

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: PRAYER

(Matthew 6.5-15)

Introduction

I heard a story a few weeks ago about a best man who was late for the wedding and couldn't find anywhere to park. In desperation he prayed, "God, if there is a God, I'll go to church every week for the rest of my life if you'll just find me a parking space." Suddenly, amazingly, miraculously, there was a space right in front of him. "Never mind, God," he said, "I just found one!"

Over this summer we are thinking about what some call 'Christian disciplines' but I prefer the term 'spiritual fitness'. What makes up a healthy spiritual work-out?

Prayer Is Work

One of the things is prayer. Have you ever prayed for a preacher to shut up and sit down? Somebody did some research a while back and found that the average length for a sermon in the UK has now fallen to under 10 minutes. Asked to comment on the research, one joker said, "It is a testimony to the remarkable power of intercessory prayer!"

But in reality, many of us find prayer hard work. The Bishop who ordained me, Geoffrey Rowell, once said, "In the contest between prayer and work, work always wins because it's easier."

I was reading the other week about the Mission that Mother Teresa founded in Calcutta. Apparently, there was a time when the sisters were becoming overrun by the demands placed on them. There were more people at their door than they could keep pace with. They had to turn some away.

So, one day one of the novices approached Mother Teresa and said, "What are we going to do? We are overwhelmed. The sisters are discouraged and exhausted." Do you know how Mother Teresa replied? She said, "Then we shall have to get up in the morning one hour earlier. And we shall spend that extra hour in prayer."

I would have said, "Then we shall have to open the doors one hour earlier to fit more people in." But it's a good job they had Mother Theresa running that place and not me. Because Bishop Geoffrey was right, in the contest between prayer and

work, work wins, because it's easier. But prayer is more effective than we know. God provided an international wave of interns and volunteers, and the mission was able to cope again.

How to...

When Jesus talks about praying, he gives some straight talk about how to go about it. "Don't show off," he says in v5, "it's not a performance."

"Don't crowd it out," he says in v6. "You really need to find a private space where you can be alone with God."

"And it doesn't have to be long. Don't waffle on and on," he says in v7, "God *knows* what you want to say."

The prayer Jesus taught, we call it the Lord's Prayer, but actually it's *our* prayer. "This then is how *you* should pray", he said (v9). And Jesus' approach is simple.

The Lord's Prayer begins with the three things that God is looking for from us: reverence – 'hallowed be your name'; allegiance – 'your kingdom come'; and obedience – 'your will be done'.

And it goes on to ask for the three things we need from God: food – 'Give us today our daily bread'; forgiveness – 'forgive us our sins'; and freedom – 'deliver us from the evil one'.

The evangelist J. John and his wife Killy heard about a woman who was in a coma, completely unresponsive. They went to the hospital and asked the staff if they could pray, and their request was granted. They stood either side of the patient, each held one of her hands, and said, "What shall we pray?" They were pretty low on ideas.

So Killy said, "Maybe the Lord's Prayer..." J. John said, "Sounds good." So they started to pray, saying each line slowly and deliberately. Our Father in heaven... Hallowed by your name... And as they said, "Your kingdom come" the patient suddenly sat up, bolt upright. She was discharged a day later.

The Christian author John Ortberg once talked about his Uncle Otis who regularly prayed for the sick. One Sunday in church, he was asked to pray for a poor soul who was suffering from quite severe constipation.

Uncle Otis started praying, "Lord, heal this man immediately!" Sometimes an immediate answer to prayer is not quite what you need and mercifully this particular prayer was not answered instantly!

In Luke's gospel, Jesus' teaching this prayer comes as a reply to a question from one of the twelve. They saw Jesus praying and asked him to teach them to pray.

It's a good question to ask. If somebody came up to you and said, "You're a Christian, aren't you? Oh good. I was wondering, tell me, I have wanted to learn to pray for ages; where should I start?" What would you say in reply? Would you offer a technique? Do you think you'd mention this prayer?

Some people like to take time out in quiet monasteries or chapels. Others pray best in the car after listening to the Bible on CD. (A word of advice: if this is you, learn to pray with your eyes open)!

Some, like me, prefer to spend the first moments of each day in prayer, before or just after getting up. For others, the best moment is at the end of the day on the sofa with a cup of cocoa. Do whatever works best for you.

Once, because I was slipping into the habit of saying the Lord's Prayer mechanically, I tried to put it in my own words, using as few words from the original as I could, but without changing the meaning. Here's what I came up with:

*Father God, high above us and far beyond us,
may everyone on earth give you honour,
accept your authority and obey your word
as the angels do in your presence.
Give us just what we need for the day ahead.
Forgive us when we go against you
just as we make peace with those who hurt us.
Don't test us beyond what we can bear
but drive the devil away from us.
The just rule, the invincible power, and the unfading glory
belong to you alone and always will.
That's right!*

In today's Gospel reading it is clear that prayer is something we rightly do alone in private. As I said, Jesus teaches us to find a space where we won't be disturbed, where we can be alone with God.

But he doesn't mean we should *only* pray privately. If Jesus wanted us to only pray alone, the prayer he taught us would begin with the words 'My Father' not 'Our Father.'

Jesus expects Christians to pray together in groups as well. When he said to go in a room and shut the door, he just meant that our praying should not be a display for onlookers.

Public prayer is not a display. "Do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing... on the street corners..." Why? "*To be seen.*"

Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch watchmaker's daughter who survived Ravensbruck concentration camp after being sent there for hiding Jews in her house. She knew quite a bit about trouble and perils.

And she knew that some people only pray when the chips are down. As soon as life gets better prayer gets forgotten. So, she once asked this question, "Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tyre?"

In other words, does prayer direct your life, is it at the heart of your decision making, or does it only really happen in dire emergency when all else fails?

But some people will worry and lose hours of sleep before they pray and leave things with the Lord.

Can I encourage you, if you are carrying heavy burdens today, and you haven't really prayed, to come to God and lay your anxieties down at his feet? Maybe pray with someone else if that helps. But don't suffer alone. The Lord is near.

There's a lovely verse in Philippians 4 about worry and prayer. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

In other words, peace comes when we leave our burdens with God in prayer.

Ending

To finish, let's thank God for answered prayer. If each of us shared, one by one, all the prayers God had answered in our lives I'm sure it would take days to hear the end of it.

And, at the same time, let's trust his wisdom and timing for those prayers that are yet unanswered.

Some of the things I asked God for years ago, I know now would have taken my life in a completely different direction, and not for the better. As someone wisely noted, "We shall need eternity to thank God for all the prayers he *didn't* answer."