

## Sunday 25 July: Eighth Sunday after Trinity

### Lord, teach us to pray

**Readings: Colossians 2.6-15; Luke 11.1-13**

“Lord. Teach us to pray.” (Luke. 11.1)

The key spiritual disciplines for Christians are few but vital. My own account of them would be to read the Bible, do good (by acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God), and pray regularly.

We are all diffident about our ability to pray. I do not know anyone who thinks they are good at it but I know people who *others* recognise as good at it, and I know places that are holy because of people’s long-term commitment to pray there. That’s one of the functions of a church for the parish around it. This is a place which in T S Eliot’s phrase has been ‘made valid by prayer’ and often it is easier to pray when joining in with others often when a few people have gathered or in a place which is prayed in regularly. Perhaps that’s why the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew’s Gospel and as we use it in church begins, “Our Father”, not just “Father” as in Luke, and definitely not “My Father”?

Jesus’s disciples seemed to think they weren’t much good at prayer either. One of his disciples said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray”. What follows is simple and direct.

“Father, hallowed be your name.”

This is a familial relationship in which God is known as Father whose name is holy, set apart. Some of us were struck at the Parish Awayday, 2 weeks ago, by Bishop Peter Selby’s very simple, “The Bible is the only book I read almost every day. It shapes me and has helped to form my character.” Here is the Word of God, singular Word not words, so personal and Godly, living and active, sharp and incisive. Read the Bible regularly, often enough for you to enter deeply into it and for it to enter deeply into you.

Prayer is similar: a simple way of consciously placing ourselves in the presence of God. It’s not that God is absent when we do not pray, but that prayer acknowledges and makes the relationship. Being with the holy, we become holy. We want to be saints, people called to be holy and fully alive to the presence of God in this glorious creation for which we give thanks.

“Your kingdom come”

What we want is a society in which our relationships with God and one another are healed and we live at peace and in love. It’s a simple longing, not optimism but hope. It won’t come just because we want it, though having the appetite for the kingdom of God will help us in our own lives. It will come because the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has already done this once and for all. As in the expanded version in Matthew’s Gospel and which we use in church, what we pray for is for God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

“Give us each day our daily bread.”

This prayer is not other worldly but material. We need to be fed, and if *we* do, so does everyone else. Ask for what you want and for what you need. The two may become the same. As in the parable of the loaves and fishes, when the resources seem meagre and unpromising for the 5,000

who have gone outside the town to hear the Lord, a small boy comes forward and releases the blessing and generosity of God that there is more than enough to go round. Live in joyful generous thanksgiving and there will be enough bread daily.

Or the story told to explain this phrase right after the prayer where the friend and neighbour bangs on the door late at night asking for bread. It's an inconvenience and is bothersome but in the end the householder gets up and gives him what he wants because of the persistence of the person asking.

“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.”

At the heart of Jesus's teaching about the restoration of relationships is forgiveness. It is the only way to get things going again. It's clear that Jesus disliked self-righteousness. It is a characteristic that leaves us too well defended to allow the love of God and the humanity of other people to enter in to us. I know it for myself. Be honest about our own needs, accept forgiveness and it opens the heart.

I've used this example before but in the corner behind me is a memorial to the Far Eastern Prisoners of War. Those of their comrades who are still alive are now in their 90's. They tell of how difficult they found it to forgive the Japanese who gave them hell in the Second World War. In the 1960's some of them began to realise that by not forgiving, the only people they were hurting was themselves. When I began to get to know them in the late 1990's, it was still a lively debate.

Starting with ourselves and our own need of forgiveness is the only way in which we can restore good relationships with each other.

This is one of those Sundays when I wish you had the text of the readings in front of you as they are so powerful and quite complex to hold on to from their public reading, especially the passage from Colossians. There's a ringing proclamation of our sins being nailed to the cross and of our being brought to new life in Christ through God's forgiveness.

Jesus said, 'the person who has been forgiven much is the person who loves much'.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

We are right to be nervous of God's judgement because by ourselves we will not be up to it, save only by being in Jesus Christ, rooted and built up in him.

This is by no means the whole of Jesus's teaching about prayer but it is the heart of it and gives us a pattern of prayer that we can use daily, repeatedly. There's nothing here about technique. The Lord's Prayer is about relationship and desire. What do we want for ourselves and for one another?

But there are things we can do in the way we pray that many people find helpful.

Be conscious about prayer and attentive to God. A glancing nod in the direction of God is often helpful in a busy day but it's not the basis of a sustaining relationship. Make time to pray. Establish a pattern of prayer. Each morning, give thanks for the gift of the new day. At the end, review the day and ask God to bless the people you have been with. And be attentive – it often helps to be upright, with a straight back, feet on the floor, and breathe God in and out as you still yourself in God's presence.

Music helps many of us, too, and I want to end this sermon by saying something about music and prayer because it's one of the things St Martin's is known for.

On Thursday at Morning Prayer the OT reading was from 1 Samuel 16. The spirit of God had departed from Saul and an evil spirit tormented him. Saul's servants said that what he needed was a skilful musician who could play the lyre well. One of the young servants said he knew just the man, David the son of Jesse a Bethlehemite. "He is skilful in playing, a man of valour, a warrior, prudent in speech and a man of good presence." It is a lovely story of David leaving the sheep and entering Saul's service and Saul loved him greatly, making him his armour bearer. David took the lyre and played it and Saul felt better and was relieved and the evil spirit would depart him.

This church knows a lot about the healing of music – baroque by candlelight soothing the souls of the weary in the heart of the city; music therapy lifting the spirits of homeless people thrilled to do something beautiful and express their feelings; as well as the music of liturgy and worship. We also know about music that challenges us and takes us to new ground. Some of the contemporary music sung by the choir in the last year works like the east window on us in a historic setting extending a tradition which still lives.

Three weeks ago David Fanshawe died suddenly aged 68. He was an energetic, eccentric, life-force of a man, a composer and explorer best known for his African Sanctus in which he mixed the traditions of his Church of England choral upbringing with the sounds of Africa, combining the Kyrie, Lord have mercy with the call to prayer of the muezzin. We performed it in a broadcast on Ascension Day a few years ago and David was here just a few weeks before he died performing it as a concert. In some ways it already feels dated and a bit safe but it did what has to be done in every generation, exploring how the Christian tradition lives in the present and not just the past.

The Lord's Prayer from the African Sanctus is more St George's Chapel Windsor than Southern Sudan, but it's a lovely way to end a sermon on prayer before the August choir holiday, establishing a good and soothing spirit that takes us on to new ground and is open to God's future.

Let us pray.

Choir The Lord's Prayer from David Fanshawe's African Sanctus