

**Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer**  
Prof John Morris, Sunday 22nd March

4. *Guidance on how to pray.*

Psalms 31 & 91; Chapter 1; Collects 2,4,6

In our Lent Compline this Mothering Sunday, we continue thinking about prayer. In the past three weeks we thought about prayers of penitence; prayer for God to show his power; and prayer for personal salvation. Today I'd like us to think about what guidance we have on *how* to pray (and, by implication, how *not* to pray). I'm going to leave The Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught his disciples, until next week, because that demands a session - indeed a lifetime - on its own. I'm also going to leave, for now, the instruction in the Sermon on the Mount to "Pray for those who persecute you", which is a very difficult 'ask'. I therefore plan to devote a whole compline talk to that. There are two occasions of prayer that we need to consider. There is our private prayer - our time talking to God one-on-one. Then there is prayer in public - prayer in our church services, when we either say together or listen to prayers written by others, and that's linked with public witness as prayer.

Let's start with public prayers. It's really important that we get this right, not just for ourselves but especially for those who have come to church to find out if what we believe and do seems right for them. Prayer is a very public face of the church and, if we are to be an evangelising church, it is critical that we get this right. As this year's Lent Course booklet ('Pilgrim') puts it "The church in every generation shares in the task of helping others to hear Christ's call to them and to follow him". One thing is certain, there is no one "right way" to do public prayers although there are things we should avoid. We have printed prayers in our service sheets and spoken prayers in our intercessions. We give thanks for all the thought that goes into their preparation week by week, keeping the services fresh and focussing us on particular needs and concerns for others. Those of us who lead intercessions always need to be conscious of Jesus's condemnation of "those who love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogue .. for everyone to see" - it is the words of the prayers that must be the focus. We should, however, pray for guidance and courage when we speak with others about our faith; Paul urges us "Give yourself wholly to prayer in the power of the spirit .. who comes to the aid of our weakness". A little later, we shall all be saying together the well-known and much-loved prayers of our Compline service which have inspired generations.

If we turn now to personal prayer; in the OT we find mostly the prayers of spiritual leaders or kings. In the book of Samuel, the Israelites who had reverted to the worship of Baal and were in fear of Ammonite raids ask Samuel to pray to God to save them. Samuel's answer is instructive: "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord and cease to pray for you." Samuel is not praying for his own safety, but makes the important point that it would be *a sin to cease to pray for others*. Prayers in the Psalms are mostly either for salvation (which we considered last week) or prayers of praise (which we'll consider on Palm Sunday). The Samuel passage also suggests that prayers of particularly holy people are most likely to be effective - in other words, that God listens more to holy people, to 'good' people. That needs a bit of unpacking! In the gospels, Jesus makes the opposite quite clear. It is not that God listens less to sinners, but it is we who, by the sins to which we are prone (particularly those of selfishness), distance ourselves from communication with God.

What does the NT advise us about personal prayer? It is literally teeming with instructions. First, let's look at what must we *avoid* in our prayers.

- While prayers for our salvation are perfectly natural, prayer is not just for emergency use! It is not an Aladdin's lamp for getting what we want although, as is obvious in the Lord's prayer, we can and should ask for what we *need*. Discerning between what we *want* and what we *need* takes careful, prayerful contemplation. I guess we have all been rather shocked at the way supermarket shelves have been emptied by panic buying in the present crisis.

- We must avoid prayers becoming self-centred, except to the extent that we pray that God's will be done in and through our lives. For that we should rightly pray for wisdom, council and direction.
- We are told "Do not go babbling on like those who imagine the more they say the more likely they are to be heard. Your Father knows your needs before you ask him." Notice the importance of the second part of this - it is only prayers for our own needs that we do not need to keep reiterating.

So how should we pray, and for what should we pray? For Jesus, prayer time with his heavenly father was clearly a critical resource - and it should and can be for us all. Christ often drew apart to pray, to draw on the resources of God through prayer.

- "When you pray, go into a room by yourself and shut the door". That does not mean that we should not pray with others - indeed praying communally can often alert us to concerns for others for which we should continue praying and, indeed on which we should act. What it does mean is that it is crucial that we devote some time each day to separate ourselves from all other distractions, so that we can really concentrate on our prayer. (Something I am very bad at!).
- Pray particularly when you need the strength of the holy spirit. At critical points in his ministry, Jesus led by example on this: at the start of his ministry, before choosing his disciples "he spent the night in prayer to God"; before the feeding of the 5000 "Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven"; just two of many examples.
- "Keep on praying and never lose heart". Jesus illustrated this with the parable of the unjust judge badgered by a poor widow, and the parable of the man who had gone to bed when a visitor knocked on his door and asked for his help.
- We should pray for forgiveness for our many lapses. At the start of Compline almost the first prayer is for forgiveness. "We confess to God almighty .. that we have sinned .. : therefore we pray God to forgive us our sins". Jesus condemns the self-righteous Pharisee, but commends the sinner whose humble prayer is simply "God be merciful to me, a sinner".
- However, before we ask for forgiveness for our own sins, we are told we must forgive anyone against whom we have a grievance. Jesus makes it clear that God will not forgive us unless we forgive others.
- "Pray for everything with thanksgiving". Most of us have been richly blessed in our lives; certainly more so than millions around the world for whom we should pray.
- While we have so much to be thankful for, we also have real needs. Our prayer should therefore acknowledge our needs, the inadequacy of our own resources, and God's ability to give us what we need via the Holy Spirit.
- Paul ends his epistles by asking for God's grace, love, and faith among believers. We, too, should pray for strength and God's grace for our current lives.
- Finally, in prayer we should spend less time talking and more time *listening* to allow that 'still, small voice' of God to speak to us.

Our prayers, then, need to be a means of intimate fellowship with, and dependence on God, for every day living, moment by moment. They are a way in which we can claim God's promises and know his will for us. When Jesus knew that his crucifixion was imminent he prayed to God for his disciples "That they may be one, as we are one". The ultimate purpose of our prayers is that we, too, may be caught up in that mystical body of all believers who, through faith, become one in Christ Jesus.