

8 August 2020

Why (and How) Do We Pray? (Luke 11.1-13)

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‘Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray”, as John taught his disciples. He said to them, “When you pray”, say this ... do it this way. It sounds so straightforward. But in practice ... well, we know how complex it can feel, how many questions prayer raises. Here are three of them ...

Rob

I was recently asked by someone I hardly know to pray for her neighbour’s nephew who is working in a Melbourne aged care home that he not be infected by the virus. This seemed to be an extreme example of the sort of intercessory prayer that has me stumped. I can understand how such prayer may help me to be more compassionate towards others which in turn may make them more compassionate and so on, but that is really avoiding the issue. The clear expectation is that my prayer will help keep the neighbour’s nephew safe.

These sorts of prayer requests are more often in the form “John gets his test results tomorrow. Please pray that the cancer has not spread.” I never really know how to reply. From a pastoral point of view how do we respond to these requests?

James

In the Lord’s Prayer which we say during communion the text when I was a kid used to be “lead us not into temptation” and now the text is “save us from the time of trial”. And I am curious about the doctrine(s) of the idea that we (the faithful) get to ask for special exemption from adverse events (as if God is an interventionist God) or whether I am not understanding the meaning behind the words and that I should be understanding something else in a broader context.

Tess

Why do we pray?

I’m sure that every one of us has grappled with the question of prayer and particularly with the practice of intercession and petition. Sometimes this grappling occurs in abstract, as a theological conundrum; but often it’s in wrenching anguish as we or those around us drown in the mire beneath an apparently indifferent heaven.

So many prayers seem to go unanswered. So much of what passes for prayer seems mere superstition or magical thinking. So why do we pray? How ought we?

The story of Jesus teaching his disciples what we call ‘the Lord’s prayer’ is told in two of the gospels – Luke and Matthew. The context in which he does so is interestingly distinct. In Luke’s version, as we heard, Jesus has just himself been praying and when he’s finished one of his disciples asks how to pray. Jesus gives his instruction, and then goes on to elaborate the need for perseverance in prayer while assuring them of the goodness of God. The emphasis suggests that knowing how to pray involves knowing the character of the one to whom you pray – recognizing God as a ‘Father who knows how to give good gifts’.

Matthew’s version of events is located differently. In this gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, not in response to their inquiry, but as part of the Sermon on the Mount, the part where he warns about self-conscious, falsifying religiosity. Beware of practising your piety before others, he says; do not make a song and dance when you give alms, do not fast ostentatiously, and do not pray loudly on street corners or in the synagogue so as to be admired for your virtue, heaping up empty phrases like the Gentiles, as if the more you say the more effective you’ll be. Rather, when you pray, Jesus says, ‘go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret’.

As in Luke’s account, Matthew’s Jesus encourages trust in God’s goodness – this whole block of teaching culminates with his exhortation ‘not to worry about anything, for ‘your Father knows what you need’. But Matthew emphasises also the being of the person who prays. Prayer is not performance and it’s not manipulation. True prayer is connected with humility, unselfconsciousness and radical God-centredness. ‘Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well’ (Matthew 6.33).

And what I notice in both these accounts are some striking theological assumptions embedded in Jesus’ teaching on prayer. For one thing, there is no sense in which God needs to be placated, cajoled or sacrificed to. God is simply good and wants our good. Jesus’ Father is not capricious and does not require buttering up; he

doesn't play favourites like the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, but rather knows what we need before we ask and yearns to give it to us. The corollary of this is that Jesus encourages a radical new intimacy in the way we relate to God, inviting us to consider ourselves as children in a 'trustworthy family relationship'.¹ Prayer is not about earning brownie points or proving our worthiness but daring to lay open our dependence and the depth of our need, before the One who will not shame or reject us.

That sounds good. Yet doesn't it raise a bunch of further questions? If God knows what we need before we ask, then why do we need to ask in the first place? And what about when we do ask, and don't receive? God is good, we're told, but if that's true, why is there so much innocent and pointless suffering in the world? Or is that wrong question? Maybe God isn't the kind of power that intervenes in the natural order. But if that's so, then why do we pray? What is it legitimate to ask for? Can prayer affect events? Or does it just improve our relationship to events, as Rob suggests?

Well, none of this is easily resolved. And rather than hoeing in to these questions directly, I want to start by offering a framework to orient ourselves. Because it seems to me that we can't get anywhere in our understanding of Christian prayer, without distinguishing first between prayers that issue from the ego-ic self and prayer that issues from the self surrendered to God. Ego-ic prayer reflects primarily my agenda, my view of the world. It need not be selfish. I can pray for all kinds of well-meaning outcomes – the health of friends and family, the peace of the world – and yet it still be ego-ic prayer. What makes it so is simply that the prayer is sourced in my thoughts, my ways, my desires ... it's prayer that seeks what I think is needed and reflects what I think I would do, if I were God.

Self-surrendered, self-emptied prayer arises at a different level and from a different place. And it's this self-emptied posture in prayer that Jesus teaches. The

¹ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p.60.

first half of the Lord's Prayer is designed precisely to draw us beyond our ego-ic preoccupation and agenda, to draw into surrender and other-centred attention.

