

Prayer: How to Pray

Last week, we looked together at why we pray. So, for those who weren't here last week, and a reminder for those who were, 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 find ways to say *'please'*, *'thank you'*, *'wow'* and *'help'*. 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. And because it's the pulse of life, our life in Christ, and whilst we're on this earth, we're called to pray.

This week, the focus is on 'how to pray' and I'll be drawing heavily on a fabulous book by Pete Greig called *'How to Pray: A simple guide for normal people.'* And the first thing Pete Greig says about how to pray is this: *'keep it simple, keep it real, keep it up'*. So, let's look at these three first before we get into the logistics of how we might pray.

Keep it simple

Jesus warns us quite specifically against getting over-complicated in prayer. In today's gospel reading, but from the Message translation, Jesus says: *'The world is full of so-called prayer warriors ... peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply.'* He then goes on to give the Lord's Prayer, which was just 31 words long in its original language, and also originally rhymed. Jesus wrote us a poem! Having advocated simplicity in prayer, he modelled it with a short, rhyming prototype that takes 30 seconds to recite in English and fits in a single tweet.

Thankfully, there are very few rules for Christians when it comes to prayer. We can pray wherever we want, even in the shower. We don't have to close our eyes (handy if you pray while driving!), adopt a particular posture, dress in a certain way, wash ourselves ritually, or use a fixed form of words simply to be heard by God. Some of these things can be helpful, but none is essential. Through Jesus, God's presence is freely available to us at any time, any place, anywhere.

Keeping it real

Also from our gospel reading, Jesus says: *'And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'* Jesus invites us to keep prayer simple, and to keep it *real*. Remember the story Jesus told about two men arriving at the temple to pray - one a Pharisee and the other a despised tax collector? The Pharisee spoke with confidence, ticking all the right religious boxes with his high-profile fasting and tithing. But it was the *other* man – the tax collector - who wouldn't even look up to heaven but hid in the shadows muttering *'God, have mercy on me a sinner'*. He who was the one who Jesus said went home justified by God.

And you will find a lot of very honest prayers in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms. You will have noticed that many of them aren't particularly happy-clappy, but are real cries of unresolved pain. In Psalm 55, the Psalmist writes: *'Evening, morning and noon, I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.'* Moses whined about the very people God had called him to lead: *'Why have you brought this trouble on your servant?'* he complains. *'What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me?'* And the prophet Elijah when fleeing Jezebel shouted: *'I have had enough Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.'* It's ok to be real. It's ok to say you've had enough. And the third ...

Keep it up

In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up – the parable of the persistent widow who day after day kept approaching the town judge demanding justice against someone who had done wrong to her. For a long time he refused, but finally he relented and gave her justice, we read, so that *'eventually she won't wear me out with her coming!'*

No matter how simply and honestly we pray, it's easy to lose heart and tempting to give up when our prayers don't seem to be working. That's why it's not enough to just *keep it simple* and *keep it real*. Jesus also said that we must *'pray and not give up.'* The Bible is full of characters for whom prayers took many years to be answered. It was 25 years before Abraham and Sarah had Isaac; 15 years before Joseph arrived from the pit and then prison to the palace; and 40 years before Moses arrived on the edge of the Promised Land.

We need to be persistent in prayer and not give up. And it's easier to keep going if we have some discipline to our prayer life. Jesus once invited his friends to *'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest'* which is as great advice now as it was then. If you don't already, try and allocate a little time each day to retreat with Jesus to a quiet place and pray. That will look different for each one of us – some of us will find this easier in the morning or the evening; the rest of us might depend on snatched bite-sized moments during the day, or time whilst commuting or travelling. Whatever works for you, try and carve out a bit of time to just be on your own in your thoughts with God.

But finding space and time to pray may not be your biggest challenge. You may already pray regularly but often struggle with knowing what to say. *'Am I doing it right?'* is a frequent worry. *'How can I get better at prayer?'* is another.

In his book, Pete Greig introduces a really handy acronym that can help us in our prayer life. Surprisingly, the acronym is the word PRAY. And the letters stand for: Pause; Rejoice; Adoration; and Yield. So, let's look at each in turn and see if there's anything we can take from them.

