

Sermon for 27th July 2025, Year C, Pentecost 7

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19); Luke 11:1-13

Sermon

Our Gospel reading today gives us the story of how the Lord's Prayer came to be a central part of our Christian tradition. Jesus was praying alone, as he often seemed to do, and when he finishes, his disciples ask him to teach them how to pray, as John the Baptist had apparently done with his own disciples, some of whom Jesus had inherited.

What we're given in response is a pattern of words that now forms part of almost every Christian service, although different denominations often use slightly different translations, based on the longer version in Matthew's gospel and this shorter one in Luke.

The differences between our modern English translations of the Lord's Prayer are entirely down to which ancient manuscripts and which Gospel reading you give most priority. For example, the ending "For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever" only exists in some very late manuscripts of Matthew's gospel, which is why certain denominations such as the Catholics omit it. And this also explains why some versions talk about forgiving sins while others refer to debts and debtors. All of these variations are valid translations, so we've no need to get anxious about which version is 'correct' – they all are.

But of course, this scholarship doesn't necessarily help us understand exactly how Jesus intends for us to pray. Are we just supposed to say these words by rote, or should we be adding our own meaning, intention and desires? Does this prayer represent the highest form of communication with the divine, or is it a beginner's prayer, or something that can be both? And is there a danger that

Christians simply learn to recite the prayer – sometimes repeating it multiple times – without thinking about what the words actually mean?

There is always a danger that any teaching about the Lord's Prayer can quickly turn into religious rules that dictate whether or not our prayers are legitimate. We can easily end up judging our own prayers, or even someone else's.

Some people, for example, teach that the Lord's prayer was not intended as a single prayer but rather as a list of categories within which we should structure our own prayers. From that perspective, phrases like "hallowed be your name" are not just a simple four-word acknowledgement of God's glory, but an invitation to an extended period of prayerfully praising God in awe and wonder.

This approach would see the Lord's Prayer as a template for a longer period of prayer, rather than a prayer in itself, but we have no way of knowing what Jesus's intention was. His own prayers seemed to go on for considerable periods of time, but he only taught his disciples to 'say these words.'

Everyone who prays is worried that we're not doing it right. That goes for new Christians praying for the first time, right through to Archbishops and Saints. This can be very disconcerting, but I'm actually glad that we don't know what the 'right' way to pray is. If we did, we'd be forever judging ourselves and each other on our 'performance.'

When I was a novice nun, trying a vocation that was 100% focused on prayer, I spent many hours each day trying to figure out the most effective way to pray, reading numerous weighty books on contemplation, meditation and intercession. Even if I didn't think there was one correct way to pray, I certainly believed that prayer should do something good for the person praying, and if it didn't then it must be because I was doing it wrong, or praying for the wrong thing. The older, wiser sisters had an encouraging saying about this: "Always pray as you can, and not as you can't". I remember my spiritual director went further,

saying, “If you feel you can’t pray, but you have a desire to pray, then that is actually prayer. You are already praying.”

Sometimes prayer can be such a wonderful experience that the temptation is then to believe that you’ve somehow mastered it and only need to repeat the formula to achieve the same results over and over again, whether those results are feelings of closeness to God, or an answer to particular prayer requests. But prayer can never be reduced to a formula. It’s not a science experiment or a magical incantation, where if only you say the right things with the right intention or intensity, God will respond in the way you desire.

So, what are we doing when we pray? The only answer that makes sense to me is that we are growing a relationship. Prayer is not about focussing entirely on God to the exclusion of all else, and it’s not about focussing entirely on ourselves and our needs and desires, however virtuous they may be. Instead, I think prayer is about a deepening friendship with God, and this is why the Lord’s Prayer that Jesus gives us is so rooted in the places where earth and heaven meet.

It’s easy to imagine a prayer that is all about the glory of God, focusing entirely on Him and leaving no space for ourselves. It’s equally easy to imagine a prayer that is all about our human needs and doesn’t acknowledge God at all except to ask Him for things. But the Lord’s Prayer does neither of these. It starts by giving glory to God, yes, but the first word is “Father” – immediate relationship. “Your kingdom come” is next, but where is that kingdom coming? From heaven to earth, connecting the two. Throughout this prayer we are yearning for connection, not just praising God or pleading for favours.

Now the second half of the prayer does indeed seem to be a shopping list of anxious demands. “Give us... Forgive us... Do not bring us...” and there is not even a ‘please’ or ‘thank you’ among it. These are not delicate and polite requests, but profound expressions of how deeply we need to be in relationship with God in order to be fully human.

One of the commentaries I read while preparing this sermon made the hugely helpful point that the God to whom we pray is not 'glorious' in isolation, but 'glorious in loving'. God's glory is not some distant vision of perfection that we can only gaze at in awe from afar, but is instead the loving, gracious, compassionate, forgiving relationship between us, and because of this, we may well discover that our human weakness and many failures are not something that keep us from God, but the very things that allows us to experience the fullness of God's love, gentleness and strength.

What my experience tells me is that real prayer cannot be faked, because it is the honest and vulnerable act of human beings who know how hard it is to be human, and know how much they need God. And so, as long as our prayers are completely honest, I don't believe they can ever be 'wrong' or 'fail'. The only prerequisites for prayer are enough self-understanding to recognise the depths of our need, and enough humility to ask for help, and to persist in asking.

These understandings are at the heart of every line of the Lord's Prayer, but I hope you can see that it is not the words themselves that hold the power – it is our honest human need for God's love that makes all prayer come alive.