

24Jul2022 Luke 11.1-13 Praying as a Disciple

In NZ about half the population claim to be of some religion and as part of that they no doubt pray from time to time. However a surprising number of people who don't say they have any religious affiliation still admit they pray!

What do people do when they pray and why do they pray. In primitive pagan religions of various sorts the 'god person' of whatever name they had, would use particular special actions or words to pray – to get the spiritual beings involved in some circumstance to produce the desired result. The spirits or gods may need to be placated so they don't cause harm, or encouraged to bless a situation or effectively manipulated in some way to give a positive outcome. Most cultures in human history and today have some way of praying. For those who don't have a religious view that includes powerful spiritual beings there is meditation to focus on oneself or nothingness. For many cultures there are specific actions or words that are used in specific situations related to the spiritual powers they believe in. For example when there is a birth or death, a good harvest or a disaster, a particular prayer may be used or a particular ceremony performed. Apart from a growing number of westerners most people would do these things as part of their pagan (ie non-Christian) cultures. Prayer here is a programmed response to particular life circumstances, to get the spiritual power or powers to give the appropriate response; blessing, provision, protection or whatever. It is a natural human response to a world that is obviously influenced by the spiritual world.

As pastors of an International church we found ourselves being asked to do this sort of thing by many, even in a Christian setting. An example: Whenever you get a new car, on the first day you drive it to church and park it in the carpark outside, would you consider it a priority to ask one of us to come and bless it? To our surprise, we had that happen several times in Eindhoven. Our African brothers and sisters considered prayer, especially from a priest, essential to keep evil spirits at bay. Our fellow Indian Christians were particularly 'prayerful'. They asked us to pray when a baby came home with the mother from hospital, when they not only got a new home but also when they had house alterations, both before and afterwards, when each of their children had a birthday, when they were about to travel, and when they or any of their relatives were seeking someone to marry. A blessing was often sought with each interaction they had with their pastors. For some of them their favourite hymn was 'Showers of blessing'. I heard that hymn so many times. Sometimes we felt a little like a source of blessings-on-tap, a bit like a Christian version of an Indian guru. Their desire to have God involved in every moment of their lives was also admirable and many were very devout followers of Jesus.

The one thing that pagan prayer always involves is doing something or saying something in particular in order to appease or manipulate the spiritual beings involved to get a better outcome. We need as followers of Christ to consider carefully what Christian prayer is so that it doesn't become a form of pagan prayer in a Christian dressing. And for that of course we look to Jesus.

That is where our gospel reading today begins. John had obviously taught his disciples how to pray. Jesus' disciples want to know how to distinctively pray as they saw Jesus doing. Disciples are those who are constantly learning how to be more and more like the one they follow. Jesus was often praying so naturally the disciples wanted to know how he in particular prayed so they could do that too.

So what is distinctive about Jesus' way of praying?

The biggest clue to this is in the very first word: Jesus says that they are to address God as Father. This is the most notable feature of Christian prayer. When Paul refers to it he emphasizes that this is a term of intimacy. He uses the word 'abba', the most intimate term that could be used to address one's father. This is not the father with absolute, life and death authority in the family as in the surrounding Roman context but a father full of compassion and mercy, certainly not a spiritual being to be manipulated and placated but a father who knows you and loves you and wants the best for you, even more than you do yourself, who will give good, better than any human father. As Paul makes clear, this relationship we have with God our father we have through the Holy Spirit. It is not something we work out ourselves but the Spirit brings the presence of God's kingdom in which we are adopted as children of our heavenly father. Our heavenly father loves us, forgives us, provides for us, encourages us to rely on him and call upon him for every need. Jesus is saying to his disciples that they are to trust God for whatever they ask for, search for, need access to.

So the first aspect of prayer that is distinctive to Jesus is that we pray as children to our heavenly father. So what do we pray to him?

