

St Mary Magdalen, Oxford

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Luke 11, vv. 1-13

First let me assure anyone who might be a little nervous that I am not taking as my starting point any advertisements in shops around our church, as I did a few Sundays ago. I turn straight to our gospel reading from Luke chapter 11, and the request of the disciples to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

We can imagine the scene. The disciples knew that John had taught his followers to pray. They knew Jesus went aside to pray alone; and they wanted to know what he did and how to do it. In a sense they are like many Christians – perhaps the majority of us. We know we should pray, that we need to pray, but often we feel we don’t know how. Luke shows Jesus giving them a simple but deep prayer, and then follows it up with two homely little vignettes about a grudging friend who has locked up the house for the night and gone to sleep, and the loving father who gives what his child asks for. Together they underline the need to persevere in prayer, and the gracious generosity of God in pouring out his Holy Spirit on those who ask him.

The Lord’s Prayer must be the most well known of all prayers. It is essentially very simple. It is also a deeply Jewish prayer, though we often forget that. It is rooted in Old Testament imagery. For example, blessing the name of God would have taken its first hearers back to the significance of God’s name as indicating his very nature. In the book of Exodus we read (ch.33 & 34) how God promised to proclaim his name to Moses, indicating his great mercy towards his people: “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” Or the imagery of the daily bread would have reminded the disciples of the manna in the wilderness, which was collected daily, just enough for the road ahead (Exodus 16, 4). Essentially the Lord’s Prayer is what I call to myself a “Kingdom Prayer”. We are taught to bless the name of God and remember his fundamental nature of love and faithfulness, and to ask that his kingdom should

be established on earth. We ask for strength and the physical and spiritual resources to be citizens and servants of that kingdom.

But of course as the disciples spent more time with Jesus they would have observed his habits of prayer and learned from them as well. Jesus went to the synagogue and participated in the community prayer of his people as well as on occasion reading the scriptures to the congregation. He had learned to go with his family to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. He used the psalms for his own prayer, and the gospel writers suggest that the psalms were on his heart and lips as he died. But more than these types of prayer he clearly also spent much time apart in silence with God. It was perhaps that marked his prayer out so clearly from those of God-fearing Jews of his day. He communed with God as with a Father, and told his followers to address God as Father. It is significant that the teaching on prayer in Luke comes just after the little episode in the house of Mary and Martha, when he commended Mary for “just listening” – whereas Martha was buzzing about being a good housewife and hostess. It soon became clear to those who were to form the early church that the teachings and practice of Jesus showed them a whole new way of praying: but more than this the gift of the Holy Spirit meant that the very Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus himself, was praying within them. Paul made this clear in writing to the Christians in Rome (Romans 8, vv. 26-7) and in Galatia (Galatians 4, v.6): because we are God’s children “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’”

So what can we learn about our practice of prayer from the experience of the first disciples.

The first thing is that prayer is an essential characteristic of Christian identity and life. If we do not pray we really cannot call ourselves Christians. But of course it is not just that we should pray: it is that prayer is actually our life blood. Or to change the metaphor from a physical to a horticultural one, it is one of the essential ways we are the branches of Jesus as the true vine. As one hymn-writer put it, “We perish if we cease from prayer.” (James Montgomery – 1772-1854: *Lord, teach us how to pray aright*) Fr. Rowan Williams, in his marvellous little book, *Being Christian*, takes as the hallmarks of Christian identity Baptism, Bible, Eucharist and Prayer.). For anyone

who feels stuck in prayer I would recommend his chapter on prayer as a wonderful source of refreshment and renewal in prayer. Prayer should consist of both community prayer and individual prayer – though to call any prayer “individual” is actually the wrong word, as all prayer is within that of the cloud of witnesses by whom we are surrounded. Every time we say a daily office, every time we celebrate the Eucharist, every time we cry out in pain and anguish, every time we repent, we are supported by all those holy souls who are around us and have gone before us. And of course every time we feel we cannot pray, they are there holding us up, praying for us. One of my favourite reminders of this comes in Elgar’s Dream of Gerontius, when the dying Gerontius says, “Pray for me my friends, who have not strength to pray.” I often think when I celebrate a quiet weekday Mass here that we do this for those who cannot be there, and we do this with those who have gone before us. The basic pattern of both community and individual prayer is the same: Praise, thanksgiving, repentence and petition.

The second lesson from our reading today and also from the insistence of all the great teachers of prayer is that of persistence, of the need to turn up, regularly, however one feels. That’s the point, of course, of the Luke story of the man who eventually hauls himself out of bed to answer the persistent knocking at his door by his neighbour. Prayer has to become a deeply engrained habit like brushing one’s teeth or locking the door at night. What we do habitually changes us – for good or for ill. It is through this persistence in prayer that we become more and more deeply available to the work of the Holy Spirit in us; more and more enabled to grow into the fullness of the stature of Christ.

What the disciples saw of Jesus’s habits of prayer, and of course his response to Mary and Martha, suggests that silence and stillness are just as important if not more so than words in prayer. Jesus himself warned against many words in prayer, and against obvious external piety. Far more important was to go to a private place and be still before and with God. There are some people, perhaps very many, including Christians, who are deeply worried at the idea of silence, and frightened at what may surface in silence before God. Words can indeed be a defence against realities that we have to face within ourselves if we are to grow in Christ. Not all of us are called

primarily to contemplative prayer. But Christians are called to descend from superficiality to the depths of their being in order to be in the presence of God. It is what the Eastern tradition often calls descending into the prayer of the heart.

Finally, and perhaps the hardest really to take in, is that in a real sense prayer is not what we do but what Christ through the Holy Spirit does in us. Christ of course prays for us like a great High Priest. And you will remember that the author of John's gospel (ch.17) puts into the Lord's mouth what is sometimes called the great High Priestly prayer – as he prays for those he has loved and taught. In case we feel that prayer is not for us remember the words, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word." (v. 20) One of our great Eucharistic hymns includes the words, "Intercessor, friend of sinners, earth's Redeemer, plead for me." But Christ does not just pray for us. He prays in us. So in some sense we do not need to worry about prayer. Provided we turn up and turn our hearts to God, whatever we feel, however badly we assume we are praying, Jesus himself prays in us and looks in love towards the Father. And that of course in time changes us. It begins to realign our hearts and wills to those of Christ himself. It is the fertile soil in which we grow slowly into what we are meant to be – into the full stature of Christ himself. (Ephesians 4: 13).