

Sermon on Prayer for Epiphany +5, Feb. 4, 2024

In today's gospel, Jesus has been teaching and doing miracles of healing in Capernaum, which seems to have been his headquarters, and the next morning he gets up really early, when it's still dark, and goes off by himself to a deserted place – think: out into the woods somewhere – and he prays. Throughout the gospels, we have examples of Jesus going off to pray. After his baptism he has a 40 day retreat in the desert before he starts his ministry. He prays before choosing his disciples, before facing the cross, and lots of times.

Now why did Jesus pray so much? If he was God incarnate, why did he need to pray so much? Well, I believe it is because Jesus, though he was fully divine, was also fully human. He was subject to all the things we are subject to: aches and pains, tiredness, hunger, temptations, desires, joy and sorrow and every human feeling. And human beings need to be connected to God if we are to live our best lives. And the way we do that is through prayer. Prayer and worship. And this applied to Jesus, too. As a human being, he had the same need to pray as we do. And, if he needed to pray, we certainly need to pray, too.

I wish Jesus had spent more time teaching his disciples how to pray. Or, if he did, that they had written more of it down. He taught us the Lord's Prayer but I think there must have been more to it than that. As a Jewish man, he would have prayed as all Jewish men did in those days. He would have said the Shema, the Hear, O Israel, at least twice a day. He would have used the psalms.

I went to a synagogue service once when I was a student. The service was in Hebrew but there was an English/Hebrew service book so we could more or less follow along. I was really surprised to see that almost all of the prayers in there were of thanksgiving. Blessing God for the good things he gives us, or for his greatness. Something like this: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe. You give us this good bread to eat." Or "you let us lie down in peace and take our rest." Or whatever else. "Blessed are you." And they say these prayers throughout the day, much as we would say grace before all our meals or a prayer at bedtime. Only for lots of other things as well. Jesus probably did that.

So how do we pray? Well, praising God and thanking God for all the good things in our lives is definitely a good place to start. The psalmist speaks of this today. In fact, much of the psalm is a prayer of praise to God. When we praise God and thank God for all the blessings of this life, it reminds us of our dependence on God. It reminds us that God is God and we are not God. We are God's beloved creatures on whom he lavishes his care and blessings. But we remind ourselves that we owe all this to God's goodness. This is good.

Among other things, reminding ourselves that we are dependent on God for everything, for our very breath, helps to keep us feeling humble and less entitled. If we think we have all these good things purely from our own exertion, because we deserve them, it makes us less likely to care for others and share our blessings with them. But when we see that all we have comes from God, we are confident to share, knowing that God is entirely capable of showering more blessings on us when we need them.

Perhaps the form of prayer we know best is what we call intercessory prayer. That is asking God for things, especially favours for other people. We ask God to heal our sick loved ones, free our loved ones from prison, help our governments to make good decisions for the benefit of all people, meet our own needs. Jesus encouraged people to make this kind of prayer to God. He speaks of God as our father and says he knows our needs. St. Paul says make your requests known to God. Of course, God already knows our requests and our needs before we know them ourselves. But one of the things about asking is that we connect ourselves with God. And since God wills the good for all people, we are kind of adding our 2 cents worth to his intention. Joining our intention to God's. And while God doesn't really need this, he does work through our prayers. We are encouraged to pray, partly for our own sakes, but I've seen real miracles as a result of prayer.

Here's what we read about in Isaiah: that those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings as eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint. Because when we plug into the Lord God, we are plugging into the power source. We are connecting ourselves with God, the source of all energy. Rather than going off alone in our own direction and running down our spiritual batteries.

The one kind of prayer we know Jesus taught his disciples is the Lord's Prayer, which you all know by heart and probably say relatively often. I know I say it every day at the end of my prayers. Did you know the Lord's Prayer was meant to be a kind of outline for prayer, rather than something we just learn by rote and rattle off from time to time? It was certainly used this way in the early church, as if each line in the prayer was a subject heading and then you elaborate on it. So let's look at that a bit.

