daily. Conversely, the less educated, the poorer, are not as commonly church members who worship weekly, and yet they are more likely to pray, and to pray daily.

As you are not just attending Sunday worship, but tuning in to a midweek Lenten service, I'm going to assume that you're among the Christian cohort who tend to find it easy to be a member of a church, but perhaps find it harder to pray daily.

And even if that is not the case, we are nevertheless all in need of asking again with the disciples,

"Lord Jesus, teach us pray. Pray with us, pray for us, and pray in us. Amen."

Prayer Today: Matthew 6:5-8

On Ash Wednesday we heard from Matthew 6, the Sermon on the Mount. That text has set the theme for these Wednesday Lenten Service, in which we have been hearing God's Word on different Christian practices: fasting, almsgiving, reconciling, and today we get to the practice of devotional prayer.

This is what Jesus has to say about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount:

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to the Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:5-8)

First, it needs be said that you could be forgiven for mistaking our Lord's instructions on prayer for the latest recommendations from the health authorities as we step further into the corona pandemic.

Practice social distancing, Jesus says, self-isolation by going into your own room, and closing the door, and then petition your heavenly Father when no one is watching. It's not just that we should not consider what other people think, but we should go out of way, be intentional about hiding.

Of course, there are some kinds of prayer that are obviously public. The Scriptures speak of all kinds of prayer: petitioning, confessing, thanksgiving, recollecting and remembering, adoration, meditation, and even worship itself. Prayer isn't only what we do behind a closed door. Our public worship is a time of prayer, of communion and communication between God and us, as well as a time of gathering by the saints.

But as our gathering in the flesh comes to a halt because of the corona virus, perhaps now is the time to hear Jesus' teaching about this different kind of prayer – the kind of prayer for a lockdown, that seeks no reward from other people, but which seeks secret time with God. Indeed, the kind of prayer that Jesus himself engaged in many times when he withdrew from people in order to pray. If perhaps you fall into the group that finds church-going relatively easy, but private prayer relatively difficult, perhaps now is the moment you need. Perhaps now you have been given the very conditions perfect for devotional prayer. Perhaps the coming weeks

and months are a time to be renewed in prayer, a time perhaps when the main way in which we can love our neighbours is through prayer.

Why does Jesus instruct us in this private prayer? We've looked at the negative dimension – that private prayer prevents us seeking rewards from other people, like the hypocrites. But Jesus also alludes to a positive dimension, that such prayer is a secret time between you and your dear heavenly Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit. A time of communication, a time of lament, a time of trust, a time of being in the presence of God, of hearing his Word. A time not just of talking, but a time of listening also.

For in the Sermon on the Mount passage, Jesus warns against too much babbling. For your Father knows what you need before you ask him. We don't have to present our best selves to God, or show off to him, for he already knows our needs and our situations. A friend of mine once showed me his long list of people he prays for every day. How do you get through them all?, I asked. He said he just names them all before God – after all, God knows what they need more than he did. I've learnt from this as a good model of how not to babble.

At essence, prayer is not our work to God but God's Spirit leading us into greater trust and reception of the promises of God. Your Heavenly Father has already drawn near to you, in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. And he knows the number of hairs on your head.

Now just because the Father knows what we need before we ask him, doesn't mean, however, that we should skip prayer altogether. At another time Jesus tells a parable about a persistent widow, to show us that we should always pray and not give up (Luke 19:1-8). What can this look like in our lives?

When to Pray: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

It is here that we can get to some of the practicalities of prayer. In Deuteronomy 6, directly after God has given the 10 commandments to his people, Moses gives us this proclamation:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

When God gives his Word to us, he also here gives with it an instruction to meditate on his Word, to pray his Word throughout the day, including teaching our children to do so. Specifically here the Scriptures mention praying when you lie down, and when you rise, but then also in the day, when you walk by the way or have a moment to sit in your house. Commenting on this passage in the Large Catechism, Martin Luther wrote this:

God solemnly tells us never to give up thinking over his commands, whether we are sitting, walking, standing, lying down, or getting up. We are to keep them in front of us and have them in our grasp as a constant pointer and sign. God certainly doesn't make such a solemn demand for nothing. He knows the danger and trouble that haunts us. He knows the constant raging attacks and temptations of the devils.

Then a little while later Luther goes on to lambast those who think they know better than God, who think that they can get by without meditation on God's Word every day.

So while Christ tells us not to babble, the Scriptures also commend frequent meditation on God's Word, as our daily habit, for the devil is always seeking to tempt us. While there are times for long prayer, and we can see in places like the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus does spend a long time in prayer, long enough for the disciples to go to sleep on him, the Scriptures also highlight the rhythm of a daily devotional life, perhaps especially three times per day.

In Psalm 55, the Psalmist says:

But I call upon God; and the LORD will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he will hear my voice.

So also in the Book of Daniel we hear that Daniel prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10). And then in one of the earliest documents of the early church, called the *Didache*, written around the time of some of the New Testament books, we hear that the early Christians would make a habit of praying the Lord's Prayer three times a day.

