

Order of Service 24th July 2022

Ready, Steady, Pray!

Welcome

Hello, and welcome to Hearsall at home for 24th July 2022. Today we reflect on the topic of prayer.

Call to Worship

We come to worship the God who calls us into relationship with him, not just for a holy Sunday hour, but throughout our week. Let us present ourselves to him, just as we are, offering him praise and thanksgiving, and fine-tuning our lives away from what is unsatisfactory or false and towards all that is good and true.

Hymn (BPW 559) Love Divine

1. Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of Heav'n to earth come down;
Fix in us thy humble dwelling;
All thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.
2. Come, Almighty to deliver,
Let us all Thy grace receive;
Suddenly return, and never,
Never more Thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as Thy hosts above,
Pray and praise Thee without ceasing,
Glory in Thy perfect love.

3. Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in Heav'n we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Prayer

Lord, remembering how you taught your disciples to pray we cry out:

Father - let us live as your beloved children.

May your name be honoured - let us revere all that is good in this world.

Let your kingdom come - we submit to your will and do not seek to impose our own.

Give us today our daily bread - we cry out that all hungry children should be fed in this world and commit ourselves to doing what we can to make that a reality.

Forgive us our sins - we know we have erred, and we thank you for the mercy Jesus demonstrated on the cross.

As we forgive others - let your mercy flow through us like fresh water, and help us if our hearts are stagnant with unforgiveness.

Lead us not into temptation - we recall your promise not to test us beyond endurance and we feel safe and secure in life's adventure with you.

All things come from you. Alleluia!

All things return to you. Alleluia!

Every good and perfect gift comes from your hand. Alleluia!

Amen.

And we sing of our heart's desire to allow Christ's kingdom to come in us in our next song, *Over all the earth... Lord, reign in me!*

Song (WT 342) **Over All the Earth**

Verse 1

Over all the earth
You reign on high;
Every mountain stream,
Every sunset sky,
But my one request,
Lord, my only aim
Is that You'd reign in me again.

Chorus

*Lord, reign in me,
Reign in Your power
Over all my dreams.
In my darkest hour
You are the Lord
Of all I am,
So won't You reign in me again?*

Verse 2

Over every thought,
Over every word
May my life reflect
The beauty of my Lord
'Cause You mean more to me
Than any earthly thing,
So won't You reign in me again?

Chorus x 2

Won't You reign in me again? x 2

Offering

Lord for the joy of giving we thank you. Please accept our gifts to church and charity and may they be a way of bringing your kingdom into our world. Amen.

Our prayers of intercession are led by Denise Rée.

Prayers of Intercession

Heavenly Father, we come before you now with our prayers for the world.

We intercede on behalf of those in need of your loving care.

We pray for the earth as it changes heating and causing us all concern for the plants, creatures and ourselves. We ask for guidance on what to do about climate change and how it will all be paid for.

We think of those who found the heatwave unbearable and the damage it caused.

We pray for the leaders of our country and that they vote wisely in the upcoming leadership battle.

We pray for those who are ill or in pain right now, that they will find healing and comfort.

We also think about the children and young people and their families as they start the long summer break. For some it will be a welcome relief but for others it holds many mixed feelings, the lack of routine, the loss of their safe refuge from the trials of family life. We pray that it will be a time of rest, before they return to their routine in September or onto new adventures at college, university or even work for the first time.

And finally, Lord, as we give thanks for the safe arrival of a healthy baby girl to our fellowship. We think of those who are still to welcome their little bundles of joy or who have not had such a joyous outcome.

We pause for a while for our personal prayers...

Hear our prayers, Lord. AMEN

Many thanks Denise for those prayers.

We hear our Bible readings now from the Psalms and from Luke.

Bible Readings

Psalm 85

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

- ¹ You, LORD, showed favour to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
- ² You forgave the iniquity of your people
and covered all their sins.
- ³ You set aside all your wrath
and turned from your fierce anger.
- ⁴ Restore us again, God our Saviour,
and put away your displeasure towards us.
- ⁵ Will you be angry with us for ever?
Will you prolong your anger through all generations?
- ⁶ Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?
- ⁷ Show us your unfailing love, LORD,
and grant us your salvation.
- ⁸ I will listen to what God the LORD says;
he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants –
but let them not turn to folly.
- ⁹ Surely his salvation is near those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- ¹⁰ Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
- ¹¹ Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,
and righteousness looks down from heaven.
- ¹² The LORD will indeed give what is good,
and our land will yield its harvest.
- ¹³ Righteousness goes before him
and prepares the way for his steps.

Luke 11: 1 - 13

Jesus' teaching on prayer

11 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.’

² He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:

“Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation.”

⁵ Then Jesus said to them, ‘Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.” ⁷ And suppose the one inside answers, “Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.” ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

⁹ ‘So I say to you: ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹ ‘Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’

We sing some of those beautiful gospel words now. *Seek ye first...*

Song (WT 365) *Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God*

Seek ye first the Kingdom of God,
and His righteousness,
and all these things shall be added unto you;
Allelu – Alleluia! *Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Allelu – Alleluia!*

Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word
that proceeds from the mouth of God;
Allelu – Alleluia!
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Allelu – Alleluia!

