

Today as we continue our series learning from Jesus we come to hear what Jesus had to say to his first disciples about prayer. I think most people who would describe themselves as followers of Jesus struggle with prayer in one way or another. In part that may well have been why these first disciples came to Jesus and said "Lord teach us to pray" (v1). Clearly Jesus had just been praying. It was something about what he did that made them ask the question. Here a last week, when we looked at Jesus washing his disciples' feet, his actions went with his words.

They saw that prayer was central in the life of their leader and so they asked him to teach them. The reference to John the Baptist and his disciples in v1 suggests that in part they may have been looking for some distinguishing mark to identify them as Jesus' disciples but Jesus seems to ignore that and simply teach about prayer in a manner that fits every one of his followers in every age and so today we will look at the passage in the hope that it will teach us about prayer and inspire us to pray as well.

### **1. It's about relationship**

I'm not sure how John the Baptist's disciples prayed but Jesus certainly gave his disciples a distinctive in their way of prayer. "When you pray, say: Father...." v2 and "your Father in heaven" v13. The passage is top and tailed by the idea that in prayer he and his disciples are speaking to God as Father.

In fact the whole passage stresses prayer as coming out of a relationship. Here he speaks of a Father in v5 of asking a friend, and in v11 he compares the heavenly Father with human fathers.

Prayer, Jesus was teaching them, is about a relationship. They were to see God as Father and in prayer speak to him as such. It was meant to be positive. However to learn that we need to understand three things; the nature of the Father, our own situation and how we are to pray.

### **2. Prayer is coming to a Father**

We must not pass too quickly over what Jesus said here about calling God Father it can be a great help to us as we think about prayer because while I realise that for some unfortunately the concept of father is not positive born out of bad experience still for most the idea of father is a positive and therefore helpful idea. To think of speaking to a heavenly Father makes us feel good about prayer. I'm sure we have all seen the film Oliver even if we haven't read the book. We are familiar with the part where Oliver in the workhouse sitting at table draws the long straw and walks towards the imposing figure of Mr Bumble. There is fear in his eyes and uncertainty in his heart as he finally blurts out "please sir I want some more". He had no expectation that the request would be favourably heard or positively answered, in fact just the opposite.

We can view prayer in that way as coming to a stern authoritarian God and trying to drag out of him things we need, but that is not what Jesus was teaching his disciples.

For Jesus prayer is not coming to some kind of authoritarian tyrant but speaking with kind, loving and generous Father.

The other day I was chatting with my son Philip on Skype and after about 15 or 20 mins he said something like “sorry I’m rambling on” to which I replied “that’s fine it is lovely to hear from you and to speak with you”. Of course as a father I am delighted to hear from him, well except in the early hours of the morning when he was lost or the car had broken down!

But the picture Jesus gives us here is that kind of picture of a heavenly Father who delights to hear from his children.

As we go through the passage Jesus gives us a picture of the nature of the Father and his response to our prayers.

**a. he is God**, “hallowed be your name, your kingdom come”, v2. It is clear here that Jesus is referring to God as father and that as God he is holy, and so to be revered and he is King. The one to whom we come is the almighty and powerful God and yet we can call him “Father”. As God we know he is able to answer prayer and so prayer is not wishful thinking or vague hope. It is coming to the one who created and sustains the universe and who as God and King is able to work out his will, especially on behalf of his children.

**b. He is giving**, “give us each day our daily bread,” v3; “ask and it will be given you” v9; “how much more will your Father in heaven give” v13. As Jesus taught them to pray to God as Father there was a clear expectation that God would give to them his children. That is especially the point of vs11-13 where Jesus says that if human fathers fallible as we are give good things to our children how much more will the heavenly Father gives us good things and especially the Holy Spirit, his presence in us to enable us to live his way.

It is also the point of the slightly odd story in vs5-8. There Jesus makes the point that if a friend comes even late at night and in the worst of circumstances and asks we humans will eventually do what we can to help. But with God there is no inconvenient time, there is no worst of circumstances and the comparison is clear a friend will respond perhaps reluctantly and even grudgingly but God is neither of those. He delights to give good things to his children.

**c. He is good** that again is the point of v11-13 as a human parent will give only good things to a child how much more will God make sure that what he gives us is good and a blessing?

**d. he is forgiving**, “forgive us our sins” v4. There is the expectation that God will do that for us. It reminds us again that God doesn’t give us what we deserve and in this we see the grace of God in

that while we are so often rebellious disobedient children in need of forgiveness yet still God the Father gives us good things.

Can you see the picture Jesus is building here of God the Father who as God is able to respond to our prayers and as good and generous responds positively for our good.

This is the God we speak to in prayer, our Father.

Jesus was encouraging his disciples in this to come in prayer with a positive attitude. I hope it does the same for us.

### **3. We are God's children**

In telling the disciples to say "Father" Jesus was establishing them as God's children and again as we look through the verses we can get an idea of what that meant for them and us.

**a. we are needy**, "give us each day our daily bread" v3 it acknowledges that we have basic needs which we are not able to fulfil ourselves. The whole idea of prayer as Jesus shows it here is of us recognising our need.

