

LUKE 11:1-13
PRAYER QUALITIES

Hopes and aspirations – most of us have them! Hopes and aspirations for the future are part and parcel of being human; they come in all shapes and sizes. Some of our hopes focus simply on today and what will happen this afternoon; we have plans for the rest of the day and we hope that these plans work out well. Some of our hopes will focus on tomorrow and on something that is planned for tomorrow and we hope that it will happen in the way that it should. We may have longer term hopes and aspirations for the rest of 2013 or into next year, plans to get married, to move house, to change job, to have better health. These can be hopes and aspirations for ourselves, which is where most of us begin; they can also be hopes for other people, for family members, or friends; these can be aspirations for church or community, or in the big sense, hopes for the world. There is something in us that has this sense of hope for the future, something to which we aspire and look forward.

Concerns are the other side of the coin, I suppose. There are things that bother us, that discomfort us, that concern us, that make us angry or sad, even that make us cry. Again there are a thousand of these things: in the world around us we see all sorts of needs and issues that we'd long to see sorted, in Syria, Africa, Cambodia, or even in the UK, issues and problems that are not of our making and which are out of our hands to sort. There are issues and needs in the Church, whether we see Church as a national group or the local congregation; these issues concern us and we wonder how they will end. There are personal concerns for ourselves or for others and there are many of these and so many of them are personal and individual. Some of these big concerns make us lose sleep at night and we worry about them; we feel helpless to sort them on our own.

Christians have learned to turn these hopes and concerns into prayer. We have taken inspiration and the example of prayer from Jesus Himself, turning hopes, aspirations and concerns into prayer, that God would help us. We don't know much about Jesus' habits for prayer and some of what we do know is based on assumption: there is one story of Jesus' praying early in the morning and we assume that this was His regular habit, that He found time and space every day to pray. We know that before He took big decisions, He spent time praying, even all night. We discover today that His disciples watched and listened to Him were inspired by what they saw and heard Jesus do and they wanted to learn from His example. Christians like Paul took his hopes and concerns for the Churches he knew and turned these hopes and concerns into prayer, to express his hope, his concern to God and to let God answer these prayers. We discovered earlier that God answers prayers, though not always as we expect: Abraham prayed for Sodom to be saved; God let Lot escape; prayer answered! God hears the hopes and concerns of Abraham and answers him.

The Lord's Prayer was the answer to the disciples' request: *"One day..." (Luke 11:1f)* There is a long, honourable tradition of Christians using the text of the Lord's Prayer to pray and we've done that again this morning; the text we use is the longer version from Matthew's gospel. As well as the Lord's Prayer, there is a parable about a friend needing bread and some other sayings that help us understand a little more about prayer. One of the big concerns many of us have about prayer is "will I get the words right? Will I use the right words so that my prayers will be acceptable to God?" Actually, prayer is not about getting the words right and what I want to do is look at these verses from Luke 11 in terms of the qualities of prayer, the qualities that Jesus wants in the person who prays;

when we get the qualities right, the words will follow; the qualities are much more important. There are five of them.

1. Intimacy – “Father” – a single word shows us something of our relationship with God. “Father” is a home word, a family word, a word that suggests we are at ease with God and in His presence, that there is a quality of relationship here that will allow us to bring all of our hopes and concerns in prayer. There is nothing that we can’t express to our Father: we can express hope, concern, sadness, anger, regret, knowing that the Father will do what fathers do and love us and care for us and do something about it. “Father” expresses something more intimate than “Dear God” does – there is something formal and distant about “Dear God”, while “Father” draws us in, like children asking “Father” for help.

2. Respect – here’s the balance: while God is our Father, He is never our pal. There needs to be respect and reverence for the greatness and majesty of God. “*Hallowed...*” (Luke 11:2) There is something indefinable about the word “hallowed”; even some of the modern translations of Lord’s Prayer still use it; the translators have found nothing to replace it because it holds so much meaning. God is to be treated with reverence and respect; the words with which we began today’s service come from Psalm 138 and suggest that even the kings of the nations need to recognize the greatness and majesty of God, that He is a King to be honoured and acknowledged. Ideally, our hopes and aspirations are to be shaped by knowing that God is King and we should seek to have these hopes and aspirations further God’s kingdom in world, to be the people that He wants us to be.