Ask and it shall be given unto you;
seek and ye shall find;
knock and the door shall be opened unto you;
Allelu – Alleluia!
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Allelu – Alleluia!

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart,
he shall direct thy path,
in all thy ways acknowledge him;
Allelu – Alleluia!
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Allelu – Alleluia!

Sermon

Ready, Steady, Pray!

Prayer,

How do you feel about it?

We might feel expected to answer that prayer is a great privilege and an effective tool for good. But some of us struggle with prayer and may feel vaguely guilty that we don't pray more than we do. Many people feel they are not very good at prayer. Some just don't really understand it; why does God want us to ask for things that he wants to do anyway?

Well, first of all, today I want to get you to relax and to remove all the guilt about prayer. Jesus took a dim view of those who saw prayer as an elite spectator sport, praying on street corners to be seen by others! Real prayer is more intimate, personal and genuine. God invites us into prayer because it is truly for our good.

Well, have a look through Psalm 85. I want to notice some things it implies about prayer.

Psalm 85

The qualities I notice in this Psalm are:

- It is a **written** prayer - such as we might write in our journals
- It **remembers God's mercy, love and faithfulness** in days gone by
- It brings a **request** for more mercy
- And the prayer is quite comfortable too, with **asking questions** and expressing how we really feel
- It becomes **poetically beautiful** around the topics of love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace... They are personified as lovers, friends or family members. This gets in touch with the feelings the poet wants to feel once more: **Harmony, love, delight** and **all being right with the world**, with God in his heaven.
- And the Psalm concludes with a statement of faith.
Journaling is good for mental health, studies have shown. And so, if you feel drawn to it, you'd likely benefit from writing similar prayers in notebooks or journals.

What do you learn from the Psalm? Talk about it with a friend; or write about it in a journal.

Well, what about our reading from Luke 11? What do you learn about prayer from that reading?

Luke 11: 1 - 13

First of all, Jesus himself was **praying**. One disciple asks for guidance on prayer - that's what John (the Baptist) did for his disciples. It's what spiritual gurus do - they teach people how to pray.

In Luke's version, Jesus' response is so **terse** as to make the Lord's Prayer feel like headings for prayer, rather than a finished prayer in fancy words. It's arguably an aide memoire in bullet point form, rather than special fancy liturgical words to learn by heart.

- It begins with a simple **relational word**: Father. This is a signal that prayer is about rooting ourselves in a benevolent relationship. It's for our good.
- It continues to **honour** Father God. Prayer honours all that is best within us, all that is loving within us, which is God. Prayer then naturally nurtures all that is good in our existence as humans. I've been watering some plants my wife put in the garden, to nurture them through heat stress. In a stressful world, prayer nurtures all that is best within us. So pray!
- Jesus' prayer then asks for his kingdom to come - prayer is **seeking for earth to meet God's standards**, not persuading God to fit in with what earth fancies. Many of our difficulties with prayer stem from the way that, in effect, we are saying *my will be done*, rather than *thy will be done*.
- Next, Jesus' model for prayer encourages the asking for daily bread for **us** - this is not a selfish demand for personal luxuries, but a **heart's cry for justice for all** - that all will be fed. In this time of rising food crisis across the world, in the Lord's prayer we remember the poor of the earth and we pray, give us all this day our daily bread.
- It goes on to **forgiveness** - we all sin, and so we all need mercy... But Jesus links forgiveness with our own forgiveness. Forgiveness is like a river that flows through us. That river washes away our faults every day, and it enables us to channel that same river of grace and goodness to others who may have offended us. And when we're not able to do that, our hearts can get a bit stagnant, and we continue to pray for the grace to let go and to let forgiveness flow on beyond ourselves.
- It concludes with a prayer against temptation or **undue testing**. Life is hard. Elsewhere, scripture promises that God will never test us beyond our endurance. This last bullet-point of prayer encourages us to enter a secure space before we get on with our day. Sometimes we think of it as putting on the armour of God. **Whatever happens, we will be able to cope.**

A parable follows which is simply designed to teach only one point, namely **persistence** in prayer. Don't give up! Prayer is a way of living, not an occasional activity.

And the gospel reading concluded with some famous teaching. Ask, seek, knock, and God will respond. Again, the **relational** component comes through. He is better-than-an-earthly-father and will give good gifts to his children. And the good gift par excellence is truly wonderful: the Holy Spirit - ie: the **presence of God** in the life of the beloved!

This brings us again to the heart of prayer, Jesus' style - a deep and wide connection with God.

Did you learn anything else from our gospel reading? Reflect on it more deeply alone, write on it in that journal, or discuss it with a friend.

