

PRAYER: WHAT IS IT?

(Romans 8.22-27 and Luke 11.1-13)

One day, a vicar was mowing the lawn in his garden when he saw a kitten climbing an apple tree and getting stuck. The poor little thing was very frightened, stuck up high on a branch and it was desperate to get down, so it started to meow.

Rather than bother the Fire Brigade with a call out for such a frivolity, he decided to drive his car up to the tree and attach a rope between the branch and his bumper. By backing the car up very gently away from the tree the aim was to lower the branch sufficiently to be able to reach up and rescue the little kitten.

So he fixed the rope, started his engine and began to back away from the tree, lowering the branch, when suddenly the rope snapped. It all happened so quickly. When he looked up the kitten was nowhere to be seen.

A week later he goes to visit a parishioner a few doors down the road. Just imagine his surprise when he sees the same kitten curled up on the sofa. So the vicar says, "I'm just curious, but where did you get the kitten from?"

"Oh," says the parishioner, "you wouldn't believe me if I told you. Last week my little girl was begging me for a kitten. I didn't really want one but I hated to disappoint her. So I said, let's pray about it and if God wants you to have one he will answer your prayer. No sooner had we said 'Amen' than this little fella flies in through the window! Two miracles vicar! Firstly the answered prayer and secondly a kitten that flies!"

God does answer prayer. Sometimes in remarkable ways...

We're looking at the Lord's Prayer this morning. I have a hunch that every one of us would say if we're honest that prayer is one of the most

difficult things to learn as a Christian. The Bible tells us that Jesus gave this prayer in response to the specific question by the disciples in Luke 11. "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John the Baptist taught his disciples."

It's quite a good question to ask, that. 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 years; where do think I should start?" How do you think you would you reply? Would you offer a technique? Would you recommend a book? Would you be lost for words? Do you think you'd mention this prayer?

Jesus gave it to us as a model and it's perfect. We call it the Lord's Prayer, but actually it's nothing of the sort. It's ours. Jesus never prayed it, at least not in its full form because he never needed to say "forgive us our sins." "When *you* pray, say this", he said (in v2). And it's really simple.

"If you want to pray, well here is the sort of thing you can pray about. It's always good to start by praising your heavenly Father; "hallowed be your name." You can pray that God's ways will be embraced over the world. "Your kingdom come."

Then you can ask him about the things you need. Go ahead and ask. He likes to give. There's no need to grovel or cringe - he's your heavenly Father who loves you. "Give us each day our daily bread."

You can pray about relationships, because they're always going wrong aren't they? Pray especially to keep short accounts and for a forgiving heart. "Forgive us our sins, as we also forgive everyone who sins against us."

Oh, and pray to resist falling into sin. "Lead us not into temptation." Or, as one schoolgirl remembered it, "lead us not into Thames station but deliver us some e-mail!"

But why doesn't God always answer prayer? There are many reasons and in verses 9 to 11, Jesus addresses three of them.

The first one is doubt, verse 9. Many people say, "You know, I'm not sure that God wants to answer my prayers". Jesus says, "Ask and you will receive".

"I'm not sure Lord." "Seek and you will find."

"I'm still not sure. I believe for my neighbour, but not me." "Knock and the door will be opened."

"Yes, but that is for strong Christians, not like me." Everyone", Jesus says, "Who asks, receives; he who seeks finds." So that's the first barrier to receiving: doubt.

The second barrier to receiving is fear. I might say, "What if something terrible happens to me? God might tell me to be a missionary in Iraq." So Jesus deals with this concern.

"Supposing you are a father, and your son comes to you and it's lunchtime and you say, "What would you like for lunch?" And your son says, "Fish and chips." So you say, "Okay I'll go and get some" - Jesus doesn't actually mention the chips!

You pop out and outside you have been keeping a snake in the garage. So you come back and you say, "Here is your fish", and you throw the snake on the plate and terrify him.

Supposing the next say you say to him, you know, "What would you like for breakfast this morning?" And with quite a lot more hesitation this time he says, "Well, maybe scrambled egg". So this time you pop down to the pet shop and you say, "Have you got any scorpions?" And they say, "Yes." And you take the scorpion back and you say, "Here you are, son, here is your egg." And you throw a scorpion on his plate.

Jesus says, "Which of you" - verse 11 - "Which of you fathers are going to do that. "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!"

And then Jesus deals there with a third obstacle, which is inadequacy. Many people say, "Oh, you know, I'm not a very good person, I'm not a

very spiritual person. If you knew what I was like inside, you wouldn't believe God would answer my prayers." All of us know that deep down we are totally unworthy. But the wonderful news is that God gives, not because of our worthiness, not because we deserve it, not because we've been Christians for years, not because we've served him faithfully, none of those reasons.

You know the Mission that Mother Teresa founded in Calcutta? Well apparently there was a time when the sisters and volunteers were becoming totally overrun by the demands placed on them. There were simply far more helpless mothers, half-dead old men, abandoned orphans, and sick babies than they could keep pace with. They had to turn people back. Open wounds had to be left untended until the next day, leaving them exposed to infection. Desperate children had no option but to go away and sleep in the streets.

So one day one of the novices approached Mother Teresa and said, "What are we going to do? We can no longer cope. We are sending people away. We simply do not have the resources we need. Some of 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."

Mother Teresa always protested when people said she was deeply spiritual and saintly. She always said "I am just a sinner, loved by God."

What Jesus says here is not: "How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who are very spiritual", but "To those who ask him." Mother Teresa had the power of the Holy Spirit in spades – she asked and received.

As we will see in this series, the prayer takes many different forms. In the Romans passage the Apostle Paul speaks of groaning and sighing. Those words come from the Greek *stenadzo* which has the sense of narrowing or squeezing. Suffering around us sometimes constricts us and crushes us so we feel our life is being squeezed out of us. "Your kingdom come!" Sometimes words fail us. All we can utter when we see some appalling

thing on the news is a deep, involuntary, internal groaning. This sighing does not go unheard by God. In fact, the Holy Spirit inspires that sense of being burdened, that groaning within us.

They say that the American preacher D.L. Moody made a list of 100 people, and prayed for them each day, that they would be converted. By the day he died, ninety-six had become Christians. The other four were converted at his funeral. "Your kingdom come," he prayed. And it did.

So may I invite you to pray...