

CORE TASK - PRAYER
LUKE 11:1-13

"I wish I could..." Do you ever find yourself thinking that? I do it often. At the Book Festival a few years ago, I was listening to Garrison Keillor, an American writer and radio broadcaster, standing in front of his audience for 50 minutes telling stories and having the audience in the palm of his hand without a note and I find myself thinking "I wish I could communicate like that" Or watching Lionel Messi ghost past three defenders as if they weren't there and scoring the most magnificent goal to win the Champions League and I still find myself thinking "I wish I could..." Or at the Open Golf Championship and watching any one of a number of players, as they hit the ball 300 yards down the middle of the fairway and then later hole a 10-foot putt with consummate ease and I find myself thinking "I wish I could..." Or anyone who can play the piano with skill and ease and as someone who struggled with piano lessons for years as a child I find myself thinking "I wish I could..." I don't think this is envy of any kind; you may want to tell me otherwise; I admire skills that other people have and somehow aspire to be able to do what they do so well and effortlessly! It's what skilful people do; they inspire us to want to be able to do what they can do.

"I wish I could..." is place with which our Bible reading begins today and the place where we begin to consider what prayer is all about. Jesus had been praying and the disciples were obviously there, listening and watching. Afterwards, one of the disciples said "*Lord, teach...*" (11:1) "Lord, this is something we'd like to be able to do, but we're not sure how to go about it; so please teach us!" "I wish I could..." is the way in which so many people react to the subject of prayer. We know that it is a good thing, but we're not sure why it is a good thing perhaps; or even more, we're not sure how to go make it a good things for us! Yet, we have said that prayer is a Core Task of the Church: 10 years ago we identified 5 Core Tasks - worship, nurture, prayer, mission, service and from time to time we have revisited them to remind us of our priorities as a Church and why these are important. We have already looked at worship and nurture and the sermons in print on the website, and the audio version is in the library. Today we consider prayer: we are a Church that believes that prayer is vital.

Here's a picture of the Church: "In much of the Church's life in the twentieth century, the place of prayer has become limited... The proportion of horizontal communication that goes on in Church (in planning, arguing and preaching) is overwhelmingly greater than that which is vertical (in worship and in prayer)... Deficiency in prayer both reflects and reinforces inattention toward God." (Richard Lovelace *Dynamics Spiritual Life* page 153) We live in a communication age – e-mail, Facebook, twitter, smartphones, skype; we have a communication strategy to help us be better at it in church; none of that is wrong, or bad; but there is a danger that we forget that part of Christian faith is communication with God. We are a Church which believes that prayer is vital, vital to the Christian life, to the life of the Church, and that prayer has to undergird everything that we are and do, because prayer opens up the way for the blessing of God to be poured out into our hearts.

Jesus prayed. That's the starting-point. Jesus prayed and His disciples saw and heard Him and said "We wish we could do that!" There is evidence to suggest that Jesus took time every morning to pray, to spend time talking to God in prayer; we can only imagine what that meant – thanking His Father for being with Him, asking His Father to bless His day. He prayed at other times: before making big decisions, asking for guidance; when

He was tired or very busy; when He was concerned about others and He turned that concern into prayer; when He was tempted; when He was in pain; and just as He was about to die, committing His life into the Father's care. There are times when that would be easy and straightforward; there were certainly times when He was wrestling with Himself, His future and God's will in His praying and that is played out for us to see. Prayer was a regular habit for Jesus and we can be sure that it was a good and important part of His life. The disciples said "We wish we could...; teach us!" He did.

Luke 11:1-13 has all sorts of ways in which Jesus teaches up to pray. But there is one thing that this whole passage shows us about prayer – it is a relationship! All of these pieces, in different ways, are personal. These verses are full of pictures of one kind or another that are about personal relationship. The Lord's Prayer begins "*Father...*" – we're talking to someone we know; this is a conversation with God who is like a father-figure to us. The man knocking on his neighbour's door looking for food is a picture of a person in need looking for help and not giving up till he gets it. "Ask, seek, knock" are pictures of things we do with other people. Finally, Jesus paints a picture of God as a father caring for and giving good gifts to his children, a good father caring for them and their needs. All of this suggests that prayer is relationship and a relationship in which we communicate with one another. God speaks to us and we speak to God. Prayer is clearly a relationship much more than it is a ritual.