* * *

Now let us explore some practical tips on praying. These are not all for everyone - some may suit you; others may not. You will have other ideas, and I hope you find a way of sharing them too. Here are my own thoughts:

First of all, consider praying with your pen or your keyboard. Psalms are written-down prayers, so we have 150 worked examples in the Bible. The advantages of writing our own prayers are twofold. Firstly, writing encourages us to think more carefully about the content of our prayer. Secondly, a written prayer can be reviewed, and we can look back and see how life has developed after that prayer was prayed.

Secondly, pray whenever you like. The film *The Two Popes* retells an old joke. A monk goes to his spiritual director and asks, *Can I smoke whilst I pray?* He is told, of course not - that would seem rude to God. But a fellow monk suggests he is asking the wrong question. Instead ask, *Can I pray whilst I smoke?* Well, I don't recommend smoking, but whatever you are doing, maybe that can be accompanied by prayer.

Third, plan for a bit more quiet in your life. Consider not always having the radio or the TV on. Tone down your use of your mobile phone and of social media, which can be very destructive of a proper prayerful attitude, because they foster a performative, *look-at-me* lifestyle, rather than an extended trust in God. Slip outdoors at night and ponder in the dark and don't put it on FaceBook. God, who sees in secret according to Matthew's gospel, will reward you, but if you publicise your spiritual activity, well, you have had your reward in your FaceBook likes, and can expect no further blessing

from God. In these little fragments of private quiet, you enter the heart of the universe. Take the occasional solitary prayer walk. If you find you are sensing God more deeply in these little fragments of silence, consider dedicating longer periods to silent prayer. Maybe think about going on a retreat some time this year or next year.

Fourthly, stop talking about God answering prayer. God *always* answers prayer. God promises to give the Holy Spirit to those who seek him. If we ask for some particular thing selfishly, then we probably won't get that thing, but God will still be present, ready to forgive our sins and fill us with his mercy and grace, to pour love copiously into our hearts, and to give the Holy Spirit in generous measure: pressed down and running over. Talking of God answering prayer can betray a transactional approach to prayer, whereas prayer for Jesus is primarily relational. It's not about getting what you want, it's about being your best self.

Fifthly, if we don't feel that mercy and love persist in prayer anyway, Don't draw a negative conclusion that God is not interested in you. Rather, draw the positive conclusion, that God seeks to reveal Godself to you in new ways. The so-called dark night of the soul refers not so much to a traumatic time or to depression. Rather, it is about God hiding from us when we seek him in familiar, superficial ways, so as to draw us into a deeper and purer connection with him.

Sixthly, don't equate prayer with fancy words. The gospels teach that prayer is not about babbling on with many words. But neither is it about impressing God with fancy words. Some of us may have the gift of the gab and can turn a pretty phrase on demand. But that cuts no ice with God. In fact, words are a step away from the core of prayer, which is a heart in tune with God. Getting fixated on fancy, wordy prayers is a snare.

Seventhly, remember the three most important things about prayer are: relationship, relationship and relationship! Prayer fine-tunes our own relationship with God. In fact, it's essential to pray deeply for ourselves, so that we are ready to serve him in the world. In prayer we experience again that we are the beloved. Prayer also expresses our loving care of each other, rehearsing and developing our tender care for those we love, so that that care will also be seen in practical terms. And prayer, in some unseen ways, fosters everyone's relationship with God. Sometimes when I

pray, all I am doing is holding the one for whom I pray in the loving presence of God. I don't really comprehend how, but I am convinced that makes a difference, not only to my own thoughts about the one for whom I pray, not only to my subsequent way of relating to them more kindly or considerately, but directly holding someone in the love of God, makes a difference to their lived experience. Jesus taught us to pray even for our enemies. When we pray for any who oppose us, then, at least for the moment, they are no longer opponents, but friends. In the deepest form of prayer, we enter the heart of God where everyone is held in love.

What further tips or ideas do you have for prayer? How could they develop or deepen? Share them with a friend. Listen to their ideas too.

* * *

If we pray for someone who is seriously ill, of course we may well be asking God for their physical healing. Sometimes, in God's grace, they do indeed experience a recovery or a partial recovery from a sickness and go on to live happy and meaningful lives. We thank God, the Father of all mercies. Or perhaps, in God's grace, they pass away into the eternal home of heaven. And we thank God, the Father of all mercies.

Either way, prayer is about relationship. Life enjoyed here on this beautiful planet is a great gift to be treasured indeed, and God shows us his love as we experience life day by day. But life eternal is also a great gift. Whatever happens, prayer is answered. Whatever happens, love is the answer.

Let us pray.

God calls us not so much to say a prayer, as to become a prayer! We sing together,
Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord!

Hymn (BPW 391) **Tell out my Soul the Greatness of the Lord!**

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord:
unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name:
make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age to same;
his holy name--the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might:
powers and dominions lay their glory by;
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word;
firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
And the love of God;
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, evermore.
Amen

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
Wherever he may send you;
May he guide you through the wilderness;
Protect you through the storm;
May he bring you home rejoicing
At the wonders he has shown you;
May he bring you home rejoicing
Once again into our doors.