

One of the great privileges I've had, and one of the greatest responsibilities, is to have been a member of the Church of England's Liturgical Commission. It was our job to write the prayers said by those who use *Common Worship*: using the complex processes of the C of E every service 'in the book' was renewed and refreshed, and some new ones were created too. It felt like we were trying to answer the question 'how should we pray?' over and over and over again for the church in our generation. And all liturgists know that we are inheriting what we've received and passing it on. It is Jesus who first answers the question we should ask every day: please will you teach us to pray? That's the substance of our Gospel reading today.

The crucial thing that Jesus makes praying simple rather than complex (that's not to say it's easy...that's different). Time and again Jesus contrasts the way others pray with how he wants us to speak to God. The Pharisees pray by getting dressed up and engaging in ostentatious displays of piety. 'Don't', says Jesus. Go where you feel secure, and talk to your Father. The Gentiles - those of other faiths in Jesus's day 'heap up empty words' in long and elaborate liturgies. 'Don't', says Jesus. Start simply, and where you are. John the Baptist established a pattern of prayer, said Jesus's disciples. What's yours? 'Well', says Jesus. 'Here's a pattern for you'.

Firstly: pray! Jesus says 'when you pray'. Not 'if'. I generally assume that most people pray. At baptisms I encourage people to pray for the little ones being baptised by saying 'when you say your prayers. I loved hearing on the radio this week of a lady born Jewish, and in the devastation and disruption of wartime Paris raised in a Roman Catholic household. She had good reason to doubt, and to be religiously confused. 'Of course I pray', she said. 'It's just that I begin: "to whom it may concern".' To pray is to acknowledge that there is more to us and the world than we can see or even imagine, and that we can connect with that which is beyond us. Just pray.

Secondly: talk to God as Father. Not just the intimacy of 'daddy', but as your beginning, your security, your reason for being, your example, your leader, and your friend. Start with God, and remind yourself of what you owe to God: your worship, your honour. Remind God that you know that it is his way of doing things which is important, that you are about his work not yours. 'Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done'. This isn't complicated, but neither is it simplistic. If we start by asking for stuff for ourselves we start in the wrong place. Starting with God opens us up to begin to fathom the depths of the divine, but we don't need the theological brain of Rowan Williams to do it. The amazing thing about prayer is that God invites us to do it. There is no theological exam. Start with God. Remind yourself of what you know about God, and what you know God wants from you. Then see what happens.

Only then do we ask. We ask for the necessities of life and for the necessities of eternal life: for the food of the world, the food of the Kingdom, for forgiveness, and for preservation from the ultimate trial. Only with God's help will we gain eternal life, for by ourselves we fail. With God we triumph. And, in praying for these things, we automatically sign up to demonstrating them in our daily lives. Given bread we must seek bread, give bread for those who have none. Offered forgiveness we must forgive those who wrong us. Spared the final judgement we must offer that hope to others.

See? It's not complicated – though of course it's not easy. Start with God. Seek life. Share life. That's all prayer is. In that sense we pray constantly when we share the Kingdom of God with others, when we work for justice, when we speak God's word, when we serve God's church. Our whole life is prayer when you think of it that way. It doesn't all have to be on our (metaphorical) knees. Some people are called to that, and they are awesome. Most of us are called to enact our prayer in the white heat, the blazing furnace, of daily life, and it's just as tough. It's about orientating our life to be shaped as God would have it.

But in case that's a bit mystical, Luke the Evangelist gives us some down to earth hints as to what to do. Simply: **ask!** Don't be so humble as not to ask for things you want. By praying for them and by putting God first you may well learn that what you want is not what you need, but God wants you to have the conversation. And **don't give up**. If you bang on your neighbour's door long enough you'll get an answer, Jesus says. Ask God. And ask again. It's good that the prayer of the friend at midnight is indeed for someone else's benefit, but the point is about persistence. Keep praying. God wants us to pray, to have the conversation. How will you know what you want to find unless you look for it? You will receive an answer, Jesus says. It may not be what you asked for, but remember that God is the best of father's. He gives fish not snakes, eggs not scorpions. You can ask!

The thing about patterns of prayer, shapes of prayer, styles of prayer, is not that they do the praying for us. It's that they help us to pray. So if a pattern of prayer doesn't work for you, try another. What we do should always put us and God in the same room, enable us to know to whom we are talking, and help us to ask in such a way that we receive an answer. I have to say that, for me, praying on my own is a disaster. A silent solitary retreat is torture. But praying with others is brilliant. Going away together is profound. Using a pattern of prayer which others have crafted – like the morning and evening prayer we use here at 8.15 and 5.00 most days is just right for me. But it's not the only way.

It all depends how keen you are to do it. On the move, in the car (not with your eyes closed), with others, on your own, to music, in silence, on the internet, kneeling, standing, it should be the heartbeat of your life, not the loose change in your pocket. Ask. Speak. And discover how much God delights in giving good things to those who ask him.