

Sunday between 24<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> July [17]

Luke 11:1-13

Being asked to pray for someone must be one of the most common requests clergy receive. But it is not only clergy who experience this, it is quite a regular occurrence for people who are practicing Christians and known publicly as such. Christians receive requests from friends, neighbours, work colleagues and sometimes even relative strangers who just found out there was a chance for someone to say a prayer for them. Pray for me when you're at church, they might say, or at the end of a conversation about a particular situation, they may ask, "keep me in your prayers."

Most Christians are always happy to hear that request and act upon it, because we believe that prayer is the single most powerful manifestation of our relationship with God. But what we can struggle with is why we are being asked to pray for others when they are perfectly entitled to do it for themselves and are equally valued and just as clearly heard by God when they do it.

They are a number of reasons why they think they need the prayers of others, they feel unworthy to pray, or they're not sure they'll do it right, or they simply take comfort in knowing that although they are praying, they like to know they are not alone in that prayer, which seems to be the most gratifying reason to be asked to join a prayerful request. In today's gospel reading we are taught how to pray but also why we pray and by taking time to reflect on this passage we can explore that great mystery of our prayerful relationship with God.

You see, it's not straightforward, it looks like it's going to be, the disciples ask Jesus, how should we pray, and Jesus gives them an easy to remember prayer with which we are all familiar and the question is answered. Yet, Jesus doesn't stop there, he uses a parable to liken prayer to a persistent neighbour. The punch line of the parable is a bit uncomfortable, the man doesn't answer the request of the one knocking his door because he likes him and values his friendship, rather he responds to the request to shut him up and make him go away. But if the man behind the door is God answering our prayers are we really just an irritating inconvenience, constantly nagging about what we want, and eventually getting an answer to prayer because God can't bear to hear us nag anymore? It is a bit hard to swallow taken at face value like that.

Before you give up completely on prayer, think again about what the request is, the man has a visitor, he has nothing to give him of his own but he really wants to show him hospitality and care, the visitor has no one else to ask but the householder has a neighbour who is generous and kind, he knows he's asking a lot but it's not for him, it's for a person in genuine need. He's not asking for anything extravagant, just enough food to make him comfortable, so he doesn't have to go hungry that night, just what he needs.

He expects his generous neighbour to help because that's the relationship they have, hopeful and expectant and because he knows his neighbour so well, he doesn't give up after knocking just once and getting no answer, he persists in his request. Each time he knocks he has a chance to consider if his request is reasonable and justified and each time he thinks it is and knocks again, until his persistence is rewarded and his expectancy fulfilled.

That sounds more like the relationship of prayer with God that we recognise. God knows what we need and what we want, God knows when those things are aligned and when they are out of balance and also knows that all my needs will be provided but provided for us as we work towards them, not as an indulgence to a spoilt child.

The act of formulating a prayer, then, is not pointless as God already knows what we are going to say, as some might suggest, but rather it is, an opportunity to consider our requests

and check that we are praying in consideration of the prayer Jesus taught us, asking for those things we need, asking for guidance and being ready to be guided rather than asking for affirmation that the route we've chosen ourselves is ok by God.

When we perceive our prayers to be answered through the working out of situations over time or the realisation of new things, we ought to be overjoyed and comforted, although, many of us likely forget to give credit for answered prayer. What a coincidence! It's all worked out like we hoped, we tell ourselves.

When we hear nothing we ought not to be dismayed, like a child who has been told we can't have our own way, rather we now have a chance to ask again, to formulate the prayer once more, to test it against the Lord's prayer and to be patient and persistent all at once. That's easier said than done but that is what today's Gospel message tells us. We have to work towards our goals with God, we can't use prayer as an excuse for laziness. "Oh I prayed about the problems of the homeless but that man still sells the big issue in the High Street, and I never buy it." Or "I prayed for my sick neighbour to feel comforted in her hour of need but I haven't had time to visit myself."

Prayer is a two way conversation with God, and sometimes just hearing our prayers formulated, our worries and concerns, our triumphs and joys, should allow us to reflect on what part we need to play in order for God's kingdom to come, God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Prayer is a gift of God to the world. A chance for each of us to forge a personal relationship with the almighty. We can and should share our concerns and pray for one another and the worries we have about situations and people, and we should be so grateful and humbled when others ask us to pray for them, but we should also encourage those asking for prayer to make sure our prayers are alongside their own.

Prayer is open to sinners and saints, all are unworthy in the sight of God yet by grace all have been made worthy to call God Abba, Daddy. Prayer can't be done badly, it is as unique as we are but if we need help Jesus gave us words to use. Start with the Lord's prayer, add to it, slow it down to really hear the words and personalise it until you develop the confidence to pray comfortably.

But most of all prayer is our call to action, our chance to work with God on what's next for us in our journey, who needs us to be Christ to them, what part do we play in God's mission in this place and at this time. If we don't ask, we may never know.