That might be good advice to us, too, to pray at least the Lord's Prayer three times a day. If you're not in the habit of this, perhaps you can even set a recurring alarm. So three times a day you'll be reminded to stop, and to remember that you are a child of God, and so talk to God, listen to God, and simply be in his presence.

Teach us to Pray: Luke 11:1-13

Those are some biblical practicalities we do well to heed. But Jesus himself does not give all that much teaching on the practicalities, aside from closing your door. When the disciples ask, in Luke 11 for Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus doesn't give them a list of things to do. There are no seven steps for a healthy prayer life, as if prayer was like jumping through a hoop in order to get to a prize, what the Book of Hebrews sometimes calls a 'dead work' (Hebrews 6:1; 9:14).

Instead, in Luke 11, Jesus gives the disciples his own prayer, the Lord's Prayer. Or to put it even more straightforwardly, Jesus simply prays:

When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.

The Lord's Prayer as we pray it combines this version from Luke, with the version given in Matthew 6, which Jesus gives just after his instructions on praying with your door closed. We also conclude the Lord's Prayer with the doxology: "*For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever, Amen.*" While that is not found in Scripture, it first appears in the early church document I just mentioned, the *Didache*, written around the same time as the New Testament. So there's a long tradition of including it in the Lord's prayer.

There's much to say about the Lord's prayer, but today I just want to note that Jesus doesn't talk about prayer, but rather he prays. He doesn't give a definition of prayer, rather he teaches us how to pray by doing.

In this sermon I've taken our Lord's lead by not giving a definition of prayer, or getting into questions about whether we change God's mind, or how prayer works. All of these are questions from the outside, but prayer is best learnt from the inside. In some ways the whole point of prayer is that it cannot be clearly defined, but rather practiced.

For that reason, I think most of us learnt to pray just by being with people who prayed – perhaps our parents, or other Christians who brought us into the faith. And it's the way we can teach others to pray too, including our children and grandchildren, by just praying with them, by coming into God's presence with them.

In this regard I'm reminded of a thought experiment a wise philosopher once gave. Imagine a child raised in complete captivity, in a prison cell, with no human contact whatsoever. She receives her food through a trap door, and as she grows older, books too. She begins to devour books and becomes especially fascinated with mother-daughter relations, in an effort to make up for the lack in her life. She earns multiple PhDs in psychology and knows everything there is to know about mother-daughter relations. But then one day, she

hears a noise, and her cell door opens, and in walks her mother, and for the first time in their lives, mother and daughter behold each other. In that moment, does something new happen? Of course! But what does happen cannot be written down, else the daughter would already have learnt it. Rather, what they experience is the real presence of someone that teaches what no book-learning can give.

Well so too with prayer. When we are stuck in our homes in coming weeks and months, we are not cut off from God's presence. And as his children who have received his Spirit, Jesus is the one leading us all in prayer, interceding for us before the Father, and calling us all to join him in the presence of God, morning, noon and night.

Teach us to Pray: Luke 11:1-13

How does Christ teach us to pray? By praying with us, and then by giving a parable:

And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. (Luke 11:5-8)

Let me briefly indicate how this teaches us to pray. There are times in life, and perhaps now is a time more than ever, when people come to us with needs that we simply can't meet. Like the friend who has nothing to set before his visitor, there are times when we have nothing to say to people in need, nothing to set before them that will comfort them or help them. Well, it is often in these very times that Jesus is teaching us to pray. At times we can feel as if we can solve all problems, or find a practical solution to everything. And at times like that we can forget prayer. But then there are times when we are reminded of our helplessness, and so are forced again to turn to one who can help.

In this parable, the one who can help is even a bit reluctant but finally gives in due to the impudence of the demand. But how much more will your heavenly Father, who wants to hear your prayers, grant you and your loved ones help when you turn to him for help when you have nothing else to set before others.

And in so doing, by giving you things that you cannot solve, Jesus is teaching you how to pray.

Conclusion

In 1948 CS Lewis wrote a brief essay called 'On Living in an Atomic Age'. Just as we are learning to live with the corona virus, society was then learning to live with the danger and threat of atomic weapons.

Nothing is more likely to destroy a species or a nation than a determination to survive at all costs. Those who care for something else more than civilization are the only people by whom civilization is at all likely to be preserved. Those who want Heaven most have served Earth best. Those who love Man less than God do most for Man.

In our quiet rooms, we too can serve earth best by seeking our Heavenly Father, by praying for ourselves and the world, by coming into the gracious presence of Christ and boldly relying on him who has already suffered all things for us, won the victory, and is now interceding to the Father with us and for us. You might have found private prayer difficult in the past. May God now lead you by His Spirit into cherishing this great gift, and so grow in thanksgiving to God, and confidence that Christ has all things in his hands (John 3:35).

At the conclusion of many sermons we hear from Philippians 4. Let me conclude with that verse, and with the verse earlier, too: *Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. (Philippians 4:6-7)*