

Praying to your Father

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 8th September 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Psalm 63:1-8, Matthew 6:5-15

Introduction: Who do you communicate with most?

Take a moment to consider these questions:

- Who are the people you know personally that you communicate with most?
- And what do you communicate about?

I've used the word "communicate" deliberately, as important conversations can take place in writing as well as by speaking, and by writing I include texting, messaging and e-mailing.

As you think about the answers you've given to these questions, ask yourself what these conversations say about the kind of relationship you have with each of these people you have identified?

Prayer as communication

What about your relationship with God? I would suggest that whether, when and how we *pray*, and what we pray about, says something about our relationship with God. After all, prayer is simply communication with God. There are many different ways of doing this, and of course communication includes listening as well as speaking. I'm guessing that most of us find prayer hard at times, if not

most of the time. It's a huge topic, and I only have time today to make a few comments about prayer. Fortunately, there are lots of useful resources available to help us, both books and other media, from phone apps to icons and holding crosses. You will find some suggestions and links on the [Prayer page](#) of our church website¹.

Relationship

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew chapter 6, Jesus gives some very important teaching about prayer. First of all, he contrasts the attitude of some very religious people of his day with what *he* thinks prayer is about.

'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'²

The real difference between the people Jesus is criticising and the way Jesus teaches his disciples to pray is not *where* they pray but *why*. The hypocrites are carrying out a ritual as a form of duty towards God, and while they are about it, they make sure that others know how pious they are. But Jesus is talking about a *relationship with our heavenly Father*. That is why we pray. It's not to inform God of our needs, because as Jesus says in verse 8, our heavenly Father knows our needs before we ask. Nor is it to impress God

¹ <https://www.stmichaels-sandhurst.org.uk/prayer.html>

² Matthew 6:5-6 NRSV

with eloquent language, which Jesus says is what Gentiles to do. We can talk to God as we would to any human being – after all, he sees what’s in our heart.

The fundamental reason why we pray, according to Jesus, is because we have a relationship with God as our loving heavenly Father. It’s between us and God, and so in that sense it’s a private thing, which is what Jesus means when he says to go into our room and pray to God in secret. Jesus isn’t saying you can only pray in a closed room, or even that this is the best place to pray. What he’s saying is that personal prayer, as opposed to prayer with others, is a private matter between you and God.

Isn’t that wonderful? God knows what’s on our hearts. He understands us even better than we know ourselves. We really can come to him, trusting that we won’t judge us for sharing our feelings, our worries, our conflicts, our doubts, even our anger and disappointment!

When we share with a friend or family member something that’s important to us, it deepens the bonds between us. The same is true with God. In today’s passage Jesus is talking about our relationship with God the Father, but we can also pray to Jesus himself, or to the Holy Spirit. A famous hymn puts it like this:

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear;
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pains we bear!

All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!³

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”⁴

What’s stopping you?

I wonder if the words of the hymn stir something in you? According to the writer, if Jesus is our friend who is always willing to listen to our prayers, and if sharing things with him can bring peace, we’d be foolish not to take advantage of this great opportunity. But he also acknowledges that so often we don’t. St Paul encourages us, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances”⁵, but most of us would admit that’s not a very accurate description of our prayer lives!

So why don’t we take advantage of the invitation Jesus gives us to grow closer to God in prayer?

For many of us, the first reason might be that we have filled our lives with so much activity that we don’t find time to stop and pray. And when we do have a space when we could pray, perhaps while driving or walking, our minds are filled with thoughts about the things that we haven’t yet done, or worrying about real or imagined problems. Or we fill the silence with entertainment.

³ *What a friend we have in Jesus* by Joseph M. Scriven (1819-1886)

⁴ Hebrews 4:15 NRSV

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 NRSV

Everyday prayer

And yet, there's no reason why a busy person can't be a praying person. If you can organise the rest of your life, and find time for the things you think are important, surely it's not impossible to programme in some time for God? The gospels tell us that Jesus got up early to spend time alone with his Father, and that he also went up into the hills at the end of the day after dismissing the crowds.⁶

Early morning may be no good for a busy parent getting children up and out to school, or for someone who has to leave early for work, but there is bound to be some point in each day when we can spend time with God. It could be while driving, or sitting in a train, or walking to the shops, or during a lunch break, or before going to sleep. The important thing is to establish a habit and stick to it. We're bound to miss some days, but the best thing is not to beat yourself up, but to start again, making adjustments where necessary.

Having a regular time of prayer is a good foundation for building a life of prayer, but there's more to it. Being a Christian is about letting God into the whole of our lives. This includes trying to remember that God is with us at all times during the day, so that we can talk to him as we go about our work, leisure and social activities. It's good to get into the habit of saying a quick prayer of thanks when something good happens, whether it's a bit of good weather, a smooth journey to work or a helpful conversation with someone. As we face a new challenge at work, or have

⁶ Mark 1:35, 6:36

to have a difficult discussion or endure sickness or surgery, let's remember that God is interested in our lives and wants to help us. So tell him how you're feeling, and ask for his help. If you see an ambulance go past with the blue light flashing, pray for whoever they are trying to help. When you hear of a disaster in the news, say a prayer for the people involved.

Simple prompts can be helpful reminders to pray – such as a prayer card stuck to the fridge, your car radio tuned to a Christian station, an alarm on your phone to remind you to pray at a suitable time of day, or a Bible verse stuck above your computer screen.

The Lord's Prayer

In addition to his general words about prayer, Jesus also gives his followers a pattern for prayer. There are many good books about the Lord's Prayer, which I recommend you to read, but I would like to finish with a few short comments.

The Lord's Prayer reflects what Jesus teaches elsewhere about prayer. First of all, it is addressed to God as "Our Father", which reminds us that being a Christian is about having a personal relationship with God. This God invites us to ask him for our needs – our need for food and other practical things, our need for forgiveness and protection from evil.

But before asking for God to meet our needs, Jesus tells us to pray for God's name to be hallowed, or honoured, for his Kingdom to come and his will to be done. A right relationship with God depends on us showing him the respect that he

deserves and submitting our lives to his will. If we call ourselves Christians, we are agreeing that God is the rightful ruler of the universe he created, that his laws are just and that our ultimate happiness lies in aligning our lives to his good purposes for the world.

That kind of attitude to God frees us from being obsessed with our own needs and wants and helps us to trust God, who is our loving heavenly Father and also the almighty, all-knowing and wise King of the Universe.

This is a God who is worth knowing for ourselves. He knows all about us, and can be trusted to listen to our prayers and answer them in whatever way is for our good and the fulfilment of his good purposes. Growing in a relationship with him is the way to finding true peace and joy.

So don't give up if prayer seems difficult. Search out ways of praying, listen to the experience of others, try new things or return to what has helped you in the past. Pray to your loving heavenly Father, or to Jesus, our Saviour and Friend, or to the Holy Spirit, who helps us in our weakness and guides our thoughts and our ways. Above all, just pray!

A poem

This poem or hymn about prayer was included in yesterday's devotional in the Lectio 365 prayer app which I was using. May it encourage us to pray!

1. Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Unuttered or expressed;
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

2. Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye,
When none but God is near.
3. Prayer is the simplest form of speech
That infant lips can try;
Prayer, the sublimest strains that reach
The Majesty on high.
4. Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air,
His watchword at the gates of death—
He enters Heav'n with prayer.
5. Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice,
Returning from his ways,
While angels in their songs rejoice
And cry, "Behold, he prays!"
6. O Thou by whom we come to God,
The Life, the Truth, the Way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod—
Lord, teach us how to pray!

James Montgomery (1771-1854)