

LUKE 11:1-13  
CORE TASK #5 - PRAYER

It was morning; the time doesn't matter because nobody had a clock! Perhaps it was the first morning that they had been together as a team; the day before had been a busy day, a stressful day in some respects; some things had happened that the team had not expected, there were some strange goings-on, but all good. There had been lots of people healed, including a member of the family of one of the team; that had been a good moment. Perhaps they'd slept later than they'd meant to; now they were getting up and looking for him, but they did not find him; where has he gone? Is he off doing more healing? Has he run away after yesterday because of all the energy He expended? He was certainly not in his bed; he must be up, but he is nowhere to be found in the house or round about. They went looking and found him eventually, all on His own, in a solitary place. Jesus is praying!

Prayer is one of our Core Tasks. In 2001, we identified 5 Core Tasks, priorities for the Church and we have been considering them over these last few weeks. Worship, Nurture, Service, Mission and Prayer. We said that worship is something in which we all take part and something we offer to God. Nurture is about growing our relationships with one another and growing as a person and in faith. Service takes our example from Jesus as He washed friends' feet and died on the cross to serve the world. Mission is something God does, to bless the world; as part of that big mission, Jesus came to give us life in all its fullness and died to give us life; the Church's mission is to work together with God and help others discover the gift of new life in Christ; we do that by the way we live, the love we show and the stories of Jesus we tell. These sermons are on the website and in print. Today we come to the fifth and final Core Task of the Church, prayer.

We have all kinds of opportunities for prayer in the life of the congregation. There is prayer as part of our services of worship, for most people this is either their first or only contact with prayer in life. Each month we also have prayers for healing after the morning service; there are some 60+ people on our e-mail prayer chain that deals almost instantly with requests for prayer for and from individuals in need. Every quarter we produce a prayer diary in *Church News* with a topic for each day of each week, and this is also available on the website. Now, we have a prayer time each Wednesday at 7pm in Hall 3 as part of Church Wednesday. Some of these prayer opportunities are managed by our Prayer Team and there are other times and groups that meet on their own.

Prayer as a Core Task of Church? Most people's view of prayer is as a minority interest. Lots of people pray, spontaneously, when they are in need; fewer pray regularly on their own as part of their daily routine and fewer still will come to meetings arranged specifically for prayer. So is prayer a Core Task, or is prayer a minority interest? It has to be a Core Task for the Church. We can only fulfil our other Core Tasks as we are sustained and energised by God and prayer is one way of finding support, grace, energy from God; prayer is our declaration that we need God's help to be the right kind of Church, to be the right kind of people for that matter. Without prayer we'd be a poorer people, a poorer Church. Prayer as Core Task reminds us that God is there, that He is able to help us and save us and so we are able to worship Him and serve Him well.

It all begins with a sense of need. We don't know what Jesus prayed in the early morning in the story from Mark's gospel with which I began; all that we know is that He prayed. We have sense that perhaps He was praying for strength and grace to deal with another crowd of people wanting to be healed because He had expended a

great deal of energy on the previous day; was He asking His Father for new grace, new strength? It is speculation to some extent, but there must have been some sense of need that He felt and prayer was Jesus' way of expressing it. The logic says that if Jesus needed to pray, how much more do we?! There is a similar sense of need in the disciples at the beginning of the reading in Luke 11: "*One day...*" (v.1) They recognised that they needed to learn to pray and they wanted to learn; they saw that this was something they didn't know and yet knew that they needed to know. Their sense of need led them to learn to pray.

Jesus gave them a pattern to follow and promises to hear that would fuel their desire to pray. The pattern that Jesus gave is the prayer we use every Sunday in a slightly different version, the Lord's Prayer, and in that prayer Jesus teaches us that when we pray we give thanks to God for all that He is, and that when we pray we rely on and depend on God for everything that we need. This is the pattern for prayer that we can use as it comes and we do that; we repeat the words of this prayer every week and do it in way that hopefully allows us to think about what we're saying rather than simply repeating it thoughtlessly. It is also the pattern in the sense that all of our prayers can be shaped by this pattern, so that whenever we pray and whatever words we use, we learn from Jesus to give thanks to God and depend on Him for everything we need. Whether we are concerned about the big issues in life – hope, peace, guilt and forgiveness, where is my life going? – or whether we are concerned about where our next meal will come from, all of these are matters for prayer, relying on God to answer our prayers and provide for us.

