



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.
Amen

‘Starter for Ten’ Discussion Question

How easy or difficult do you find it to pray? What do you think helps you to pray, and what hinders you?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

You are invited to bring your thanksgivings to God, and then to pray:

God of blessing,
teach us to be ever thankful
in both the good times and the tough times.
May we know your love for us,
and forever live to sing your praises. **Amen**

Psalms of the Week – Psalm 138

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
**I bow down towards your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love
and your faithfulness;**
for you have exalted your name
and your word above everything.

**On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.**

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.

**They shall sing of the ways of the LORD,
for great is the glory of the LORD.**

For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly;
but the haughty he perceives from far away.

**Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;**
you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.

The LORD will fulfil his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures for ever.

Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit
as it was in the beginning, is now and shall be forever.

Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of relationship,
you bring renewal in tired places,
and set us free to follow you into a hope-filled future.
Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:

God of mercy, forgive us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:

God of love, comfort us.

We bring to you the brokenness and oppression in our world:

God of justice, disturb us.

We bring to you the times we've hidden from the risks of love:

God of courage, fortify us.

We bring to you the failures of the Church to stand for justice:

God of liberation, convict us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of new beginnings, of love stronger than even death,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.

Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and breathe new life into us.

Amen

Reading Luke 11:1 – 13

Sermon

When I was a PhD student up in Durham, I shared office space with ten other students, all of whom described themselves as atheists or agnostics. Being the only person of faith within that context was not always easy, and I frequently found myself both being asked loaded questions designed to 'trip me up', and being the butt of office jokes. However, one of the most interesting things was the way that, when fewer folk were about, some of those people would discretely share their problems with me, and on several occasions, I was asked if I'd pray for them. Looking back, I'm still not completely sure about what

was going on. Was this a kind of insurance policy, which might read 'I don't know if prayer works, but it can't do any harm'? Alternatively, was it actually the case that some of my colleagues were more open to faith and spirituality than they felt able to share, given we were in an environment where the dominant voices were strongly anti-faith? Either way, reflecting on this experience raises various questions of which just three are: what happens when we pray? what differences does prayer make?, and do we need to have a personal faith for our prayers to be 'answered', whatever that means?

Now, before we begin to grapple with these, we need to take a step back for a moment, and think a bit about the image of God we have, because this will impact how we understand prayer. If the picture of God we have in our heads is of a distant and/or largely disinterested God, who occasionally and arbitrarily decides to intervene, then we might well find the subject of praying to be really rather problematic. Some of you may know the song 'From a Distance' by Nanci Griffith, which was a hit back in the 1980s. There is a lyric in that song which says that 'God is watching us from a distance', which I don't think is quite right. God is not some distant deity who has kicked off creation with the Big Bang and then retired to the heavenly sofa with popcorn to watch how events unfolded. Instead, God's intimately involved in the life of what God has created. We can trust in this claim because, in Jesus, God became fully human and shared our life, and because the Holy Spirit was sent to sustain and guide us. If we start with this idea then we are more likely to see prayer as something worthwhile. There's more to be said, however, because this in turn gives rise to questions about *unanswered prayers*, especially in situations where we or somebody we love is suffering, or in which we sense injustice.

There are, of course, a range of standard responses to this problem. We might say that God has a plan, and we can't always see the 'full picture', but that begs more questions than it solves. More helpfully, we might argue that Jesus' cross and resurrection reveal the power

of God's love simply to go on being there even when all hope is lost. One of the hardest things I experienced while at theological college occurred when one of our tutors had a stroke. After he was released from hospital, it seemed everybody around me was celebrating, but I found myself wondering why the prayers for his recovery had been answered, when those for my mum had not. With the benefit of time to grieve, I have been able to rediscover hope in the knowledge that the resurrection means that mum as she was before her stroke isn't lost, but is upheld in the memory of God. Yet, the fact that we cannot 'systematise' prayer, and nail down exactly how our God works, can be nonetheless very painful and confusing to grapple with.

