



A reflection for Sunday 24th May
7th Sunday of Easter



‘Our Father’

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+17%3A1-11&version=NRSV>

Prayer fundamentally is communing (communicating) with God and allowing God to commune with us. It is far too important to allow worries to hold us back - imagine having someone you loved dearly and who loved you even more. But you never spoke to them and you never allowed them to speak to you because you were so worried about what to say and when to say it or how to say it. That would be sad and damaging too. Eventually the relationship would suffer and would have no chance to grow. Our relationship with God is in many ways just like our other relationships; it needs time, it needs effort and it needs love. But it does not need to be ‘formal’ (though of course it can be) or ‘correct’ or proper. It has only to be real. God is interested in our heart, not our praying technique.

People often ask about how to pray. Perhaps they feel there ought to be a correct posture for example. Should they stand, or sit or kneel? What are the preferred words? Is there a ‘best’ time - morning, noon, or night? Is it ok if they only pray in times of need? Or is that hypocritical? And committed people of faith who pray a lot still often chastise themselves for not doing it so well as they see it. They get distracted, caught up in the busyness of their life. Or they feel they use too many words, or not enough. Or they feel they have neglected it too long. It can feel mechanical.

In the Bible we learn that Jesus prayed a great deal. We can watch him at prayer. And that seems a good place to start. That sense of intimacy and belonging in God’s loving presence that is nurtured by and through prayer was there throughout his ministry: he prayed at his baptism and ‘the heavens’ opened’ as he did so; he prayed before miracles, he prayed when he needed time to be apart from the crowds that seemed to follow him everywhere; he prayed before choosing his disciples, he prayed the night before he died and, again, on the cross; he prayed before the raising of Lazarus and when he sat and broke bread with the disciples after the Emmaus journey. And he prayed in different ways, in the Temple, on the road, alone, with others, for others, for himself.

In this Sunday’s reading, we watch Jesus at prayer, which is quite something. First of all he prays to be glorified, that his identity in and with the Father be fully revealed. This ultimate unity of God the Father and God the Son resonates throughout the Gospel of John especially. Equally Jesus often reminds us, his followers, that, through him, we too are intrinsically one with God. Just as the branches of a vine will bear fruit if they remained connected to the root, so we too depend upon Jesus and we bear fruit when we remain connected to the Father through him. Jesus says: ‘I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing’. And in the famous John 14 passage, he says, ‘If you have seen me you have seen the Father’.

On one occasion Jesus was at prayer and a disciple, no doubt watching from a distance, asked him to teach them – and., by extension, us - how to pray.

Jesus responded by teaching the Lord's Prayer.

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.*

In his commentary on The Lord's Prayer, Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, once said: 'if somebody said, give me a summary of Christian faith in the back of an envelope, the best thing to do would be to write Our Lord's Prayer'. He went on to unpack for us its central message, that we are set free to live because we are rooted in a child-like dependence on God, a dependence encapsulated in the first line – 'Our Father'. Some Christians are understandable put off by the patriarchal nature of the term Father in this context and the inference, for some, that God is therefore male. But if we can get over that, if we see the phrase as simply encouraging a child-like confidence in God, then, as Williams put it, that confidence sets us free. 'We know that there is a relationship that nothing can break'. We live, said Williams, 'in a vulnerable world of doubt and uncertainty, where evil seems to be at play', and he goes on, 'To stand with dignity and freedom in a world like that, we need to know that God is Our Father. We need to know that whatever happens to us God is God, God's name and presence and power and word are holy and wonderful and that that glorious God has made us members of his family in a very intimate and direct way'. The two simple words Our Father is the anchor that holds us in every storm. If we pray no more than that, we pray enough.

IN this Sunday's reading, Jesus also prays for his followers. To pray for others is such a loving and powerful thing to do – and to know that others are praying for you. If someone says they are praying for me, I don't need to ask how they are doing it – sitting down, standing up, with this or that set of words. I only need to know that they care enough to do so, care enough to anchor me and my hopes and fears in God.

Prayer is essentially communicating with God and building a relationship with him that, through that relationship, we who pray and those whom we pray for, might know ourselves to be loved as we are, and yet aware of all we could be. It is that simple and that profound.

So when you are asked or are asking what to pray about – remember that God loves us and knows us. We can pray to say thank you, to say please, to say sorry or to share with God some of the joys and challenges of our day. We might want to pray for others, for the world. We might have nothing to say, but just want to come alongside God in a more conscious way. We might just want to listen! Prayer doesn't always need words.

And there are so many ways to pray and it is all about finding what helps us spiritually and makes us feel best connected to God. We can stand, sit or kneel. We can pray alone or with others, say familiar words such as The Lord's Prayer or the Jesus prayer, or use our own words, or a bit of both! We can sit in silence, light a candle, meditate on a passage from scripture or listen to the birds in the garden. It's all good.

Finally, we need to be honest in prayer. God is our Heavenly Father and knows us better than we can hope to know ourselves anyway and we are already anchored in his love come what may. Prayer helps us to remember that.

AMEN