We start by acknowledging our relationship with God. God is our Father. Or our Mother. Our parent. This is meant to express our intimacy with God, and our dependence on God, not God's gender. We depend on God for our very life. As we did our parents. And we are in an intimate relationship with God, as with our parents. I know we didn't all have ideal parents but the idea here is that God is an ideal, loving, wise parent for us. So we start by acknowledging our relationship: loving, intimate, dependent.

Hallowed by your name. Your name is holy. May your name be kept holy. In our speech, in our lives, in our world.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. This is a prayer that everything that is done on earth (especially by us) will be done according to God's will. So first we pray for God's desires, as our first priority. We are asking God to bring God's kingdom on earth. I've talked a lot about that: the kingdom of peace and justice, where everyone has what they need, where everyone is safe and respected. We are praying for that to come in its fullness here on earth. And in our own lives, too. Jesus asked us to pray for that. This was his stated goal in life, to bring the kingdom. When we pray this, we are saying, "Yes. I am on board with that. I will try to work for that in my life, especially in my own actions. Let me only do what you want me to do. I'm with you on this one, God. I am aligning my will with yours. I want to do things your way."

Talk about a scary prayer! It means examining all our actions and asking ourselves, are we doing God's will here? Or are we acting from our own will? Our own desires and fears and even rebelliousness? Are we willing, truly, to bring our will, our actions, our whole lives, into line with God's will? Because that's what we're praying. And when we line ourselves up with God's will, praying that it will be done on earth as in heaven, we are also committing ourselves to be on side with that, to work for it. That's hard.

It's only after that that we start asking for our own needs. Our daily bread. Not enough bread to last us a month or two. Just today's bread. Not enough money saved up to keep us and our kids and grandkids forever, but just what we need at the moment to pay our bills. We aren't asking to be rich. We are asking to have enough. And any left over, we would share, which the whole Bible makes clear, Old and New testaments. It's all a gift.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Or our debts or trespasses. The Greek word can mean any of those. We're asking God to forgive us. But we're also committing to forgive each other, to be forgiving people.

Lead us not into temptation. Or save us from the time of trial. Or do not put us to the test. All good translations of the Greek. And deliver us from evil. We are acknowledging that we actually don't have it in us to keep out of trouble. We need help. Sometimes that's because we're weak and highly temptable. Sometimes it's because life overwhelms us. But either way, we need help to get through life. We're asking God to help us.

And we end as we always should with praise for God, acknowledging God's greatness. God's amazingness.

We need to pray so we can stay connected with God, the source of life. So we can stay on a good path through life. It is easy to become lost or overwhelmed or go in the wrong directions or become depressed when we are disconnected from God. Of course, being connected with God doesn't guarantee us a smooth ride. But it beats being disconnected. Being connected with God for a while and then figuring we know what we're doing, is like looking at a map at the beginning of the journey and then putting it away and trusting we'll remember it. That doesn't always end well. I remember one time, before GPS, becoming totally lost in Montreal because I thought I knew where we were going, put the map away, and took a wrong exit. Took a long time to figure out where we were and how to get back to where we wanted to be. There might have been words. And I had to get out the map to do it. It's the same with prayer. We need to keep at it, like following the GPS.

How we pray doesn't matter as much as that we pray, daily, throughout the day. Solitary prayer by ourselves, corporate prayer in worship, prayer with one or two others as in our prayer group. Praying the daily offices of Morning and Evening prayer, praying compline at bedtime, praying by going into the woods like Jesus did, praying while we're driving, praying before meals, praying our thanks when we see something beautiful, praying by singing songs of praise to God, praying in meditation. So many ways to pray. All good. Lent is coming up. Why not try a new kind of prayer this Lent? Let us be like Jesus and soak ourselves in prayer, in God's presence. It can transform our lives.