

## PRAYER

Some time ago in a church magazine a cartoon appeared of a little boy kneeling down by his bed to say his prayers. Underneath was this caption, "Dear God, same again as last night!"

We can smile. Yet most of us know how hard it is at times to pray, to find time for prayer, and how easy it is for our prayers to become routine and repetitive – of the 'same again' variety!

The Bishop of Chelmsford, Stephen Cottrell - who was a speaker at the recent clergy conference which all the Liverpool clergy were invited to attend by Bishop Paul - admitted, "There always seems to be a good reason to put off praying, or when I do set time aside, my mind wanders, or I gallop through words that should be taken slowly."

So it's no wonder that the disciples asked Jesus in today's Gospel "Lord, teach us to pray."

I suppose one of the first things to say is that religion is not a set of rules and regulations, but rather a relationship – a relationship with God through Jesus, for as our epistle tells us, 'In Jesus the whole fullness of God bodily dwells'. In other words, if we find it hard to relate to the concept of God, we can relate to Jesus – God with skin on his face.

Religion is about relationship.

And one of the things you learn in life is that relationships vary. The way one couple works out a relationship won't necessarily suit another, and it would be wrong to try and impose it.

So with prayer. There is no one right way to pray. A method or form of prayer that suits one person, may not suit another. Some people like structure, others prefer flexibility. Some people like to have a set time, for others that doesn't work or is possible.

As someone once said, "God has his own secret stairway into everyone's heart". So, ways of praying will be different for different people, and like human relationships may change and vary from time to time.

The important thing is not *how* we pray but *that* we pray, that we keep in touch with God.

And then as we see in the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus gave as a kind of headline prayer, prayer is not only about asking, it is also about praising and thanking and striving for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The point of the story Jesus told in today's Gospel is not that God is like the friend who has to be bothered and badgered by his neighbour. The point of the story is not likeness but comparison. If a friend or neighbour is willing to help, how much more so is God.

Most of us have grown up with the idea that prayer is about changing a situation, but I wonder if prayer is more about changing ourselves as we open ourselves more and more to God's presence and love.

As one writer put it, "Prayer is releasing God's love and power into ourselves and into the world."

One of the leading preachers and writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, John Packer, put it this way, "Prayer is not an attempt to force God's hand, but a humble acknowledgement of dependence."

One of the people in the present day who has wrestled with the question of what we do when we pray, and what happens when we pray, is the Rev David Wilkinson, principal of St. John's College, Durham, who is a noted scientist as well as a theologian.

In his latest book, "When I Pray What does God do?" he talks about how his wife, also ordained, was, as he says "literally struck down by two debilitating illnesses in the last 8 years". She still gets very tired and is in constant pain, despite numerous prayers. And he says, "Prayer does not always save us from the worst of circumstances. And he goes on to say, "Maturity in prayer means learning to live with unanswered questions.... Faith is not trusting in what you want Jesus to do, but trusting Jesus in the midst of unanswered questions." And he refers to how, despite repeated prayers, St Paul had to live with his 'thorn in the flesh'.

A few weeks ago, Ted and I returned to our last parish to take the funeral of our former organist, who was a great friend as well as a colleague to us both. He had battled with cancer for the last 3½ years. So many prayed for him, but though he died, very quickly at the end, he did so peacefully in the presence of his family - and God.

His family were, naturally, very distressed and one of them said, "I've fallen out with God! What about all our prayers?"

It was not the time for theological debate or even an attempted answer, but it gets back to the point of prayer being not about changing the situation but realising God's presence with us in the midst of pain and suffering. Maybe the fact that he was upbeat to the end and without fear was the answer to prayer.

In his Letter to the Colossians, part of which we had today as our epistle, Paul gives a definition of prayer as he writes. "I am asking God that you may see things, as it were, from his point of view by being given spiritual insight and understanding."

Prayer is more about a change of attitude than a change of circumstance. Prayer can change the pray-er.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus asks us to pray for 'God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

There are two things to be said about this petition.

First, that prayer doesn't end on our knees. We have to actively work for what we pray for. Prayer is about aligning ourselves to God's will, and then being willing to do something about it. Prayer is not an easy option.

Secondly, God's will is not always done on earth as it is in heaven. God's will is often hindered and blocked. God's power lies in persuasion rather than compulsion. The achievement, the fulfilment of God's will on earth depends on human co-operation.

As St Augustine said of old, "Without God we cannot. Without us God will not." God's will is done on earth when people, WE, follow him, obey him, and put into practice his precepts of love, justice and compassion.

Our Gospel topic today is prayer, something central in the Christian life. Yet when we pray, in whatever way we do, we soon realise that it is an activity that can give so much challenge as well as comfort. It is no wonder that the disciples asked Jesus, 'Teach us to pray.'

To Pray is also a promise that Henrietta and Freda's parents and godparents are about to make. To pray for the girls as they grow up but also to teach them to pray. It is also a promise we are all about to make. The girls have been regulars at our Wednesday service and once they got used to the strange woman at the front now run up the aisle for a blessing so in their own way they know that prayer is something special.