

Lord, teach us to pray

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” And he said to them, “When you pray, say:

*“Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
And lead us not into temptation.”*

And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything’? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:1-13 ESV)

In the study of religions in RE in schools and in the experience of meeting people whose religion is different to one’s own we make comparisons – you have deities and so do we; worship is both geographical and ritual across the world; personal experiences have some resonance especially at the times of life colloquially known as ‘hatch, match and dispatch’ – that the Martian might conclude that religions on Planet Earth have more in common than they have differences. People on Planet Earth can think similarly – all good deeds lead to heaven, all prayers go to God sort of idea – so when Christianity claims a uniqueness in the supermarket of religions that is often deemed offensive today. After all, everyone prays. Possibly – though the atheists and humanists might dispute it. Nevertheless among religious people there is prayer.

So we don’t bat too much of an eyelid – and perhaps we should – when the disciples of Jesus, having observed him praying, send over a representative – ‘Lord, teach us to pray’ – and we often don’t hear the next bit ‘as John taught his disciples’. Prayer is not a natural human action such as breathing. It is more like swimming when you learn to breathe while moving in the water. Thus we learn prayer from a teacher. We learn prayer from others. We learn prayer from the patterns and even rituals we observe. We are taught prayer.

That’s what religious guides do at some point – talk about and teach prayer – and they pray and are observed and possibly heard. We have no details about John the Baptist’s prayer insights – but those disciples of Jesus who were John’s former disciples wanted to enter Jesus’ school of prayer. Jesus, teach us to pray. And he does.

At first glance Jesus does what we expect the teacher to do. He tells us what to do – gives us the code, the key, the abracadabra so that our prayers will work – and for those who have already been praying, they want them to ‘work’ better than before. Luke’s account gives us 5 of the 7 petitions we know as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ and I don’t know why except to suggest that Jesus taught about prayer on many occasions and he only focused on these petitions in the scene Luke has researched.

However what Jesus does here is not the run of the mill prayer teaching. It is even clearer in Matthew’s account which is part of the Sermon on the Mount. His words are not the right ones – like your PIN you use for banking – where you get God to spit out the amount and type of need you want – instead his words describe who God is, your relationship, and how you relate to him. This is not a clever new teaching but a claim by Jesus that sets Jesus apart from all the other religious gurus and teachers of prayer. Jesus’ teaching on prayer claims a uniqueness that when the world stops and thinks about it and realises that Jesus doesn’t give out a spiritual ‘open sesame’ to goodies but something else then they might even string him up! What Jesus does in his teaching on prayer is claim to be God’s Son and then teach you that you can have his

relationship with God – you can call God ‘Father’ too – and pray and go back to your living in that relationship. To pray this prayer we call The Lord’s Prayer is to trust Jesus that he isn’t getting us into big trouble with God by being too familiar, close, or delusional.

So trusting Jesus and accepting his relationship with God is ours through him, we then learn what that relationship is like and it is so much more than having God as a vending machine. Our relationship with God is marked by God’s name, God’s kingdom, our living day-to-day in this world, dealing with sin through forgiveness and help in temptation – according to Jesus via Luke in today’s reading. Again this only makes sense if you trust that the teaching isn’t spinning you a yarn or pulling a fast one. After all, how do we know whether any prayer teaching is correct unless we trust the teacher?

Cut to the basics I think people pray because they want something. I think people search for all sorts of new insights on prayer because the version they’re using doesn’t work all that well for them – God remains elusive and we don’t get all that much satisfaction. So what Jesus does, after giving us his relationship with God and the words that shape our relationship with God and with this world, is to tell us, that when this prayer doesn’t seem to work, to persevere. He does with two anti-types saying that if a persistent neighbour can get bread at an ungodly hour and we who are known to do lots of wrong can still do right things by our own children, then realise that God is better than a harassed neighbour and better than us.

God will give to those who ask; not play hide ‘n seek with those who seek; and open to those who knock. I think more people are disappointed by these words than most others in the Bible precisely when their prayers don’t go as they want. Many a leaving God and Jesus and the church is a result of unanswered prayer. However Jesus never taught a ‘blank cheque’ theology. He revealed God and a relationship that God creates with us through Jesus and there is a freedom – rather than a blank cheque – that we can pray as our needs and circumstances require – but it always remains within the relationship. And the most clear example here is that God will not answer a prayer that will harm ourselves or others – not matter how well meaning or heartfelt or even angry and justified we might be. God doesn’t give us access to him and his power so that we can destroy in his name or become a mini tyrant god in his name.

What Jesus points out is that while we can give good things to our children – and usually they are good though on occasions we get it wrong and what we give has many negative consequences and we later regret the gift – God will always give us the Holy Spirit for he is who we need most of all.

It is the Holy Spirit’s role and task to convict us of sin, reveal Jesus as our Saviour and guide us in living in this relationship each day through Word and Sacraments. In particular as we pray The Lord’s Prayer it is the Holy Spirit who confirms that this prayer – one with a built-in date stamp – to be prayed at least once per day – ‘give us this day ...’ – is not weak but never ending for each day opens up for us new aspects of our relationship with God and the people around us.

Martin Luther understood this well when he taught what The Lord’s Prayer meant – see your Small Catechism or p.323-325 of the LSB – and when he reminded us that prayer opportunities 5 times per day were possible when we linked prayer to getting up in the morning, when we eat, and when we go to bed in the evening – see your Small Catechism Daily Prayers section or p.327, 328. Such prayer was more a pause in the day – a bit like orienteering – to get our bearings again – remember who we are as God’s children through Jesus – and then embark again on the journey into our lives with the people around us. Prayer is not just our list of gimmes – give me this, give me that! Prayer is conversation with God where Jesus gave us the framework which we personalise in a relationship in which God is faithful. That is why we can keep praying – and returning to The Lord’s Prayer – because Jesus has given it to us to remind us and confirm for us our relationship with God because of what Jesus has done – and why stopping this prayer is such a top target for the world, our sinful and shameful flesh, and the demonic.

Lord, teach us to pray. He has and he does and we do not go away empty handed. It’s just that the blessings we receive may not be the ones we’re expecting. Lord, teach us to pray.