**b. we are dependent** when we see our need we realise that we can't meet those needs ourselves and as children we are dependent upon our heavenly Father to meet our needs.

I think that one of the biggest problems many of us have with prayer is an unrealistic sense of what we can achieve on our own in our own strength. Is this not so? Are we not often to be found battling along as if we are left alone on the wild sea of the world in which we live when actually there is a great and mighty God ready and willing to help.

All that Jesus says here is a reminder to these disciples of their dependence of God for food, for forgiveness, for everything in life now and eternally.

If we will not come to God as children we will never know the power of prayer.

### **4. How does Jesus want us to pray?**

Well he wants us first to recognise that in him we are children of God and as God's children he wants us to pray that is he wants us to talk to our heavenly Father.

In all that he says here I think three practical things stick out.

**a. Ask** – Jesus expects his followers to ask our heavenly Father for what we need be it our daily bread or whatever. Jesus told them to ask, seek, knock which all come to the same of asking God for what we need. I know people say prayer is more than asking but in the Bible and especially in the New Testament almost every time the word prayer is used it is about asking. But of course we Brits get diffident about this because well we don't like to ask. The clear command of Jesus is "Ask".

Friends that is what children do – they ask for things and often unashamedly.

So what is it that you need? Is it to see a family member come to faith? Is it a friend's healing? Is it to see a Christian brother or sister in prison for their faith be freed? Ask – God tells us to.

Do you want to grow in your faith, do you want to be forgiven for past wrongs, do you want to be better able to serve God then ask.

If you are not too sure about asking then listen to your children or grandchildren and learn from them. God wants us to ask.

**b. Expect** – in all that Jesus says here there is an expectation that God will respond to our requests. I mean it is hard not to see it isn't it. The story about the man who went to his friend, the man expected his friend to give him what he needed and the point is how much more can we expect God to give and this is why the next verse begins "so". Asks and it will be given to you. As we pray we should expect God to answer.

Some years back I heard a story from a clergyman. He'd been a Vicar in Liverpool and one day a lady came to him and asked "Do parakeets eat celery?" When he asked the reason for her question she told him that while she had been doing her work as a cleaner at the docks that morning she'd seen a shipment of parakeets. However, she'd been told by one of the dockers that, because of a strike that was taking place, they would probably die of malnutrition. She was upset by that and prayed that God would do something. On her way out of the docks she came across a pile of celery that had fallen off a lorry. Was this the answer to her prayer and hence the question, "Do parakeets eat celery?"

There was expectancy a looking for the answer. Does your child or grandchild say can I have an ice cream and then walk away without waiting for an answer?

However if we are going to look for answers then our prayers must be specific.

In their recent news letter Michael and Nicki Duncalfe our link missionaries in Papua –New Guinea report that over 100 Bibles were sold in 3 days and then noted that the supplier had run out of Bibles and said, "please pray that more will come in quickly". That is specific and they will be able to see how God answers that prayer. To pray God bless Mummy and Daddy may be OK but hard to see the answer so try and be specific and then look for the answer.

**c. Remember** – that God our Father is God and he may not always give us everything we ask for even as a human parent doesn't give everything a child asks for.

I have mentioned before that in times past I used to read the Perishers a cartoon strip in the Daily Mirror. In one cartoon a little boy, Baby Grumplin is walking to church with his sister Maisie and the conversation goes like this, "If I pray very hard I'll get everything I want won't I Maisie?" "Well everything within reason." "Here what's this within reason lark? Ask and thou shalt receive is what it says!" Maisie responds "Oh I shall loose patience I shall. It means ask for something proper something unselfish, something within reason. To which Baby Grumplin replies "I knew I should have read the small print."

Well Maisie has got it right and wrong yes we are to ask and yes we will receive but in all we need to remember that God's will for us is perfect and he will only give us what is good for us or what is in accord with his purpose.

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Father everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Yet not what I will but what you will" (Mark 14:36). As we know it was not the will of the Father to keep Jesus from death.

As we pray we need to remember God will only give us what is good for us or what is in accord with his purpose.

Friends I know this only too well. Daily I pray to be able to bowl a cricket ball like Stuart Broad and often end up bowling like Stuart Little! But then God knows my pride and it wouldn't be good for me!

But seriously Jesus here is not encouraging us to act as if God is some celestial philanthropist just giving us everything we want. However that does not mean that God does not answer our prayer. When your child or grandchild ask for a third cake you answer them but the answer is not what they want to hear and sometimes it is so with God, his answer is no and sometimes we find that hard and we cannot understand. But then we are children and as such are called to trust our heavenly Father. What has Jesus to teach us about prayer? He tells us it about our relationship with God who is our Father in heaven to whom we come as loved children and of whom we can ask anything knowing that he will give to us what is for our good, our spiritual and physical welling and as a blessing through us to others.

It is as we shall be reminded in our closing hymn a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! And again as we shall be reminded we forfeit peace and we needlessly bear pain when we will not come to God in prayer.