



Mothers' Union Quiet Day

Benedictine Abbey, Camperdown

5th March 2022

Focus: Prayer and Praying

Conductor: The Rev'd Dr Mark Garner

Morning session

The focus of our reflections today is prayer and praying. Yesterday was the World Day of Prayer, so this is a very fitting time to think about prayer itself. Our first session will concentrate on private prayer; this afternoon, we'll think about praying together.

As a background to this first reflection, let's think back over the last couple of years and the suffering of enforced separation from our loved ones. It has been very difficult, hasn't it? I couldn't count the number of people, from schoolchildren to the very elderly, who have told me how desperately they miss simply being with those who are so important to them.

With all the wonderful modern technology, of course, we can keep in touch with them. Whether it is through live video links, social media, or simply an old-fashioned telephone call, we have been able to communicate with them instantly.

We are wholeheartedly grateful for all these wonderful inventions, but even so, it is still never quite the same as being with them, whiling away the time sitting and chatting about whatever comes into our minds, being there as they go about their daily activities. Without that immediate, personal presence, we can't help losing a little of something special in the relationship.

That is why, when the restrictions were eased, so many of us made a tremendous effort to get together with those who deeply matter to us. Yet, when we could spend comfortable time together, that little lost something is quickly restored. It was as if we had never been apart.

What has this got to do with prayer? Let us go on a journey of exploration together.

First of all, let me emphasise that this is as much a learning experience for me as I hope it will be for you. Being ordained doesn't make me an expert on prayer, and I hope I never stop learning about praying, which for me is a constant challenge.

Some years ago Basil Hulme, who was then the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster in London, appeared frequently on BBC radio. He often presented Thought for the Day, was consulted for a Christian perspective on some particular topic. I'd read articles he wrote in the newspapers. He struck me as a most holy man, a person of deep and practical spirituality. Whatever he said or about living a Christian life was full of great wisdom. How I longed to have a faith like his. And one day I heard an interview in which the presenter asked Cardinal Hulme what he found most difficult about living the Christian life, he answered without hesitation: praying. I was astonished, but I was also encouraged. If a man like him struggled with prayer, I need not feel so inadequate about my own prayer life.

I hope that what I have to say in the next few minutes will help us to find answers to three questions that we should be constantly asking ourselves:

1. What is prayer?
2. Why should we pray?
3. How should we pray?

For most people, believers and unbelievers alike, what comes to mind when we mention praying is asking God for something. At its most personal, we might ask, "Lord, help me through this problem". Or we sometimes focus on others' needs: "Lord, may my friend recover quickly after the operation", or, more widely, "God bless the church". There is nothing wrong with this, of course—Jesus himself taught us to pray for ourselves and for others. But as long as our prayers consist of nothing more than asking God to do something, we are missing out on so much.

And, further, if God is all-powerful and in charge of the whole of creation, why does he need us to prod him into action?

The website of The National Day of Prayer in the UK, suggests 10 reasons for praying. They include:

1. Prayer is an act of humility: *Barnabas cartoon*. Praying reminds me that I am much less capable than I like to think, and that on my own can never meet all the challenges that face me.
2. But in prayer I offer myself to be used by God as a part of the answer.
3. Prayer is the time in which I ask God to align my loves and desires with his own.

When we pray, we follow the example of Jesus. How often do we read in the gospels of Jesus removing himself to a quiet place in order to spend time in prayer; e.g.:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (Mark 1:35).

Why would he, of all people, be so diligent in prayer? The answer lies in the reasons for praying: they are about how prayer changes *us*, not about how we can change God or force his hand.

In summary, the reason for praying is the same reason that we need to visit our loved ones. God loves us all with a passion, and wants to engage in a deep and loving relationship with us. Archbishop Hulme described prayer as "whiling away the time with God, making friends with him, and he with us".

So praying is entering into, building on, and exploring the riches of, a very special relationship. When we visit friends and family after a long separation:

- We are **reminded** of what we share
- Those aspects of the relationship that have been neglected are **restored**
- We and they are **changed** in some way by our interaction

It is the same when we spend time with Our Lord. Simply being there, relaxed in his presence, restores that intimacy that is so easily lost in the busyness of life. It also takes the focus away from me and on to God and our relationship.

Praying is not a matter of presenting a wish list to God. It is a time of sitting down with God, enjoying being with him, being reminded of his love.

I heard an interview many years ago with that great saint, Mother Theresa. The interviewer asked her where she found the strength to keep going, day after day, with all her demanding work for the poor and needy in India. The exchange went like this (as I recall it):

MT: Oh, I spend a lot of time each day in prayer

Int: So what do you say to God?