3. Humility – the next two qualities go together, as qualities that express a sense of need, an attitudes that is different from the world’s attitude that says we can manage life for ourselves, and we don’t need anything. A couple of years ago, some of us worked our way through some study material called *Just People*, designed to help churches engage with the needs of the local community. The examples and stories came from communities with high unemployment or a drugs problem; we stumbled over fact that we could not identify a sense of need in our community. It is never really true and there are times when that becomes painfully obvious. “*Forgive...*” (Luke 11:4) Humility takes a look at ourselves in the mirror: what do you see? We see ourselves as we are and so we recognise our faults, failings and mistakes; they are part of our lives and we can’t avoid them; so we humbly ask God to forgive us. Seeing ourselves in that way should make us humble and gracious in the way that we treat one another and other people; a forgiving heart and receiving forgiveness go hand in hand.

4. Dependence – a sense of need leads us to depend on God. “*Give us...*” (Luke 11:3f) There was a time in Scotland when we had a strong sense of dependence on God for our food, but now we worship at the altar of the great god Tesco, Waitrose, or Sainsbury and that’s where our food comes from and we forget that everything we eat (“Our daily bread”) comes from God. This is why we persist with Harvest Thanksgiving services, as a reminder that we are not the masters of the universe and that we still depend on God for our food. We also depend on God for spiritual resources: being disciples and following Jesus is a big task and one that we often sense is beyond us; God has given us His Spirit and has promised to strengthen and help us so that we are able to live a Christian life. Turn that sense of need and dependence and weakness into prayer!

5. Persistence – hospitality was a big issue in the Middle East in Jesus’ time; it probably still is! This is the background to the story that Jesus tells about persisting in prayer.

Visitors arrive at your door at midnight and you have nothing to give them; it's a disaster! The only option is to go next door; there is no freezer and no microwave; all we can do is see if our neighbour has bread. *"Then..." (Luke 11:7f)* Getting up will disturb the whole house; we can understand his reluctance, but deep down "the friend in the street knows that the friend in bed will understand; he would do the same if the roles were reversed." (Wright) This story has one point of comparison and only one: to encourage persistence and boldness in prayer, insistent asking. We saw it earlier in Abraham and God accepted Abraham's prayers as he insisted on seeking to express his deep concern for his family. As we said there are a thousand things in the world that bother us; there are others in the church; there are some in our family and friends; there are some for ourselves – we have seen a glimpse of what God can do in the world when we pray and we are encouraged to pray and to keep praying and not to give up. *"Ask..." (Luke 11:9f)* Energy, work and struggle are part of prayer; we should persist and seek God's grace.

When we have these five qualities, we don't need to get the words right. God reads our hearts. It struck me the other day that in story of Abraham, that God reads Abraham's hopes and concerns from his heart because these are not the words Abraham used. Abraham talked about saving Sodom; that was all he talked about; "what will it take to save Sodom?" His real concern was not for Sodom; he knew kind of place Sodom was; his real concern was for the safety of his family, for their welfare if this was God's plan. Maybe he thought that prayer was too selfish, but God read Abraham's heart; God read his real concerns and saved Lot out of Sodom before it was destroyed. God reads our hearts; we may talk one way and our words may say one thing, but deep down in our heart is the real hope, the real concern. God reads that and answers our prayers in His way. We need have no anxiety about getting the words of our prayers right; it is more important to have these five qualities in our hearts when we pray.

Paul had hopes and aspirations for the Church in Philippi; we can see from the rest of his letter that his deep hope and concern was for the Church to grow, to become stronger and for the Christians in Philippi to live their lives in Jesus' way. He expresses these hopes and concerns in his letter to them. But he also expresses his hopes and concerns in prayer, that they be loving, wise and more and more like Jesus: *"This is..." (Philippians 1:9ff)* We have our hopes and concerns: but do we turn them into prayer? Do we take time to express our hopes and concerns to our Father and depend on Him for their outcome? It is easy to be concerned about the Church in Scotland today – let's turn that deep concern into prayer for the Church as a whole, for the congregation, for leaders of the Church nationally and locally. We have hopes and concerns for ourselves or for people that we love: is persistent, insistent prayer part of that sense of hope, or that deep concern?

Intimacy – God is our Father, there is a warmth and a settled sense to that relationship; respect – our Father is a great God and is King of the universe; humility – we have our faults and mistakes, we are weak and imperfect people; dependence – God gives us all that we need, food to eat, forgiveness, strength and help; persistence – we pray and keep praying, bold, insistent praying. These are the qualities for prayer and with these qualities we can bring all of our hopes, aspirations and concerns to God in prayer. It's not automatic; it's not a part of Christian life that everyone finds easy or straightforward. I am comforted by disciples' question: *"Lord, teach us to pray"* and that's what Jesus started to do, to teach them to pray. Hopes, aspirations, concerns are part of our experience of life, part of being human; learn to pray them! Let God into the picture, let Him shape our hopes and aspirations, let Him answer these prayers. It's what He loves to do!