The Lord's Prayer is a wonderfully succinct piece: in its few words, Jesus gives us everything we need to learn to pray. Prayer is a relationship with God as our father and as part of that relationship we thank Him for being as great as He is. Then we express a sense of need of some kind or another, that God will provide for our daily, practical needs (bread) and for our deeper, spiritual needs such as forgiveness and strength to live life well. The Lord's Prayer is a wonderful piece that teaches us to pray in two ways: first of all, we recite it, using it just as Jesus gave it to us and we do that in our service every Sunday; secondly, we learn from its principles for our other prayers, to say 'thank you' to God as the Lord's Prayer does, and to pray for other needs and to have the sense that we depend on God for everything. So often, we have used it badly; if we've grown up with it, there is a danger that we know it so well that we say it so quickly that it becomes very thing it was never meant to be, a prayer to recite! Think about its words; say them carefully; let them nurture our relationship with Father.

Have you ever gone asking for a cup of sugar because you've run out? Do you remember the old *Gold Blend* adverts? There was a whole story that began when one of them knocked on the other's door because they'd run out of coffee and wondered if the neighbour might have some to borrow. "*Suppose one...*" (11:5f) Have you a good relationship with your neighbour? Enough to persuade your neighbour to get out of bed at midnight to give you bread you need to entertain unexpected visitors? "Just a couple of slices! Toasted cheese!" "*Because of...*" (11:8) God is not unwilling to bless, but sometimes our prayer needs to be persistent and bold, going for a long time before God appears to answer you. Prayer is pictured as a conversation between neighbours in which you express your sense of need and the neighbour answers. We tell God what we need and He answers us. As if to reinforce that, Jesus ends this piece with the father and children relationship: "*which of you...*" (11:11f) It's as if he's saying "those of you who are parents, what do you give your children? You give them what they need! You don't give them bad presents!" "*How much more...*" (11:13) God is a better father than me; God is more likely to give me what I need than I am to give my children good presents!

Right in the middle of these pictures are prayer promises. “*Ask and ...*” (11:9) Asking is something we do of another person; knocking on the door, we expect someone else to answer and open the door. These are promises in which Jesus shows us that God answers prayer. There is no magic wand here, though. There is no big red button to press that will all of a sudden make everything right and we’ll have every prayer answered in exactly the way we want or ask. Prayer is a relationship with God as the Father who knows us and who knows what we need rather than what we want. God will answer our prayers as and when appropriate and in ways that His greater wisdom sees as good for us. If your 6-year old son or grandson asked you for a car and driving lessons for his birthday, you might not give them to him immediately, but be happy to do so 11 years later! If your 6-year old son or grandson asked for an AK47 assault rifle, you would not want to give it to him at all. Parents exercise that judgment on behalf of their children; God exercises the same wisdom in His response to our prayers.

Having said that, the beauty of prayer is that God does respond! God answers our prayers. Sometimes quickly and obviously, sometimes it takes longer and is worked out through the circumstances of life, sometimes only with hindsight years later we see it, but God does answer us when we pray. He is like a Father who loves His children enough to give us good gifts; He is like the neighbour who gets up to answer the doorbell at midnight; He is Jesus’ father who listened to Jesus pour out His heart every morning. When we pray, He listens to us; He pays attention to us and He will answer us in the way that we most need. The quality of our relationship can be such that we can say whatever we like to God: we read some prayers in the Bible and they express such anger and disappointment and hurt and longing that they make us think twice about reading them; but we get angry, we’re disappointed and hurt – talk to God about it; we’re concerned for others, a family member, or a friend in need – talk to God about them; we’re confused and anxious, frightened, not sure what to do next – talk to God about your circumstances and ask Him for help.

Prayer like this is a world away from “saying your prayers”. Saying your prayers suggests some kind of ritual, something we do by rote; prayer is a relationship with God as a friend, a father, someone who listens, cares, knows, is able to help us. We are a Church which believes that prayer is vital. Here’s why – prayer is an expression of trust. We know that we make mistakes and have faults; we trust God to forgive and prayer gives voice to our repentance and faith. We are a Church that is formulating plans for mission in the community, but we want to do what is right in God’s eyes – prayer gives voice to our hopes and aspirations and seeks God’s guidance. A family member or a friend is unwell and we feel helpless; there is nothing we can do to cure them and all we can do is watch; prayer gives voice to that sense of helplessness and trusts that God is able to save, help, and heal. We are lost, angry or hurt and we’re not sure where to turn next in life; we have plans for the future and are excited by them and we hope they’ll turn out well – prayer gives voice to the deepest emotions of our hearts, and we trust God to provide for us. “I wish I could...” I hear so many people say that about prayer; well, you can! Speak to Father.