Pause

Quite sensibly, I think, Greig says that to start in pray, we first have to stop. To move forward, we must *pause*. The first step in prayer, he argues, is to put down your prayer wish list and wait. Sit quietly. Be still and centre yourself on God. That's hard for us restless souls but there's much encouragement in the Bible. *'There is a time to be silent, and a time to speak'* we read in that famous passage from Ecclesiastes, and the Psalms tells us again and again to *'Be still, and know I am God.'* You see this in the Lord's Prayer. Before it launches into the long list of all we need – daily bread, forgiveness of sins, deliverance from evil – he tells us to *pause*, to address God affectionately by name, *'Our Father'*, and respectfully *'hallowed by your name,'* beginning therefore with an appropriate awareness of the one to whom we come.

Rejoice

The second step is to *rejoice* in the blessings we've already received before asking for any more. It's a time of adoration and thanksgiving where we linger and expand on the words *'hallowed by your name.'* Where we remind ourselves and thank God for the privilege of being his dearly loved children. We're able to tell God everything and ask him for anything because we know,

as Jesus said, *'Your Father in heaven loves to give good gifts to those who ask him'* because he is our Father and loves us. That doesn't mean that we understand completely why some prayers are answered and others aren't, particularly prayers of healing, but God is still God, even when we don't understand him. Even when we don't completely like him, because the reality is, he's all we've got. One of the easiest ways to build adoration into your prayer life, particularly if you struggle with this aspect of prayer, is to read a Psalm, using the same prayer book that Jesus used, or to listen to a piece of music. It's great that many of the greatest classical compositions are deeply worshipful. Do whatever works for you.

Ask

The third step is *ask*. Prayer means many things to many people, but at its simplest and most immediate it means asking God for help. It's a soldier asking for courage, a football fan at the final, a mother alone in a hospital chapel. The Lord's Prayer invites us to ask for everything from 'daily bread' to the 'kingdom come', for ourselves and for others. I love it that Greig encourages us at this point to pray less about the big, ugly, seemingly impossible problems in life that require huge miracles, but to pray more about the small things. Because it's when you pray about the small things that you get to live with greater gratitude, as you then start to notice how many minor miracles are scattered abroad in the course of a day. Archbishop William Temple famously said, *'When I pray, coincidences happen. When I stop praying, the coincidences stop happening.'* It would be possible to have a whole sermon series on this aspect of prayer covering 'how to ask', 'what about miracles?', 'why do we need to ask if God knows what we need anyway?', praying for others, and 'what about unanswered prayer?' We'll look at unanswered prayer next week, but do please feel free to chat with others over coffee about the others or buy a copy of Greig's book to delve deeper into this.

The last bit of the acronym is

Yield

or surrender to God. Thomas Merton said that *'The deepest prayer at its nub is a perpetual surrender to God.'* we yield to God's presence *'on earth as it is in heaven'* through contemplative prayer - there are lots of resources available on this form of prayer which are really helpful - and by listening to his word which is *'our daily bread'* and in confessing our sins and getting right with God. I

cannot underestimate the value of using scripture in prayer. When Jesus taught us to pray for our 'daily bread', he didn't just mean physical food, but also the daily nourishment of God's word. There have been many examples in *my* life when I've been praying for something, and the answer has come from something I've then read in the Bible, but that's another sermon which you will get to hear at some point. And there are many other ways, of course, in which we can hear from God – in dreams and visions, through the advice and wisdom of others, in personal reflection – journaling is a great tool to use, and hearing God in action, through obeying his commands and doing his work.

There are also many resources available to help us in our prayer life. Pete Greig's book is a new resource which seeks to help the majority of us who don't find prayer easy. I share it to you as something which might help and, for that reason, you'll be offered, as you leave today, a piece of paper with the acronym that you can use at home. But if you'd like any other resources or help, please don't hesitate to ask.

I close today with the words that end the Lord's Prayer – *'For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.'* Because, to pray these lines is to give the kingdom, power and glory back to him. It's to give him our little empires – family, career, interests – and say *'yours Lord, is the kingdom'*. It's to give him the power-bases we've built and say *'yours, Lord, is the power'*. It's to give him our credibility, our trophies of success, and say *'yours, Lord, is the glory, forever and right now'*. Amen.