

Lent Sermon Series 2014

1st Sunday in Lent, 9th March

St Mary's Kidlington, 10am

Revd Andrew Allen on *What are we doing when we pray?*

One evening young Sarah asked her father for a pet horse. 'Sorry,' said her father, 'not now. But if you pray really hard for two months, perhaps God will send you a baby brother.' So Sarah prayed for a month, but it seemed futile so gave up. However, a month later a new baby arrived - or so she thought. Her father brought her into their bedroom and showed Sarah - twins. 'Aren't you glad you prayed for a baby brother?' asked her father. 'I certainly am,' said Sarah 'and aren't you glad I stopped praying when I did!'

Sometimes prayer can be confusing: not just when we don't get what we ask for: but what are we doing when we pray? Are we trying to convince the omnipotent God to grant us what we think we want? Are we just going through the rhythms of praying because that's what our parents taught us so many years ago? We laugh at the thoughts of Sarah, but, how often do we do this ourselves? We hope and hope and hope that by praying lots someone will get better or life will change.

Prayer is what Christians do. I used to live in a smallish village in the Chilterns. A child at the school got ill and died: it was very sad and tragic, especially in a small community. Members of the Church asked what they could do to help, and others, non-church goers asked for prayer, because, as they said 'well, that's what Christians do.' We hear again and again that this is our calling – our churches should be a house of prayer for all nations. Ordination vows include daily prayer developing a life sustained by prayer. Yet what are we doing when we pray?

John Calvin wrote that prayer is a perpetual exercise of faith ¹ : perpetual because we are constantly in conversation with God, and an act of faith because we 're not face to face to God, nor do we expect an email or letter in reply; prayer is as much about discerning God's will for us as it is petitioning God.

One area I'm not going to talk about other than mentioning now is how prayer builds community and fellowship – praying together in groups, as a congregation – one of the things we're doing when we pray is that. But I want to focus more on the person praying is doing when she's praying.

I was talking to a colleague about this sermon and his response was that by praying we're forming a relationship with God. Yet the relationship with God is formed much earlier : God's love for us is from before time In Romans Paul writes of the fall as needing to happen so that we can be reconciled with God. He writes 'Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all². And this relationship, formed and bonded by the death and resurrection of Christ isn't like any other relationship. We're humans. God is not. We're not equals, but we are beloved and known by God, and this means that God wants to talk with us, God is communicating with us all the time, and prayer is how we response to this.

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Book III, Chapter 20 Institutes
Romans 5.18

So prayer is the conversation between us and the Triune God. Yet being in this relationship isn't just about asking for things, and praying isn't about trying to convince God to do the things we want to do – otherwise God wouldn't be God, and instead would be some kind of puppet God that we have created. Thomas Aquinas, writing sometime in the 1260s said that ' We do not pray to sway God, we pray in order to change ourselves so as to receive properly what God has willed to give to us.'³ In other words, praying is a way of us realigning ourselves to receive God into our lives, and prayer itself changes from a long shopping list of things we want – like good weather, or rain, or job security, or a sick friend to be made well again – and it changes from this and becomes a source of spiritual strength because it helps us better cope with the way things go in the world.

It's like a spiritual therapy, a meditation on what's troubling us, allowing us to begin to process that. This therapeutic aspect of prayer is important in reinforcing the relationship that we have with God. We're told in the gospels that God knows what is worrying us even before we've formed that very thought in our minds. Again Aquinas sheds some light on this when he writes that ' we must pray, not in order to inform God of our needs and desires, but to remind ourselves that in these matters we need God's help and guidance'⁴ – not as we necessarily want, but as God has ordained for us.

But I think it is also important to recognise that life doesn't always go the way we want, and that life can be pretty awful. And if we are truly in a communicative relationship – a conversation with God – that means we need to bring the bleak and dark stuff to God too. Throughout the OT – the tradition of Lament – 'out of the deep do I cry unto thee, o Lord, O Lord, hear my cry'⁵ Ghandi said that prayer is not asking, it is a longing of the soul, it is a daily admission of one's weaknesses and anxieties. So, when we pray we must be honest with God. We mustn't side step issues that are wearing us down – we should resurrect this ancient tradition and lament – maybe not with sack and ash cloth - but we shouldn't hide our anxieties and protests from God.

So far I've talked about what we do when we're praying - and it's been very active – communicating, meditating, lamenting. But we need to remember too that much of prayer is listening.

Hans Urs von Balthasar who, apart from having a splendid name, was a Swiss theologian and Catholic priest, who died in 1988. He wrote a wonderful book on Prayer, which in itself is a form of prayer and not an academic treatise. In it he writes 'prayer is communication, in which God's word has the initiative and we are simply listeners'⁶. For prayer to be more than just an external act performed because we feel we ought we need to be able to reduce the noise and sounds of our lives so that we can hear God speaking to us.

And that's hard because we so often like to be in control – control is evident in today's readings – from the eating of the apple to Jesus' temptations. But listening to, and discerning God is just as important a thing to do when we pray as is lamenting or meditating or speaking.

3 Appendix 3 to Blackfrair's Edition, Vol 39 of Summa Theologia
4 ibid
5 Psalm 130
6 von Balthasar, Prayer, 1961 London SPCK

This has been a more abstract sermon than perhaps I'd like – there aren't many images to remember or think about. But I'd like to end by sharing with you a poem by the Welsh priest-poet R.S. Thomas.

Prayers like gravel
flung at the sky's
window, hoping to attract
the loved one's
attention. But without
visible plait to let
down for the believer
to climb up,
to what purpose open
that casement?
I would have refrained long since
But that peering once
Through my locked fingers
I thought that I detected
the movement of a curtain.⁷

Prayer can be like gravel – we pick up whatever we find/ think of and throw it up to god to get his attention – hoping maybe for a miracle, hoping for something to happen to us. Almost hoping for a direct line of intervention – the plait let down, like Rapunzel from the tower, and when we don't get an immediate response we think of giving up, But yet, yet we often still persevere with prayer because it is through endurance that we build character and grow in faith and in hope – and we then do get a response and do feel that the communication and developing of the relationship and fellowship we have with God.

Prayer and a relationship with God are impossible without each other – we all have entered into a relationship with God = one that began on Good Friday when Christ died for the sins of the world. God came to earth as a human – the Word made flesh – Jesus Christ is the ultimate communication between God and us. When we pray we are sustaining this relationship – with our struggles and delights, our feelings of insecurity and of not knowing whether our prayers can be answered; we're exposing ourselves to the mercy of God and by doing so reuniting ourselves with our loving creator. That's what I think we're doing when we pray.