

Reading:

Matthew 6: 7-13

Prayer

The theme of today's service is prayer. That's why I chose a passage from Matthew's gospel in which Jesus teaches us some important things about prayer and gives us the prayer we have come to know as the Lord's Prayer.

The first thing Jesus tells us is that to be ready to pray, to be ready to meet with God, we need to be quiet and away from the hustle and bustle of the world. Even if we can't find silence and solitude we need to quieten our minds and turn them away from the world and towards God.

Then he gives us his prayer – the one prayer we need if we can't think of anything else and which brings us together as a family in his name. It's too familiar – we dash it off without a thought, we can say it on autopilot and lose its meaning. Let's look at it and see what it says. First, it begins by putting God right at the top of the agenda. We acknowledge God's place as Lord of all, and we put his will before our own. And we look for the coming of the kingdom. In another place in the gospels Jesus tells us to seek God's kingdom as our first priority, and everything else will follow. That's what the Lord's Prayer says as well. It's only then that we can turn our thoughts to what we need for today – and it is just for today. Jesus tells us not to worry about tomorrow – just ask for today's needs – that's all we really need. And then we must work to get our relationships in good order – forgiving those who have hurt us, or who are in debt to us, so that we in turn can experience the forgiveness that God gives us.

Jesus goes on in the following verses to tell us to be persistent in prayer. Don't give up just because you didn't get an immediate response. God always answers our prayers, but it may take time – we may feel that we are being ignored, but there is always an answer – even if it is no. There are a couple of places in the gospels where Jesus seems to be promising that if we pray God will give us whatever we ask for – but that is not what Jesus meant. He was talking about God giving us the Holy Spirit – and he will always give us the Spirit if that is what we truly want. God will give us what we ask for if it accords with his will for us, and the more we get to know him through prayer, the more likely we are to be asking for the kind of things that God would want to give us.

That's a summary of what Jesus teaches us but what do we read in the gospel accounts of Jesus praying himself? There are many references to Jesus praying and we can learn from them. First of all, he prayed often. We read in a number of places that first thing in the morning he would go off to a quiet place on his own and spend time with his Father. We know he prayed at times of need – for example in the Garden of Gethsemane, begging, pleading with his Father to find another way rather than the cross, but then quietly accepting the Father's will. He prayed before the miracles of feeding the multitudes – in all the gospel accounts of those events we read that before distributing the bread and fish, he gave thanks. And we can be sure he prayed before healing people, for example in Mark 9, he heals an epileptic boy who the disciples had been unable to help. When they asked him why they hadn't seen able to heal the boy Jesus told them that that kind of healing could only happen by prayer.

Now, in the Acts of the Apostles, which tells us about the early days of the church – and could just as easily be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit – we read that in everything the Apostles did they sought the guidance of the Spirit. Whether it was replacing Judas or appointing deacons to assist in the pastoral

work, or sorting out where to take the gospel message and who was to go – in everything they prayed for guidance and were led by the Spirit.

So what does all this tell us? Firstly, we must pray in every situation. There is no part of our lives that is not of interest and concern to God. Prayer deepens our relationship with God. It helps us to experience his presence with us in all we do. When we are a bit lost and not sure of the way ahead it can change our perspective on things and help us to see life from God's perspective.

How should we pray? There is no one right way. If someone tells you this is the way, then remember that whatever they say – it may be the right way for them but it may not be right for you. Find your own way of praying, wherever you feel comfortable and can feel God's presence. Use whatever helps – music, silence, doing something creative, walking in the country. And it doesn't always have to be in words.

Remember – God is not a slot machine – you put in the prayers and out come the answers. He is not a fixed odds betting terminal that will only pay out on odd occasions once you have invested a great deal of time and effort. God does not promise to give us whatever we ask just like that. No new car, new job, new house just because that's what we fancy. God gives us what we need.

The answer may be delayed, it may be no. But there will always be an answer.

Be honest in your praying. If you prayed for something to happen, like healing for someone you love and it didn't happen, then maybe you are feeling let down, angry even. Be honest with God, tell him how you feel. After all, he already knows. If he is going to help us move on from our sense of being let down we have to be honest.

And that brings us to the hardest part – which is to listen as well as to speak. If we just batter God with our words we will never hear him speak to us. We need to practice the habit of being silent before God so he can speak to us.

Remember this as well – it's not all down to us. We are prayed for. Paul tells us in Romans 8 that the Spirit intercedes for us when we don't know what to say. So when words fail us and all we can say is Oh God! then remember that the Spirit prays for us, knowing our deepest needs and placing them before God. Paul also tells us that Christ Jesus himself who is at the right hand of the Father intercedes for us. Remember we are prayed for, even in our darkest moments when we don't know how to begin, we are prayed for.

And we can encourage one another by sharing our experiences of prayer, the answers we've had and the way we have felt God at work in our lives. It's something we can all do.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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