MT: I don't say anything, I just listen to him

Int: And what does God say to you?

MT: He doesn't say anything, either: he just listens to me

Prayer restores us. We do not have to face the problems of the world and our own difficulties on our own. The sentence that opened our mass this morning was an encouragement from the writer to the Hebrews:

Let us approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need

We are changed when we pray. Very often when we ask God to do something, the answer comes, not out there, but inside us.

In the light of this, **how** should we pray? Clearly, if we pray because we want a deeper relationship with God, and if we want to be open to his responding to his love, we must approach God as we are, without pretending. One of the difficulties I have struggled with in my private prayers is simply being myself, and not trying to put on a front.

I had the privilege of meeting in a relatively informal setting and talking to two monarchs, the King of Sweden and the Queen of Denmark, on separate occasions. I was given some coaching beforehand about what I should and should not say, and for the five minutes or so I spent with each I was terribly careful not to say the wrong thing. It's a similar feeling I too often have in prayer: that I need to speak to God in a proper way.

I was greatly helped by a conversation with a very different kind of person from a monarch: a poor and more or less illiterate old man, a devout Christian, who told me he prayed every evening. He said, I always start with "Lord, it's Tom". What a lovely and natural way of 'approaching the throne of grace'!

Further, we must pray in the expectation that God wants a response from us. He graciously changes us so that we can become part of the answer to the problem we are praying about. In the words of a song I used to sing as a child,

Three sayings about prayer have meant a lot to me:

- i. “God does not compel us to go against our will: he just makes us willing to go.”
- ii. “Pray as though everything depends upon God; work as though everything depends upon you”.
- iii. “When you pray, move your feet”—in other words, be ready to act as God’s Spirit leads.

Spending time alone with God is vital. Like spending time with our family and loved ones: it keeps us in touch, reminds us of our relationship, gives us an impulse to act and renewed energy and ability to do so. What we say, and how we say it, are much less important than simply being there in God’s presence.

Let me quote Cardinal Hulme to finish. “Prayer is *trying* to raise our minds and hearts to God. The only ‘failure’ in prayer is when we neglect it. The only ‘success’ is the sense of God’s presence. It is a special gift from God; we have no claim on it. Our part is simply to turn to him as best we can.”

So let us say, along with the disciples, “Lord, teach us how to pray”.

Reflection

Reading: Luke 11^{1–13}

Silence

Discussion

What aspect of prayer do you find most difficult? What is your response?

What aspect of prayer do you find most rewarding?

Is there anything you would like to comment on, or add to, in what I have been saying?

Recall for a moment what you have been praying for, at home, in church, and even today.

You have prayed, alone and in quietness—that is a vital part of our calling, but it is only a part. Another essential part is what we do next.

Think—what can you do to become part of the answer? Can you give something—money, food, or the like? Can you phone or send an e-mail? Can you go somewhere, roll up your sleeves, and get to work? Is there another person, or, that you can work with?

Afternoon session

This morning we thought about praying as individuals; in this session I want to reflect for a few minutes on communal prayer: praying together with others. Similarly to what we did this morning, I'd like to address two questions:

- Why should we pray together?
- How should we pray together?

Why pray together?

Martin Luther emphasised the need for a disciplined prayer life, and he recognised that one important way to ensure discipline was to pray with others. This is because members of a group tend to hold one another to attending at certain specified times.

Further, by praying with others we become aware of what is on their minds and hearts; we can also be encouraged by them. It is a way to avoid the kind of self-centredness that can beset us when we are praying on our own. Collective prayer is a way of reminding ourselves of the fundamental truth that we Christians are the Body of Christ: we all belong together, are committed to one another, and are called to serve one another and the world.

For most of us, communal praying occurs most frequently in church services. Being together, worshipping and praying, reminds us of our unity in Christ. When we meet in church, we are not simply a collection of individuals who happen to be in the same place. We are functioning as Christ's Body: his eyes and ears, his hands and feet in the world. We therefore need to strengthen our relationships with one another and with God, to confess our shared weakness and selfishness, and to commit ourselves to one another and to God, who is our Loving Father.

Three points we raised in our morning session are equally true of communal prayer; group praying:

- i. **reminds** us of our collective dependence on God, and of his love for us all;
- ii. **restores** us: we can feel the shared determination to bring God's love to the world, and the strength to do so which we gain from supporting and encouraging one another;
- iii. **changes** us. Just as, when we engage in a conversation with several people, each of us draws something from it, and we become ever so slightly different, in the same way a collective conversation with God causes us to develop a greater sense of belonging together, as we learn from one another, and grow closer to one another and to Our Lord.

So **how** should we pray together?

