

Prayer toolkit

praying with the Lord



AIM

To invite a fresh exploration of the Lord's Prayer. The writer provides three points of reflection and discussion about the Lord's Prayer that could be used for a discussion group, a reflective service of worship or by individuals who may want to note their thoughts and reactions in their prayer journal.

INTRODUCTION

After a year spent rediscovering the Bible, getting inside the book so that the Word can get inside of you, we may assume that the choice of 'prayer' as the second theme for Vision4Life is meant to be a similarly fresh, if not subversive, re-working of a core element of Christian life. There is little doubt that we need to encourage a new approach to prayer and praying. Who was it said that prayer is like sex - you suspect that everyone else is not only doing it more often but is better at it than you?!

To pick up from the 'year of the Bible' why don't we start with the prototype offered by Jesus? You can find this at Matthew 6, 9 - 13 or Luke 11, 2 - 4. The version in Luke is slightly simpler but doubtless Jesus used his material several times and it is the version preserved in Matthew that the Church has used from very early times. The doxology (Glory to the Father, Son and Spirit) was added for use in spoken prayer sometime in the first century¹. Begin by reading one or both of these versions of the Lord's Prayer out loud.

Though Jesus reportedly rebuked those who used too much repetition in their prayers, meaning the Pharisees, the Church has treasured this short prayer almost too literally. It is more often said than prayed. But there are three vital lessons to be learned from this prayer, especially if it meant as an example rather than a prescriptive text and these are outlined here for discussion and reflection.

1. PRAYING A SHOPPING LIST

First, it is depressing to find prayer still widely interpreted as asking, often for unlikely outcomes or *in extremis*. A personal discipline and rhythm of reading, reflection and prayer is vital for believers in any faith tradition. But for Christians Jesus will not let you misuse this prayer time or indulge yourself and relapse into the selfishness of the shopping list prayer.

We go straight to the heart of the matter, "Father". To trust God enough to accept that God

¹ In the 'Didache' (a text probably from a similar time and place as Matthew's Gospel) a doxology is added to the Lord's Prayer (Didache 7)

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really wants what is best for us is very demanding, not least in a cancer ward or on a battle field. Sadly, some people's prayer seems to be almost an effort to persuade or even cajole God to love and care, even though a moment's thought would reveal that to be a gross misunderstanding of the nature of God. Hard though it is, just assume that God wants what is good, that God is still as Jesus revealed, and then pray.

2. PRAYING IN SOLIDARITY

Second, the Jesus who said "whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret"² also left us in his prototype prayer a sequence of phrases wholly in the plural, 'us' and 'our' with not a 'me' or 'mine' in sight. We are steered well away from individualism and subjectivity. Our personal needs and feelings are catered for – while our ever-present instinct for self-righteousness is seriously undermined! Though Luke does not have the opening 'Our' to go with 'Father', the whole thrust of the Prayer in both Gospels is to establish a solidarity with all in need, all who might be included in the 'our'. Strangely perhaps in this Prayer there is nothing that we might categorise as 'intercession' - extraordinary when compared with most contemporary discussions about (and objections to) prayer which assume that prayer is only about intercession, about divine intervention or Providence ('prayer changes things'). You won't find 'intercession' in the Lord's Prayer - nor of course in Jesus' other recorded prayer in Gethsemane. Instead you are invited to pray in solidarity with everyone who can be included under 'we' or 'us'. When we pray for 'our' daily bread who can exclude the starving of famine-stricken regions? To pray for our deliverance from evil must surely include all manner of oppressed people, including prisoners and asylum seekers on every continent. In the 'Church of the Pater Noster' in Jerusalem it is moving to find this text in over 60 human languages and dialects. Who does not belong within the 'Our'? If you ask where might Jesus draw the line around those to be included in the blessings prayed for, you will soon discover that 'our' and 'we' and 'us' embraces all whom the Father has made and loves.

3. PRAYER AS COVENANT

Third, the Lord's Prayer implies a covenant with God, a relationship which requires both parties to fulfil their promises. The primary and essential point of this prayer and Christian prayer in general is that God is worthy, worthy of praise and trust because worthy of thanksgiving - because God keeps his side of the covenant. This is reminiscent of the Ten

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Commandments; our good behaviour is a response to God's grace not an attempt to secure it. So our bread is 'daily' - like the manna of the wilderness years depending on a continuous relationship with the living God. Our forgiveness is apparently conditional on our doing some forgiving too - echoing the constant call of the Old Testament prophets to God's people to act like it³. We too are to be 'fatherly', God-like on earth as in heaven. So there is nothing in this Prayer that we might categorise as 'confession', another strange omission. Yet we are to be forgiven by a God who is "always more ready to hear than we are to pray"⁴; we do not need to list our faults but only to ask for mercy, like the tax-collector in the Temple⁵. God knows, God loves, God is merciful, God is great.

CONCLUSIONS

Developing new approaches to prayer and praying would seem timely, given the misunderstanding and confusion that prevents so many people from confident prayer. Be natural; be quiet; be conversational; be reflective; be patient: these may not be the adjectives that are always used. Remember, the old formulas and patterns are not necessary; just pray.

I have only set down a few fundamentals:

- make thanksgiving the basis of your prayer,
- only pray for yourself what you are willing to pray for others,
- trust God to love you whatever and wherever.

That would seem to be at the heart of what Jesus taught about prayer. And as John put it "It is God's only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known".

PRAYER

Conclude your session by saying the Lord's Prayer, whether alone or with others, prayerfully and carefully.

² Matthew 6, 5 – 13.

³ There is more about forgiveness in Jesus' recorded teaching than about any other topic and more than in that of any other religious teacher.

⁴ collect for the 12th Sunday after Trinity

⁵ Luke 18, 9 - 14

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More information

You can find out more about the church of the Pater Noster as <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/jerusalem-church-of-pater-noster.htm>

EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

If you want more toolkit items please revisit the website. You will find other items about praying with the Bible there.

Acknowledgements

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HOW TO FEEDBACK TO VISION4LIFE?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group and the coordinator about general issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

Website issues can be dealt with through web@vision4life.org.uk

If you have comments and particularly contributions to the prayer year, you can email the V4L prayer year coordinator via prayer@vision4life.org.uk

If you want to make contributions or ask questions about other V4L years you can email:

Year 1 – Transformed by the Bible: bible@vision4life.org.uk

Year 3 – Transformed for Evangelism: evangelism@vision4life.org.uk