So, given all this, what light can today's reading shed on those three questions which I posed earlier: what happens when we pray? what difference does prayer make? do we need to have a 'personal faith' for prayers to be 'answered'? Well, Jesus's response to the request made by his friends to be taught how to pray is an invitation to enjoy the same intimacy with God he enjoyed. The first thing we do within that prayer is acknowledge that we are God's beloved children. One of the things that happens when we pray is that we give attention to our relationships with God. Notice, however, that the contents of the Lord's Prayer aren't some shopping list of wants, but a vision of the Kingdom of God, in which all have their material needs met, sin and evil are overcome with forgiveness that flows from God, and there's the promise of ultimate deliverance from sufferings. Perhaps part of the difference praying makes is that it has the potential to transform our vision, focusing us on living lives based on God's life-giving love and hope. If this is true, it means that prayer liberates us to be more sensitive to opportunities for us to be answers to prayers ourselves, and thus to work with God in bringing in the Kingdom.

The parable that follows after the Lord's Prayer, and the injunctions to keep searching and asking, and knocking on God's door, suggest an answer to our third question. God longs for those who don't know

how precious and valuable they are in God's sights to come to know her, and the door is never bolted shut against anyone. Instead, God longs to bless us, and bless us a lot. Thus, I would suggest that God never closes God's ears to genuine prayers. That doesn't mean that everything will always work out how we want. Yet, it does mean that nobody is beyond the reach of God's love and because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, all can be saved, and set free to enjoy life in all its fullness. The invitation is there for all, to come to know God, to be released from the chains of sin that bind us, and begin again.

So, our passage gives us some important pointers as to what prayer is about, even as our experiences warn us of the danger of trying to make things too neat. God isn't like a fruit machine, and prayer isn't about carrying on putting coins in and turning the handle until we hit the jackpot. Moreover, nowhere does the Bible say that discipleship is about escaping from this world, or never facing very difficult times. However, prayer matters precisely because it is about *relationships* – our relationships both with God, and others. I would therefore like to encourage you, friends, to stick at prayer and to keep on praying, even when you don't much feel like it.

From a standpoint of relative safety that being ordained gives, I feel able to admit that prayer can be quite a struggle for me at times. It's interesting that I have fewer conversations about prayer these days than I did before training for ordained ministry, perhaps because I'm now seen by some as a 'professional religious person', and thus not likely to have the same difficulties with praying that others do. I wish that were true! The fact is, prayer is hard work, and it takes effort to keep a prayer life going. Sometimes, I feel really close to God; other times, it feels like I am talking to the ceiling. However, as I was once told by a wise minister, nine-tenths of the battle is turning up. Hence, while it might not always seem like much is happening, the one way to guarantee nothing will is not to bother at all. And thus, with all this in mind, let us pray:

Abide with us, Lord,
abide with us today and forever.
Abide with us in our joys and our sorrows.
Abide with us in darkness and light.
Abide with us, and your whole Church.
Abide with us in time and eternity.
In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

David Wilkinson's *When I Pray, What Does God Do?* looks at prayer and some of the misconceptions associated with it.

Prayers of Intercession

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring good news to the poor.
We pray for all those who struggle to make ends meet,
for those having to choose between food and heating,
and those who are worried about what the future holds.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring release to the captives.
We pray for prisoners of conscience throughout the world,
for those living under oppressive regimes and dictatorships,
and the work of human rights organisations and advocates.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring recovery of sight to the blind.
We pray for everyone who struggles to trust they are loved,
for those blinded by affluence, self-interest or greed,
and all those who have lost sight of you in the midst of life.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring freedom to the oppressed.
We pray for those experiencing isolation and loneliness,
for all victims and survivors of abuse of any kind,
and those struggling with ill health in body, mind or spirit.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

Lord's Prayer

Blessing