

PRAYER – A MEDITATION

Note to Reader: All preaching starts with the unspoken words “I think ...”. The answers that follow are prefaced in the same way, perhaps with “I am sure”, or some similar variation indicating an opinion.

Prayer is a subject which is both simple and complex. Simple in that we speak to God, the Supreme Being, in which we believe. It is complex as well, because any prayer is inspired by emotion, and that can influence the structure and tone of our prayers.

Consider the psalms, the oldest prayers that we have. Various translations have attempted to bring them into the present, but through their strange language we can feel the joy, praise, fear, anger, penitence and love – the whole spectrum of human emotion that touched the psalmist.



Language matters.

For the moment let us look at prayer as a newcomer to faith might look at it, to consider the questions that might occur, and the responses.

Question: What exactly is prayer?

Answer: Prayer is talking to God. God is far beyond us in every way, beyond our ability even to comprehend. However, Jesus, the human face of God, encouraged us to pray. He gave us his own prayer, the Lord's Prayer.

Question: How do I pray to God?

Answer: Anyhow, provided it is done in love and respect.

Question: When can I pray?

Answer: Any time, in any way. You can pray in bed before sleeping, getting up in the morning, even in a sleepless night, running, walking, waiting, crying, laughing, grieving, or just leaning on a gate looking at the wonder of his Creation in sun or rain.

Question: Must I kneel?

Answer: No. Only if it helps you concentrate.

Question: Will God answer me?

Answer: Yes, but in His own time. You will feel, almost certainly, that he hasn't answered. But sometimes something may occur to you explaining why things happen as they have. Often, life sweeps us along and we forget, but when we think back, we realise that he did answer. Not as we wanted, maybe. An old joke has it that God's desk has three trays, marked "In", "Out" and "Pending". Guess which has the most correspondence in it!

Question: You said "Him"?

Answer: God, to us, is "It", but it sounds disrespectful and is unhelpful to us. God is beyond gender, and "She" or "He" would be equally valid.

Question: Are there any rules – what can I pray for? What can I not pray for?

Answer: The first rule is that of simple courtesy. We are. We are given life, love, a spirit that defines us, and those we love. Give thanks for those gifts, and for the Creation in which we live. Many things can go wrong in our lives, but at our birth, we have those simple gifts.

The second rule is that we cannot, as Christians, pray for the harming or destruction of any person, even though we may burn with anger at injustice and inequality. We cannot pray for God to act against our understanding of Him, the source of love. He is Father not only to us, but also to some terrible people as well. *Condemn not, lest ye may be condemned* – a salutary warning!

The third rule is that all prayers are summarised in the Lord's Prayer which I have mentioned. It should be said every day. It is a masterpiece of both brevity and comprehensiveness: in this short prayer nothing is omitted. The Lord's Prayer is also a form of rosary, a device used in the Roman church as a prayer discipline, to ensure that the person praying – the intercessor – remembers all and forgets none.

Question: How old is praying?

Answer: As old as mankind I expect, but not to God until Abraham realised the existence of God. As mentioned earlier, the oldest prayers on record are the Psalms which date from 1000BC. They are Hebrew/Jewish, and serve to remind us that even 3000 years ago, people had the same feelings of penitence, anger, joy, etc as we do today. The earliest Christian prayers come from the Gospels and early works such as the Didache, the 1st century liturgical work.

Question: Terrible things happen in the world. Why does God not intervene?

Answer: God's Creation has its dangers, of course, as we know. It is dangerous but not malign or evil. Floods, earthquakes, fires, disease are consequences of the laws of nature and physics.

When God created us, he gave us free will. We are free to accept or reject Him. The story of the Garden of Eden at least tells us that. The evil in this world comes from mankind. Jesus told us that we do not become evil through what we eat or drink. It is in our spirit. Whatever it is, if you rationalise it, you will find that it is either a consequence of nature or mankind's evil. Conquests, empires, communism, fascism, racialism – anything that seeks to dominate, discriminate or confine is driven by power and greed, simple evil in one way or another.



The point of free will must surely be that God wants us to return to Him in love and obedience, voluntarily. Otherwise mankind would be no better than animal life?

Question: The commonest prayer, probably, is one where we pray for the return to health of someone dearly loved. Our prayers don't seem to be answered.