Jesus' way of prayer begins with praying that God's name be hallowed and that his Kingdom comes. In the longer version in Matthew's account it adds that his will be done and that all these are to be 'on earth as it is in heaven'. Note that 'hallowed be your name' is not a description of the Father as it almost appears to be in the way we commonly say

this prayer. It is actually something asked for in exactly the same way as we ask for God's kingdom to come. A far better translation for the beginning of the Lord's prayer would be:

Our Father,
 Your name be hallowed,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done,
 on earth as in heaven

What Jesus asks us to pray for here is that all become disciples worshipping God like us and that all become disciples living under God's reign like us. These require our action as well as our expectation. We honour God ourselves and we participate in the work of the Spirit which marks the presence of the kingdom in our midst, just as we participate actively in the kingdom dynamic of the giving and receiving of forgiveness. We pray and trust God that our basic needs are met; as we need them, and as we seek to meet the needs of those around us, bringing God's kingdom presence, being Christlike, to others. And we ask for the protection and deliverance from the testing and trials of the opposition and pressure that results from faithful discipleship.

This is the other most distinctive aspect of Jesus' teaching on prayer: that we are asking for what we are actively involved in as his disciples. Prayer is only Christian prayer, prayer as Jesus taught, if it is the prayer of a disciple of Jesus, of someone who is also actively seeking to bring about what is being prayed for, in their own life and in the world around them. This is not the pagan prayer for getting the spiritual power to do what you want, to meet the needs you are concerned with, or to mark the spiritual occasion. Rather the follower of Jesus is to pray as one aligned with what God wants, asking that what God wants, what they as a disciple are living out, happens even more.

And Jesus goes on to teach about how much more God our father will respond to our asking these things in prayer. The first illustration is of the friend who is asked for bread at midnight. The middle-eastern expectation was that if someone is asked something like that they are socially obliged to agree as a neighbour or friend. It was natural for all the family to be sleeping together. The asker here is persistent which overcomes the natural reluctance of the neighbor to wake the family for this. The implication of the story is that our generous Father in heaven will be even more likely to respond when we pray persistently for these things.

The disciples are concerned with the technology of prayer – what should we say? Jesus' concern in his further teachings on prayer is with the character of God – to whom do we pray? What matters above all is understanding the nature of the one to whom we pray – a loving and concerned father, not a sleeping and indifferent god, surely a much better father than our human fathers. He is one who is concerned with our needs and is more than willing to pour out his Spirit upon us. Note that what God will give is his Spirit

how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Prayer as Jesus taught his disciples is actually for more of his Spirit to be at work in our lives as disciples; that God is worshipped more, his kingdom comes, that we are forgiven and forgiving, that we trust him more for daily needs and protection.

The 'Lord's Prayer' is therefore not just a loosely connected string of petitions, of things we are to ask for. And it is certainly not just another form of pagan prayer, the right words, as if a magic incantation, or the right sorts of things one should pray, perhaps alongside living the right sort of life, so that God will do what you ask. Rather it is a prayer for people who are following Jesus on the kingdom-journey. Jesus, when he taught this, was on the way to Jerusalem, to act on behalf of God's name, which had been dragged in the mud as his people had turned away from him in rebellion. He was on the way to accomplish the true 'Exodus' in which the long-awaited kingdom of God would become a reality. He had provided bread for the journey, and 'the breaking of bread' was to become the sign of his presence in the church, and the bond between his followers. He was already offering forgiveness, and would accomplish it completely in his death – and he was already demanding from his followers that they imitate the graciousness of their God in forgiving their enemies, let alone each other. And he was waging war against the powers of evil, a war that would reach its decisive battle on Calvary. This is a prayer that grows out of the mission of Jesus himself. It has been ideally suited, both as it stands and as a framework for wider praying, for his followers ever since.

We are urged to pray like this, since Jesus is the model pray-er, our father is a loving responder to our prayer, and the Spirit is poured out to assist and empower us; because to be a disciple is to be one who follows and learns from Jesus' example 'on the way', and because we long, like all other disciples, to see God's kingdom come, both realised now in our world and in the future when Jesus returns.

Let us pray, now and always, not as pagans but as Christian disciples, followers of Jesus, trusting in our heavenly father.

We now respond in prayer to whatever we have heard of God's word, first in songs and then in praying for his name to be honoured and his Kingdom to come and his Spirit to empower us even more as Jesus' disciples.

Let us begin in song acknowledging God as our good, good father.