

HOW CAN I PRAY AND BE HEARD BY GOD?

(Matthew 6.5-13 and Luke 11.5-13)

Today we are aiming to answer this question for how we pray – both together as God’s people and in private.

A story is told that in the early 1900s a bishop was due to preach at the royal chapel at Sandringham. He was met at the local station by Queen Alexandra and her driver in what was then a novel means of transport- a motor car. To the bishop’s surprise the Queen asked the driver to sit in the back while she drove. The Queen could see the anxious face of the bishop so she said “don’t worry my Lord, millions of people around the country are praying for me during matins.” All was well with the journey!

More recently when President Obama was visiting the Queen he was said to have looked surprised when he got into the royal car to take him a short distance the 95 year old Duke of Edinburgh was the driver.

Our present Queen over the years has thanked all her citizens for their prayers - she has appreciated them and has had faith that they have been and will be answered.

Likewise during the Second World War her father King George VI called for days of prayer for our nation he had faith those prayers would be heard by God and they were answered too.

It has been God’s way over the centuries to choose public prayers to be answered in very clear ways; these have often been at times of crisis for our nation and other nations

In the book of Exodus, chapter 17, we read that when the Israelites were attacked Moses went up a hill to pray with Aaron and Hur.

As Moses held his hands up in prayer the Israelites were winning the battle but as he wearied and his hands lowered the enemy started to

win. Therefore Aaron and Hur stood with him, provided a stone for him to sit on and supported his arms until the battle was won; an example for us to follow. How we support others in prayer will vary but it is so important that we stand by each other at times of crisis both in prayer and in practical ways too.

Later Moses said that his hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord; a reminder to us when we are praying we are coming to God's throne.

On a more modern note, who is a football supporter here?

On 17 March 2012 there was an FA Cup match between Tottenham and Bolton. After 40 minutes- score was 1-1 and something happened. A player collapsed on the pitch. Fabrice Muamba had a cardiac arrest and was treated for 78 minutes.

His fiancée, Shauna and parents Marcel and Gertrude encouraged the watching world to 'pray for Muamba' - a request that people responded to on social media with the hashtag #pray4Muamba. There were front page headlines like *God is in control* and *In God's hands*. Premier league celebrities wore t-shirts pray for Muamba. (This story is told more fully in this book, *The #pray4 Principle* by Alexander Lee).

Millions of people prayed for him and he made an excellent recovery, despite a prolonged cardiac arrest. Those very public prayers were certainly answered in a miraculous way .

So an encouragement to keep praying with others in public - be it in church services, prayer meetings or in more modern ways like social media.

Coming back to our question- how can I pray and be heard by God? An important big question for us and our own private prayers (and also a question that the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord teach us how to pray.")

The disciples had seen what Jesus did. The gospels say "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5.16). Jesus had important decisions to make each day. These included:

- Who he should be with
- Where he should be and when
- How he should be teaching the people and his disciples

We face similar questions each day in our relationships.

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountain to pray and spent the night praying to God. The next morning he chose his 12 disciples (Luke 6.12) i.e. before big decisions.

He was listening to God. It is important to listen to God when we pray to know his guidance after we pray.

In our first reading from Matthew 6, Jesus warned his disciples what they should not be doing when they prayed. It was not to be a spectacle in front of others and not using many words. These people may have appeared good on the outside with their lengthy prayers of thanksgiving but that was not the whole truth. They had the wrong motives. Hypocrisy was a real problem for these people.

Our prayers too do need to have the right motive of genuinely seeking God.

Bishop Tom Wright tells the story of buying a bar of chocolate in a Middle Eastern country that was nicely wrapped up on the outside but when he opened it and was about to put a piece in his mouth he glanced down at it and then dropped it with a shout as it was alive! Inside what looked like a perfectly ordinary bar of chocolate, there were hundreds of tiny wriggling worms. Likewise, Jesus was teaching about things that might look fine on the outside but were rotten on the inside.

