

Words and Prayers (Luke 11:1-13)

10:00am Holy Communion –27th July 2025

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’ He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.’

And he said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.” And he answers from within, “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.” I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

‘So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’

Our brain is often thought of as a muscle. It isn't biologically speaking, yet like a muscle the brain does seem to respond as if exercise can make it grow. Within our church history there is a great tradition of placing into memory some of the most central things we can know of the Christian faith. Today we have the prayer which Jesus taught – the Lord's Prayer – as it comes from Luke's gospel. But consider also the creeds and some of those unchanging parts of the services we have, especially in a long season such as Trinity.

St Luke presents to us today a very familiar passage of Jesus teaching prayer, and he does so in two ways (or so it seems), with the *familiar* and the *particular*.

In 2008 I spent part of my summer placement from Ridley Hall theological college, in a rural benefice on the Dorset coast. Revd Bob was the incumbent and getting close to retirement. Every morning, he and I would go to one of the nine churches where morning prayer was said from the Book of Common Prayer – except Bob didn't actually need the book. He prayed the entire service as from memory, even with the optional extras, and I don't think he open his eyes once. Seventeen years later I think I can almost manage the same with Evensong, and maybe the 8:00am.

There is much to be said for **repetition of minded prayer**. We have The Jesus Prayer, the catholic rosary and Taizé chants. Some of us may have cherished Psalms in mind and our most meaningful passages of scripture.

Yet I have come to realise that whilst words are the normal conveyance of our prayers, **it is sometime the wordless passions of the heart which are of greater substance.**

So, for old Revd Bob, it was not about the words, they were just the reason for him to make the time and place, yet the petitions he silently brought in his heart were still fully present, as if said. In a recent address I gave on the significance of the Nicene Creed, I recall saying something like *‘this creed might be the most recited text of all time, other than the Lord’s Prayer’*. Together they amount to so many words, **but I wonder what God really gets from us when each is said.**

It seems as if one request to Jesus, from his disciples, brings forth two teachings: ‘a disciple said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’ Then comes the Lord’s Prayer - regular, unchanging available in mind whenever we pray - which might be *every time* we do so.

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.’

The Lord’s Prayer has regularity built in: Jesus said to them, ‘When you pray, say’. **It’s made for constant unchanging use:** daily bread, the unceasing need for *personal* forgiveness, and the ever-present trials of life. They keep coming, we keep praying.

But that is not all which Jesus taught that day, because then comes a point about prayers of petition for *other’s* needs – that is what prayers of petition are – **it’s us seeking God for others.**

After the Lord's Prayer, the passage immediately goes on to this parable of the **hungry night visitor**. It's easy to picture the scene – it's midnight and someone arrives late from a long journey. There is nothing in the house to eat, which is point of concern for the host – *I have nothing offer* – that does not feel great (and is often how we feel in prayer). But this host is so **aggrieved** that he goes off down the road to *another* friend and then (I expect) knocks on his door for food. **How often do we feel so stirred up as this?** Try this yourself at home tonight, at midnight. See how many times you have to repeatedly rap on the door until you get what you want (but not my house!)

“Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.” I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he *will* get up and give him whatever he needs.

‘So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.’

See the little **‘and’** from verse 5 which stitches to two together: **‘And he said to them’**.

For prayers of petition there are all sorts of words and needs to be said, *quite unlike the Lord's Prayer*. Our prayers of petition are probably said with a lot less *form and regularity* than the Lord's Prayer. But the way Luke has chosen to set these two discourses of Jesus together, seems to suggest **that the regular comfort with which we say the Lord's Prayer, should be the same regular comfort with which we bring all of our prayers to God.**

Does that create a tension within us, being unable to hold the apparent *familiarity* with which we might say the prayer that Jesus taught us, with the more spikey and specific petitions we may have? **Jesus is teaching us how to pray, not just what to say. Do our prayers for others needs pour forth from us with such ease?**

Years of praying for ourselves and others turns us into amateur psychologists. I'm sure most of us have had the experience of listening to someone's words yet gaining a much greater picture from how they look and behave. Like old Revd Bob, words fill the elapsed time together, but being in the presence of God for that time gives to Him the chance to see us in prayer – our expression, our posture, our tone, our hearts.

The pivotal word in this teaching is *persistence*, and it brings many questions. But the translated Greek word which sits underneath is found *only here* across all of the New Testament. That means scholars have no other contexts to compare to, and so across various translations there are all sorts of attempts at what Jesus might have meant.

What I read earlier, was the NRSV - *persistence*; the NIV has *boldness*. The KJV reads: '**because he is his friend**' – which is like *responsibility* so: '*if you don't no one else will.*' The Good News substitutes the phrase: '*because you are not ashamed to keep on asking*'. I like that one best because it uncovers the emotion of the one praying: '**I have a hungry friend, and I am ashamed to be able to offer him nothing**'. There is an emotional sincerity that God can read from our best intention – *and that is the substance of the prayer*. God is hearing the words, but (I say again) is reading our expression, our posture, our tone, and our hearts.

Persistence here tells God how important this is to us, for them, in a loving way.

We may sometimes feel our petitions are difficult to say, but for God it is never difficult for him to hear them. **This I think is Jesus's teaching here: The regular comfort with which we say the Lord's Prayer, should be the same regular comfort with which we can bring all of our prayers to God, no matter how difficult they may be.**

Quite challenging stuff. Amen