Promises that Jesus gives us to hear reinforce that message. Listen to them again: "*Ask and ...*" (v9f) Sometimes people say of prayer, "I tried it once and it didn't work, so I gave up!" 'Ask, seek, knock' are spoken about by Jesus not as one-off attempts, but as continuous actions; we ask and keep on asking; we seek and keep on seeking; we knock and keep on knocking; for that kind of persevering prayer Jesus promises that we shall be heard, we shall find God's blessing and the door into grace will be opened. This is not because God needs to be persuaded; that somehow God is reluctant to answer, but perhaps it is all about how much we want God's blessing; is it just a passing fancy, a fad; or is it the real desire and longing of our hearts? The assurance that we have from Jesus is that these real longings of our hearts and minds will be satisfied; He promises that we will be heard and we will find God's blessing and door into grace will be opened. I have said that twice because it is something we seem to find so hard to hear, these promises that Jesus makes. These promises are meant to spur us on, to encourage us; this is what God does when we pray.

You have a friend who lives next door; late at night you have visitors who have just arrived and discover that you've run out of milk and the shop is shut and you can't get to the 24hrs Tesco! You go next door to your friend to borrow some milk, but everyone's in bed. You ring the bell and the shout comes back "we're all in bed; go away!" What do you do? You need the milk for your visitors! So you ring again and again till your friend comes and gives you milk. "*I tell you...*" (v8) Does God need to be persuaded to get out of bed to come to answer our doorbell prayers? No! The only point of this little story is to encourage us to be bold and persevering in our praying, to pray and pray and not give up and God will answer our prayers. He may not always answer in precisely way we ask or expect, but He will always answer our prayer.

We read Psalm 13 for a particular reason. Prayer is not always easy and not always full of faith and grace. Psalm 13 is a complaint; the Psalmist is coming to pray with a sense of dismay and perhaps even anger in his voice. He has a complaint that God

seems to have forgotten him, neglected him. He has enemies around about him and nothing is happening to help him deal with these enemies or take them away. So he complains to God that God is ignoring him and hiding His face from him. He wonders aloud as to how long this state of affairs will continue and how long this wrestling must go on. There are some people to whom you could say anything, you could express your deepest feelings, fears, anger, anxieties in way that you wouldn't do with anyone else. That is the kind of relationship that the psalmist had with God; this is the kind of relationship we can have with God, with our Father, to express any emotion, even anger and despair and let Him heal us. The Psalm ends with a sense of trust in the unfailing love of God; the psalmist has come through the darkness into the light of God's grace, peace and unfailing love.

Hudson Taylor came from Yorkshire and grew up to be founder of the China Inland Mission; he left England to go to China, not knowing what he would find there and not knowing how he would go about being a missionary in China. The work he started grew and grew to touch many lives in China and now all over East Asia through the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. He once said this about prayer: "You can work without praying, but it is a bad plan, but you cannot pray in earnest without working.... Do not be so busy with work for Christ that you have no strength left for praying. True prayer requires strength." (Biography of Hudson Taylor p.419) In a day when Churches are producing plans for the future, goals and aims for mission and ambitious building plans, we need to be reminded over and over again that prayer is a Core Task of the Church; prayer is a Core Task because we need to discover what it is that God wants of His Church; prayer is a Core Task because we need to be reminded over and over again that we depend on God; prayer is Core Task because we need to take to heart over and over again the promises of God to inspire us, to encourage us and to bless us; that's where our strength comes from.

Prayer is not about getting the words right; prayer is not about asking for exactly the right things in precisely the right way. Prayer is about opening our hearts to God, bringing to Him our sense of need, our fears and anxieties; seeking His blessing on our lives and for others; looking for His grace, guidance, peace, forgiveness. It doesn't matter that we get the words wrong; it doesn't matter that we stumble and fall over the words; it doesn't matter that our prayers are not carefully crafted, but that we come with a simple cry for help. Prayer like that taps into all the resources of God's grace and power and releases these resources to work in the world. As we pray, God works to build His Church; as we pray God works to help people in need; as we pray, God's Spirit works in our hearts and minds to deepen our faith; as we pray the blessing of God spreads across the world. *"Lord, teach us to pray!"*