Our Father in heaven
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

I wonder what happens in you as you pray these words? My experience, when I really give my attention to them as opposed to just rattling them off by rote, is usually of deep relief and the quieting of agitation. I come to prayer full of anxiety, need, anguish for myself and the world. These words take me into a space where my concerns are immediately related to a reality far larger than me, and not all depending on me. They invite me to be handed over, yielded in faith – and not just as an isolated individual, but as someone who belongs to the whole, who is simply one among many members of human family. 'Our Father'.

From this self-emptied posture, Jesus then invites us to name our need, our dependence on gift. God, he says, knows our need already – knows who we are, our creatureliness. But there's something about *us* knowing it, naming it, that awakens our receptivity and strengthens our trust. 'Give us this day our daily bread'. And as I pray this, as I yield any pretence at self-sufficiency, I become present to a yearning that all that lies between me and God, me and others, be dissolved. 'Forgive us what we owe, what we've done or haven't done that's left a legacy of unresolvedness – a debt' – forgive us that, as we forgive the legacy of unresolvedness, the debts that are owed to us. It's a prayer for peace, reconciliation. And then, finally, 'do not bring us to *peirasmos*', the time of trial, temptation, hard testing – the place where we're at risk of despair, of being overwhelmed and broken. And though we are often not saved from experiencing such testing, maybe the prayer is about acknowledging our vulnerability, asking not to be tried beyond our strength, inviting trust in the availability of help.

The 'Our Father' is, thus, a profoundly contemplative prayer – a prayer of radical self-emptying and other-centring. Its effect is to open us to the gift of God's Spirit, and so to join us more completely to God. 'If you then, who are evil', Jesus says, 'know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' To pray in the way Jesus taught is to be brought into his own relationship with God. And this relationship is a continuous stream of loving self-communication – the Father poured out to the Son, the Son poured back to the Father, through the Spirit. The great 4th century theologian, Evagrius Ponticus, described prayer as 'a continual intercourse of the spirit with God', and the summit of prayer for St Paul was to allow God's Spirit to pray in us, 'for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words' (Romans 8.26).

And all this implies that the basic framework of Christian prayer is the reverse of what we tend to think. Jesus teaches us to pray not as if we were separate from or 'outside' God, desperately trying to get God to do something good or meet our needs. Rather, the whole point of our prayer is to draw us to the *inside* of God. We stand now in the same relation to God as Jesus does, beloved children of a loving Father, God's own Spirit alive within us. From this place, intercession is not about advocating on behalf of the world to a distant divinity; it's about us being joined *with* the God who is always coming to the world, seeking to bridge the gap between love and its refusal, between God's creating, redeeming purpose all that is alienated, resisting and afraid. This is how Christ lived and prayed. He came, from God and as God, to heal the world. As St Paul puts it: 'in Christ *God* was reconciling the world to himself'. And now, God is entrusting this message, this work of reconciliation to us'. (2 Corinthians 5: 19-20).

Sometimes we fantasise about a god who just waves suffering away and disarms all that flows from human fear, malevolence, intransigence. But this is not who and how God works – at least not on the Christian vision. The God of Jesus Christ transforms death and the pain of the world only by entering into it and undergoing it, encompassing it, suffusing it with love. The same is asked of us if we

want to participate in the world's healing. Intercession isn't hurling requests at God from a safe distance, but joining with God so as to enter more deeply into and bear the world's pain in our bodies and our hearts.

Sometimes when we're asked to pray for a good outcome – for a neighbour's nephew, for example, that he not be infected by corona virus – the request itself comes from a place of magical thinking, as if somehow with enough lobbying, God as distant deity might be persuaded to make a special intervention. I don't think that's how it works. So what would Christian prayer look like here? I think it might begin with that moment of self-emptying, let ourselves become still, collected, opened to the love of God. From that posture, we would let ourselves be present to what it might be like to be someone working in an aged care facility in this time of pandemic, carrying that kind of responsibility for others and fear for yourself. As we sit in this awareness, there grows in us a sense of empathy, connection, even love for our neighbour's nephew, whom we do not know but who is our brother. We might sense ourselves joined to him, to those he cares for and works with, and in prayer draw them with us into the stream of the Spirit's love – the Spirit of God who has animated our praying and been here all along.

Does this prayer affect the outcome? Does it change what might happen to him? On the surface, it doesn't always seem to. Even so, I do believe that truly self-emptied, self-offering prayer deepens our connection and the connection of others to the good, to God. It activates love, opens a channel for compassion and grace to flow in and through us – and that is necessarily healing, reconciling, even if we can't always see how. Why do we pray? We pray, John Main says, to dispose ourselves 'for the full liberation of the life of the Spirit within us, which is the prayer of Jesus and his vital connection with the Father'.² We pray to give ourselves for love of our neighbours and the world, that God's will might be done and God's kingdom come. So be it.

² John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main*, ed. Laurence Freeman (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), p.47.