

Praying: engaging with the life of God

[Luke 11:1-13](#) | 25th June 2017

At this year's General Assembly, the Convener of the Council of Assembly gave her speech. That Council deals with accounts and pensions, with legal compliance, budgets and other such things. So you can imagine what ground she might cover: it sounds like a good excuse for an afternoon nap, to be honest.

What she did speak about, however, were the findings from a number of meetings held all across the Church over the past few months. People from the pews, and the presbyteries, had the chance to tell the national Church what was most important to them about church. And here is what she said as she reported on what people like us said:

“Let us pray. We need to pray. The Council of Assembly has focused the first part of its report on prayer because this is what people are telling us is important. The reaction of over a thousand elders and members in roadshows across Scotland to depressing figures of church decline and ministerial ageing was not one of depression and despair, but rather of challenge and a desire to take action. It became clear that the one issue which had surfaced at every event was the call to pray. This is a timely reminder that, whatever we would like to do in the future, what really matters is what God is calling us to do and to be. The Council of Assembly recognises the pervasive theme of a desire to pray in an intentional way that God would work in our churches to refresh and renew our vision. ... We ask the whole Church to affirm this message from its own people; let us pray.”

To help us work out what we might make of this, and whether we agree with what seems an increasing sense of prayerfulness within our branch of the church, I'd like to spend this week and next having a think about what we understand prayer to be.

I want to start by saying that it is really about becoming more human. It is not about being airy-fairy and detached from the world, but about becoming more engaged. It is about being hospitable rather than being considered holy. And it is about consciously making space for God within ourselves so that we might make ourselves available for other people, and for God. It is not trying to make things happen against the odds.



Becoming more human

St Irenaeus, writing around 180AD, said: ‘The glory of God is (human)man(kind) fully alive, and the life of (human)man(kind) is the vision of God.’ He meant by that, that God intends humanity to have life in its fullness; and that for life to be lived in this sort of fullness it needs to be lived according to God’s purposes for humankind. A key element of that full life is an enriching relationship with God, and prayer is one of God’s main gifts to enable human beings to relate well to God as Creator and Redeemer.

We can make the mistake of rushing too quickly to the idea that prayer changes things, that we pray mainly because we want things to be different. The first thing prayer changes is the person who prays. To take even the opening lines of the Lord’s Prayer on our lips is to recognise that, in Jesus (who taught us to pray like this) we stand in a relation of family love to God who has shown himself to be, in some deeply true sense, like – but much more than – what we might understand as a Father to us.

In the days when the church prepared people to be married, one of the principles was that good, honest, frequent and clear communication helps build relationships. Prayer is, in many ways, just like that. If we are to have a good relationship with the Source of our life, we will need to take time, regularly, to rest and to be aware of God’s presence with us. This is less about trying to draw ourselves up to heaven by our pious efforts. It is much more the long-term discipline of knowing more deeply what it is that God is with us. It takes silence, and faith, to do that.

Letting Jesus in

If we let Jesus in as we pray, we are also to go where Jesus is. Jesus, who says he is ‘in’ the Father, also lives in us. And so prayer is about us becoming different people. We experience more and more the truth that not only are we letting Jesus in to our lives, but in love, God the Father lets Jesus, and with him us, in to God’s very presence. This is a serious, and a demanding, business. Although it is available

to everyone it is not to be taken casually. It also takes time, and practice, and is the fruit of determined effort. It's not surprising that Christians through the centuries have suggested either an extended period of daily prayer, or three shorter times of prayer each day. It requires deliberate action, Rowan Williams says, to 'make room, [to] empty our minds and hearts, so that the love of God can fill them.' If we really do want to let Jesus in, we need to make room for him. We can't just shout down the hallway of our soul, 'It's unlocked – open the door yourself.' The clutter of our thoughts and our overly self-centred dreams have to go.

Making ourselves available

Origen is another fairly early saint who thought and wrote, in depth, about the Christian life. He suggested there were three steps people could take to make themselves available to God. The first is to become more aware of ourselves and what we think, and how we react, and become better at seeing where we are selfish and less than wise, and at the same time determine to act more generously.

The second is to become more aware of God: to see God at work in this world often in quite ordinary ways, but to recognise that the so-called 'ordinariness' is

shot through with beauty and the divine.

The third and final step is a kind of leap into the light, where the way we see the world around us with renewed eyes of faith almost compels us to come to God. Then, as Origen says, 'The whole of our life says, "Our Father"'.
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Putting this into practice

I think you need to give this some time and effort, and keep going but also keep looking out for small changes which are a sign of bigger things happening.

So I'd suggest you make time more days than not in the week to give, say, fifteen or twenty minutes at a time that suits you, to be quiet and focus on God in you. You might find it helpful to light a candle. You might want to write and repeat a few times a sentence which says what this focused time of quiet is about, for you. You might find music from Taizé or other contemplative traditions helpful. You might find reading a short passage from the Bible helps you. And I would encourage you to keep a wee notebook to record what you think and sense, so that, over time, you might discern changes in your thinking, your attitudes, your awareness of God with you. That's individual prayer.

There might also be a place for praying together. Not necessarily making words up while our eyes are shut, but becoming conscious, as we meet one another, that we do so in the presence of God. We'll resume our Sunday morning prayer times in September, and you're welcome along to those.

Conclusion

We live in a world where it seems there are more possibilities than ever, and where we are offered, or promised, more than we can imagine. It might be tempting in such a world to run with the latest novel fad and, in doing that, leave behind some of the treasures of the past. I think we need to be twenty-first century Christians, but I wonder whether some of the old ways don't remain valuable.

What if prayer is, as Christian people have understood it for centuries, seeking to let the life that was alive in Jesus be alive in each one of us through the gift of God's Spirit, so that God might work in us, individually and together, to refresh and renew our vision? Isn't this worth exploring, and trying, and perhaps discovering that prayer is still life changing?

What do you make of it - and (perhaps more significantly) what, do you think, prayer might enable God to make of you?