I read somewhere that, if a group of Christians spontaneously decide to have a prayer meeting, there are three kinds of reaction. If they are Quakers, they will all immediately fall silent. If they are Pentecostals, they will all immediately start talking. If they are Anglicans, they will look around for a book.

All three approaches are valid, and we can learn something important from each one. By the same token, each has its pitfalls which we need to guard against.

Praying together in silence is something Anglicans rarely practise, but it can be a powerful experience. It can give us a sense of drawing close to God in one another's presence, a sense that for us Anglicans can be lost in the layout of the church and the concentration on reading set prayers. Like Mother Teresa we are simply listening to God, but instead of doing so as individuals, we are doing so as a community of his people. This can be a powerfully moving and bonding experience.

There is a danger, though, that in the silence we become withdrawn into ourselves and lose the sense of

communality and oneness. This can make us uncomfortable with the silence. Very often in everyday life, when we are in someone else's presence, even that of a total stranger, we feel a strong desire to talk: not to say anything feels unnatural. But in the prayer group, if we can learn to remind ourselves that we are listening to God and enjoying his presence, silent communal prayer can be thoroughly uplifting.

The second approach is to pray aloud in company, spontaneously as we feel led. This kind of praying is likely to be more familiar to most of us than silent communal prayer, and it is a wonderful means by which we share our personal concerns with the group. It has the advantage of empowering each member of the group, because all are equal. It can be like a conversation we are conducting in God's presence, reinforcing our human interdependence, and learning what is on the hearts of others. It helps to connect our personal prayer with our communal prayer, and each will be enriched.

But there is always a temptation to direct our prayers, not at God, but at other people. We can feel constrained by the presence of the others to speak in a certain way, rather than entirely naturally. As a young man, the church youth group I was a member of held regular prayer meetings. I realised just how stilted and controlled our way of praying was when, on one occasion an older woman joined us for prayer. She was a very passionate and enthusiastic Christian. She started praying for the young people in the neighbourhood who were not in our youth group. Her prayer went something like this:

Lord, we pray you will work in the hearts of the young people around here, they're so lost without you: you've no idea what they get up to on Friday nights ...

I found it hard not to laugh, but it struck me what a lovely example this was of how natural talking to God in prayer was to her. May it become just as natural for us.

In our Anglican tradition, of course, we emphasise the third approach to communal prayer: we have a liturgy. This is set out for us, and we follow it, with slight variations, in each service. Different liturgies: Eucharist, Morning Prayer, Ash Weds, etc. As part of this liturgy, most of the prayers are scripted. When I became an Anglican, I found this really uplifting. The words are carefully crafted to express deep truths about our human experience, in beautiful language. It was—and still is, after many years—a powerfully moving thing. There is, of course, a danger that they become mere empty words that we repeat parrot-fashion. In order to guard against this, it is important to make a constant effort to reflect on what we are saying and to make it our own is itself good for us.

Given that liturgy is so central to communal prayer for most of us, it is helpful to keep reminding ourselves of what we can learn from it. It is far more than just an order of events, like the agenda for a business meeting. It is a carefully crafted pattern for worshipping as a community. 'Liturgy' comes from the Greek meaning 'work for the people'—it is something we are meant to engage in actively, not simply go through the motions. We not only express our faith in it; we learn our faith through it. Prayers are a central part of our various liturgies, and the different kinds of prayers remind us of different aspects of life and faith e.g.:

Collect of the day: sets the theme for the service, and we ask God to help us to learn through "the words of our lips and the meditations of our hearts".

Collect for purity: we ask God to clear our minds of the many things that distract us and can impede our worship and our fellowship with one another.

Confession: we acknowledge that we are frail human beings, and need God's forgiveness.

Thanksgiving: we encourage one another to recall and rejoice in the many blessings we receive at God's hand.

Reflection

Prayer

Lord, we come to you as a small group of the worldwide Body of Christ. We want to meet with you so we can together give you our thanks and praise and bring our weaknesses and concerns to you and seek your blessing. Too often we come together for the wrong reasons, and the prayers we offer are not what we really should be offering to you. But in your grace receive our poor offering and by your Holy Spirit transform it into a deep sense of your presence, as you gave to your disciples on the mount of transfiguration.

Lord, teach us how to pray.

Please add here anything you would like to, either internally or out loud.

We ask in the name of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Reading Ephesians 1^{15–23}

Silence

Discussion

Can you recall an occasion on which you found communal prayer particularly uplifting and enriching?

Is there any aspect of liturgical prayer that you find difficult?

When you hear the word prayer, what is the first thing that comes to mind?

Do you think about it differently after today's reflections?