Pray in private. Pagans used long complicated or even magic words that were repeated over and over again.

Jesus said to keep it short and simple - (stand up, speak up and shut up).

Pray directly to God the Father. The promise is that he will reward you.

When we turn to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew chapter 6 the focus is on God, his kingdom and his will being done. (The answer to this prayer is being in tune with his will). Also there is praying for bread (provision), for forgiveness and guidance when we are being tempted.

What we pray for will vary for us all. We all have different areas that God has put on our hearts.

The second reading, Luke 11.5-8, is about boldness and persistence. How long do we persist - days, weeks, months and years?

We may be tempted to give up praying because nothing appears to be happening. However when we plant seeds we do not expect to go back and see a shoot with leaves the next day. It takes time for a plant to grow and to bear fruit – likewise when we pray nothing may appear to happen at first and then we gradually see signs of change.

Other times when we pray we may think for a long time that God is not acting in a situation and then suddenly there is a change – that can be compared to the blows of an axe when felling a tree. 99 blows with an axe and no apparent change. But on the 100th blow, the tree falls.

In the early 1980s I knew a man called Harry who always prayed for Albania in prayer meetings and had been doing so since the 1940s. That country remained under a grim dictatorship and there were few Christians there who lived in fear of their lives. However later there were real changes in that country and by the time Harry died, 5 years ago, his prayers over many decades had been truly answered.

Why does God work like that? We may never know. We do know that God knows our needs and does not need us to remind him of them. God may well be challenging our commitment for a situation and for regular prayer for it.

The promises of Jesus are: Ask, and it will be given. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened.

Verses 11-13 say: "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

This shows the goodness of God and the importance of the Holy Spirit when we pray.

We will receive answers to our prayers but the answer may not be "yes." It may be "not yet" or "no". Being in the will of God we will get the right answers and make the right decisions.

Now for the practicalities...

Try to have a regular habit of prayer. At the start or at the end of the day. This week Linda and I were at Inspire- the New Wine conference in the North East. One of the speakers, Rev Robert Ward, the leader of a church in Newcastle who has been greatly used by the Lord over the years and is currently leading a "fresh expression church" that sees about 150 people coming through the doors each week. He shared how in the 1970s he was waking early and how God had challenged him to get up early each morning and pray for the North East. Subsequently he and a friend started an early morning prayer meeting that led to real church growth. A challenge for us all to commit each day to the Lord.

Some prayers are "arrow prayers" - very simple, like "help Lord"! Keep prayers simple and straightforward.

Be positive and look for God's answers.

Remember that prayer is two-way communication, and focus on knowing God's will in a situation.

Use set prayers like the Lord's Prayer. Collects and prayer books can be helpful to some.

In your diaries, set a time and place to pray. Be open to new ways to pray. In a notebook, write down prompts to prayer and also encouragements.

James wrote in his letter-

"If any one of you is sick he should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well."

It is right that we continue to pray for the sick in the way that James wrote but we all know that physical healing of the body is not always to be in this world and how hard and difficult this is particularly when loved ones are very ill.

Likewise, when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26.6) the day before the crucifixion he prayed "if it is possible may this cup be taken from me." Jesus came to fully agree that it was the Father's will for him to die for us on the cross and rise again so that we might have eternal life through trusting in him.

Yet not as I will but as you will. That means that as Jesus prayed he lined up or got in tune with his Father's will. Likewise, when we pray God is working in situations so that our prayers are in line with God's will.

Answers to our prayers not always what we wish. We need to trust in the goodness of God and know that our loving heavenly Father wants the best for us and our loved ones whatever that may be.

Our prayers always will be answered. When we pray he is either answering in the way we hoped or changing our hearts by the Holy Spirit working in our lives.

There can be opportunities to share with others that we are praying for them – some may think that the answers to our prayers are just coincidences.

William Temple used to say "When I stop praying the coincidences stop happening and when I pray the 'coincidences' keep happening."