

Prayer: Why Pray?

On Mount Athos, two thousand metres above the Aegean Sea, on this morning, big-bearded Orthodox monks are praying, as they have done for 1,800 years.

Thirty miles north of Lagos, more than a million Nigerian Christians are gathering at the vast campus of The Redeemed Christian Church of God to worship and to pray.

On the banks of the River Ganges, Hindu pilgrims are plunging into the sacred waters seeking cleansing and hope.

Somewhere in London this morning, a group of addicts on a 12-Step Programme is meeting, seeking '*through prayer and meditation*' to improve their conscious contact with God.

High in the Himalayas, bells are chiming, strings of coloured prayer flags dancing against blue skies, calling people to meditation.

In Morden, London, at the UK's largest mosque, built to house 15,000, Muslims will be getting ready to respond to the call to prayer that they hear five times a day.

One person in every four prays the Lord's Prayer each year on Easter Day alone. One person in every six bows towards Mecca up to five times a day. Hasidic Jews stand at Jerusalem's Wailing Wall dressed in black, rocking to and fro, lamenting the loss of the temple and reciting from the Book of Psalms, a book of prayer. In front of them, between the giant stones of Herod's temple, thousands of hand-written prayers are wedged like badly rolled cigarettes between the bricks. You may have visited the wall yourself; you may have even placed your own prayer.

And this morning, we gather to pray in this beautiful building where people for centuries have gathered to do the same.

All over the world, in every nation, of all religions, people are praying. Why, you might ask.

Our English word 'prayer' derives from the Latin '*precarius*'. We pray because life is precarious! We pray because life is marvellous. We pray because we find ourselves lost for many things, but not for the simplest words like 'please', 'thank you', 'wow' and 'help'. I prayed in labour that my babies would be

delivered safely, and gave thanks as I held them for the first time. I prayed when the alarms went off in the swimming pool during my children's swimming lesson as a child was dragged lifeless from the water, and breathed a prayer of relief as she came round. I prayed when I was made redundant and wondered if I'd ever find work again that fulfilled me as much as that job did. I prayed as I drove at high speed to my in-law's one Friday morning having received a frantic call that my father-in-law had collapsed and it wasn't looking good. I prayed on the way home a few hours later as I wondered how I would tell my children that their grandad had died. I prayed during my ordination retreat that there hadn't been some awful mistake and that I really *was* supposed to be there. I prayed with purple ribbon at my daughter and son-in-law's wedding that God would bless their marriage and deepen their love for one another and their love for God, and I prayed a prayer of thanks following the birth of their first child just over two years ago. And I prayed in wonder at the beautiful world God created as Martyn and I snorkelled in the Andaman Sea in Thailand last November amongst the beauty of brightly-coloured fish.

The Canadian psychologist David Benner describes prayer as the '*soul's native language*', observing that '*our natural posture is attentive openness to the divine*'. We see this posture in many great men and women not necessarily known for their religious devotion. A few years ago, Tony Blair, former prime minister, took part in a debate on the role of religion in public life alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury. He told the audience of 450 people in Westminster, central London: "*I remember the Salvation Army coming to see me when I was leader of the opposition.*"

"At the end of it, she said: 'We're all going to kneel in prayer'.

"There were two members of my office, who should remain nameless, who looked aghast.

"I said: 'You'll have to get on your knees'. One of them said: 'For God's sake' and I said: 'Exactly'."

And, at the other end of the political spectrum, Theresa May, who professes a Christian faith and regularly attends her parish church in Berkshire, was asked by a Daily Telegraph reporter: "*What do you pray for in church, Prime Minister?*"

In an apparently tongue-in-cheek response, Mrs May said: "*I pray for serious questions from journalists.*" But she also spoke of how faith played an

important part in her life, guiding her in everything she does, and that prayer is an important aspect of that.

But prayer isn't just for those in church on a Sunday morning, or for those who profess a faith, famous or not. In the UK, from an article in the Sunday Times, a quarter of those who describe themselves as 'non-religious' admit that, in fact, they 'take part in some spiritual activity each month, typically prayer'. So, it seems that more of us are praying than we realise.

There is no doubt that the greatest person who ever lived was pre-eminently a man of prayer. We read from our gospel passage today, from Mark's gospel, that '*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.*' And this seems to be a regular pattern. Before launching out in public ministry, Jesus fasted for more than a month in the wilderness. Before choosing his twelve disciples, he prayed all night. When he heard the devastating news that his cousin, John, had been executed, '*he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.*' After feeding the five thousand, he was understandably tired, but his response was to climb a mountain to pray.

When the pressures of fame threatened to crush him, Jesus prayed. When he was facing his own death in the Garden of Gethsemane, bleeding with fear and failed by his friends, he prayed. Even during those unimaginable hours of physical and spiritual torment on the cross, Jesus cried out in prayer to the one who had apparently forsaken him.

Jesus prayed, and he prayed, and he prayed.

But, it didn't stop there. After his resurrection, Jesus commanded his disciples to follow his example, so that when the Church was eventually born, as we read from Acts, '*they all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.*' And then, as things began to really take off, the apostles continued to follow their Lord's example, prioritising prayer over everything else. We read in Acts 6 that as the number of disciples massively increased, the twelve apostles struggled to cope with the daily distribution of food. There were complaints that some weren't getting their fair share and some widows were being overlooked. The solution? Seven elders were chosen to oversee this aspect of ministry so that the twelve could give their full attention to '*prayer and the ministry of the word.*' And the result? The word of God spread and the number of disciples in Jerusalem

spread rapidly. Prayer was prioritised and consequently had tremendous results.

The reason why you and I are sat in a Christian church in the UK today is as a result of a prayer two thousand years ago – a prayer prayed by Peter, one of the disciples. We read in Acts 10 that *'about noon, Peter went up onto the roof of the house to pray.'* He fell into a trance and received a shocking vision of non-kosher animals presented as food. And despite his initial response of *'Surely not, Lord!'* Peter realised that the gospel wasn't just for Jews, but was intended to be embraced by all. This was a defining moment that catapulted the gospel from its Jewish roots into the vast Gentile, non-Jewish world. If that hadn't happened, Christianity would never have arrived in this country with the Romans in the second century AD and we wouldn't be sat here today in this church.

It would be easy to provide more examples from the early church, because the priority of prayer is there to be found in one way or another on almost every page of the Bible, and in every chapter of church history. It is not an optional extra to faith, or just for the devout or the desperate. It doesn't belong to some other time in history, nor to some other type of person more spiritual or disciplined or experienced than you or me. Prayer is for each and every one of us, and should be as natural and important as breathing.

'Prayer is more than a lighted candle,' insists the theologian George Buttrick. *'It is the contagion of health. It is the pulse of life.'* A real relationship with God means walking with him daily, like the image of Adam and Eve strolling in the Garden of Eden casually chatting with Father God. Or talking with him intimately, like Moses with whom we read *'The Lord would speak ... face to face, as one speaks to a friend.'* And it means listening attentively to his voice because, as Jesus said, *'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.'* In this three-week sermon series, we will look next week at *how* to pray, and then, the week after, how to deal with *disappointment* when our prayers aren't answered in the way that we hope. But, for today, let's remind ourselves of why we pray.

We pray because it's part of our DNA and as natural as breathing.

Because life is precarious, for good and bad, and we need to say 'please', 'thank you', 'wow' and 'help'.

Because it's our native language and our natural posture before our Lord and God.

Because Jesus prayed and told us to do likewise.

Because it has always been important to the church down the centuries and remains so today.

It's the pulse of life, our life in Christ, and whilst we all still have a pulse, we're called to pray.

Amen.