Answer: I think God does answer, but we don't like the answer when we become aware of it. We have to accept that we are mortal, and one day we will die, at least to this world.

Looking at prayers dispassionately, if we have free will, it seems illogical to expect God to intervene in life's progress in answer to our prayers. We are the minds, hands and feet that must do God's work, and the wonderful people in the health professions do God's work in healing. I am sure that God knows our feelings and wants to hear our prayers, but it is His will and not ours which will prevail. And it will not necessarily be good news.

I can remember those times when I prayed with every fibre of my being for someone very dear to me, only to experience that desperate feeling that there was no answer. It was like a phone call that had been cut off. Looking back, God was telling me that I would have to face the tragic blow. The Disciples must have had the same feeling on Good Friday, but remember what happened three days later. Tunnels are black but there is a light at the other end.

Question: You referred to the importance of language. Why?

Answer: It depends on the person praying, and their use of language. Some for example, like to use old English, with thee, thou, etc, as in the Kings James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. It means that often we use words like "beseech" which we would never use in normal life unless in the acting profession. On the other hand, current vernacular has lost much of the beauty of Shakespearean English and tends towards the specific rather than the general. In the end it is a matter of taste, and it is something that arouses more energy usually than worship itself!

There is, to me, no reason for avoiding beautiful – indeed extravagant – language in prayers. Think of Psalm 96, the Cantate Domino: "*O sing unto the Lord a new song, sing unto the Lord, all the earth....*". The joy of the psalmist in expressing his faith is obvious. There are many examples of the psalmist's moods and anxieties.

There are many thousands of wonderful great prayers, many from the Gospels. The “comfy words” that graced Holy Communion for example. I recall with affection “*Come unto me all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*”, not that I was particularly heavy laden, but I felt refreshed. At Evensong we sing the simple and wonderful prayer of the old priest Simeon, on seeing the infant Jesus.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word;

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people

To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

(Gloria)

Sacramentaries were written in the 6-8th centuries in the Roman Catholic church which were liturgical handbooks for the Mass, the Holy Communion service in the C of E. From them came wonderful prayers which managed to encapsulate so much within a short and simple prayer. For example, from the Leonine Sacramentary, the poetic prayer that is used at Compline, and quite often at Evensong at Rock:

Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the silent hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this fleeting world may repose upon thine eternal changelessness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Or the tender prayer of St. Augustine:

Watch thou, dear Lord, with those who wake, watch, or weep tonight, and give thine angels charge over those who sleep. Tend thy sick ones, O Lord Christ. Rest thy weary ones. Bless thy dying ones. Soothe thy suffering ones. Pity thine afflicted ones. And all for thy love's sake. Amen

Or another BCP Compline prayer, wonderfully extravagant and rightly so:

Look down, O Lord, from thy heavenly throne, and illuminate the darkness of this night with thy celestial brightness, and from the sons of light banish the deeds of darkness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

And finally a more modern prayer, particularly appropriate now:

Loving Father, who has made all mankind in your own likeness, and loves all whom you have made; suffer not the world to separate itself from you by building barriers of race and colour. As your Son our saviour was born of a Hebrew mother, yet rejoiced in the faith of a Syrian woman and a Roman soldier, who welcomed the Greeks who sought him, and suffered an African to carry his Cross, so teach us rightly to regard the members of all races as fellow-heirs of your kingdom. Through the same Jesus Christ.

Question: There is so much to pray for. Is there a list?

Answer: The 1980 Alternative Service Book contained a five-form intercession with prayers in relatively modern language for the Church, the Nations, our Loved Ones and Communities, the Suffering and the Departed. Prayers, set or ad lib, following that pattern embrace our concerns and allow additions to meet particular concerns. The BCP, its predecessor, has similar, excellent prayers. Ad lib prayers require thought and preparation, but have the considerable advantage of simply speaking to God in today's language.



A very good complement to regular prayer is a good daily newspaper and/or TV news, which will draw our attention to subjects for prayer not just in the UK but the whole of God's world. In reading or viewing, we can feel and silently pray for victims of tragedy. Prayers don't have always to be spoken.

Of course we cannot deal with everything in our prayers.

God knows that.

Amen.