

Luke 11.1-13

Interrupting Heaven: praying

Amington

Sunday 2 June 2019

The Life You've Always Wanted

(1) Prayer is a learned activity

Are there any American Football fans here this morning? There is something called a Hail Mary pass – basically, when all else fails, when there is no time left, the players run as fast as they can down the field, and the quarterback hurls the ball forward, desperately hoping that one of his players catches it.

It is called a 'Hail Mary' pass after the Catholic prayer, 'Hail Mary, full of grace...' When we reach our limits, we turn to prayer – and *that* kind of prayer comes quite naturally. It's like breathing, or reaching out to grab something when we feel ourselves falling.

But what about *everyday* prayer? This, I suspect, is where most Christians feel the most guilty. We don't pray as much or as well as everyone else – we tell ourselves – perhaps we don't love God enough because we don't find prayer as easy as everyone else.

Well, the first thing I want to tell you today, that I want you to remember, is this.

Pretty much everyone struggles with prayer: not the instinctive prayer for ‘help!’ – that one is easy; I mean the everyday discipline of talking to God.

Pretty much everyone struggles with that sort of prayer – even the disciples! They saw Jesus slip off to pray by himself, and one day they saw him change, his clothes become as bright as a flash of lightning... does that happen when you pray? No?

One day, the disciples plucked up enough courage to ask Jesus to teach them to pray. They knew all the right words – as Jews they grew up with prayers offered throughout the day, before meals, at the Sabbath, in the synagogue.

They saw that Jesus was *fed* by his prayer, like their stomachs were fed by food – and they wanted *that*. They realised they were missing something. They realised they needed to *learn*.

And so, having watched him praying one day, they asked.

Reading: Luke 11.1-4, 10-13

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said, ‘Master, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.’

So he said, ‘When you pray, say,

‘Father,

Reveal who you are.

Set the world right.

Keep us alive with three square meals.

Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.

Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.

‘Don’t bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This is not a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we’re in. If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn’t think of such a thing—you’re at least decent to your own children. And don’t you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask him?’

Luke 11.1-3, 10-13 (MSG)

(2) Talking to God

What is the first word in Jesus' prayer?

Father.

What does that mean?

Prayer is communicating – talking and listening to a person; not just any person: our heavenly Father.

It isn't complicated. We all learn how to talk from an early age. Listening is perhaps a little harder – but we can all do it.

So why do we find prayer so difficult, so much of the time?

Activity: tissue paper aeroplanes

Point: communication is difficult when you are far away

(3) Patterns

Time and place

The best piece of advice I can give you, if you want to improve your prayer life, is this: you need two things, a time and a place. Prayer works best if they are the same time and the same place, every day.

Some people tell me it's impossible – they are never in the same place at the same place two days running. To which I reply – then prayer is obviously not that important to you.

Christian wisdom through the ages says that to draw near to God so we can speak and listen, we need to carve out a time and a place, so it becomes a regular, daily habit. Keep it **regular**.

You only need start with five minutes, but make it five minutes a day: some days it'll be easy, some days it'll be hard – but stick to five minutes, and then stop.

As for the place – it needs to be free of distractions. I pray in my study, and if my computer is on, or my phone is in my hand, I'm afraid praying tends to disappear out of the window.

The wandering mind

So, you carve out the time, and you find the place, and you sit down to pray – and your mind starts wandering... have you been there? I have! The thoughts don't stop... I must remember to send that email, I need to call my Granny, I'm hungry – perhaps I should get a biscuit, I wonder if it'll rain today, I hope Jess has a good day at work... they don't stop.

None of that seems spiritual... so I make myself pray for world peace, and the other things I'm *supposed* to pray for.

But here's the thing: prayer is simply talking to God, and listening to him. So in the talking part, tell him what's *actually* on your heart, not what you *wish* were on your heart. It might seem trivial, it might seem selfish, but don't pretend to be something you aren't. God knows who you are, anyway.

The other thing to do with a wandering mind is to use it to guide your prayers: instead of getting frustrated when your mind wanders, pray that God would bless the person or situation your mind has wandered to. Pay attention to those deep feelings, and speak to God about them – CS Lewis said, 'lay before him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.' Keep it **real**.

Keep it going

Keep it regular – keep it real – keep it going.

When Jesus taught about prayer, he told us to be persistent, to keep it going. Sometimes our prayers are answered in dramatic fashion – but sometimes they are not; that is why Jesus told us to keep it going, to be persistent.

One helpful tip is to keep a prayer diary – to write down the things you are praying for each day. Partly this can help us pray, but mostly it helps us look back and see all the ways God has helped us or answered our prayers – often in ways we can't imagine. And that can help us keep going with prayer – it isn't that prayer is powerful, but God is, and he has given us permission to speak to him – let's not take that for granted!

Keep it regular... keep it real... keep it going. Why?

Because what prayer is, is knitting our heart to God's heart. It takes time, it takes effort, but it isn't complicated – we simply need to spend time with him, talking and listening, every day.