



6th November 2016
Psalm 17.1-9
Luke 20.27-38

Honest Prayer

Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.

I wonder how many ways there are to pray?

Just within Christianity there are written prayers, some hundreds of years old, memorised and cherished from the Prayer Book. Others prefer extemporary prayer with nothing written down simply praying as we feel led. Whilst others, like our Quaker friends, dispense with too many words and sit in silence listening out for the voice of God.

In different traditions to ours the Buddhists have Prayer Wheels and Flags, the Jews assemble at the Wailing Wall and Muslims follow their call to Prayer five times a day kneeling on their mat facing Mecca.

So when it comes to religion and faith prayer seems to be a common bond between us.

And I suspect there has never been a right way to pray.

I was brought up to believe in something called the daily Quiet Time – the idea that every day it would be a good idea to set aside say fifteen minutes to read the bible and pray. Not so very different really from saying a Daily Office in a monastery. That's still a fine aspiration as long as you don't get too guilt ridden if you don't make it every day.

So for some there will be a set time of prayer whilst for others it will be less structured. For some there will be words, for others silence or the use of images and icons. For some prayers are said in church whilst others pray whilst walking or driving along.

For most of us our prayer-life is an amalgamation of all of these – we might even try some for a season and then move on to another style or even a different understanding of prayer itself.

There are, I think, no experts when it comes to prayer – just stumbling practitioners. Indeed, many were stunned to read some words of Mother Theresa's, found after her death, in which she said that after decades of praying she had never once felt near to God. I suspect we are just as much comforted as we might have been unthinkingly surprised by these words – indeed I think such honesty is refreshing and a real gift to leave behind for fellow travellers on the path of prayer.

This morning's Psalm, set as the lectionary reading for today comes either from the pen of David or someone in his household and it's an example of honest prayer

(It's at this point in the sermon that I confess to you I'm leaving the New Testament reading all about heaven and wives for next time round in the lectionary's three year cycle – that will be November 2019 – which might give me just enough time to work out what it means!)

So, David, the Bible Commentators tell us, is being pursued by his monarchical predecessor King Saul. By now Saul is a man racked with jealousy at the popularity of David and is hunting him high and lo.

With his life in the balance and constantly on the run David is exhausted and at his wits end. This, for him, was a time of crisis – and throughout history such moments have often brought people to their knees.

David cries out to God in Psalm 17 with phrases like:
Show me how marvellous is your unfailing love, your right-hand saves those who seek sanctuary from their assailants. Guard me like the apple of your eye, hide me in the shadow of your wings from the wicked who do me violence, from the deadly foes who throng around me.

As the psalms were used as the temple's hymn book, it's difficult to think of hymnic equivalents in contemporary worship collections.

It's interesting, however, to recall as we approach Remembrance Sunday next week that in World War 2, with the British army trapped at Dunkirk George 6th called for a National Day of Prayer to be held on 26th May 1940. In a national broadcast he instructed his people to turn to God. The newspapers reported that millions of people across Britain flocked into churches praying for deliverance and that folk queued for hours to get into the service at Westminster Abbey.

There is a certain 'vulnerability' at the heart of what we might mean by prayer. In prayer we turn to God with honesty and sometimes in desperation.

Honesty is a core component in living alongside others. And in matters of faith there is never a need to come before God masking our fears or stifling our questions.

Psalm 17 is full of honesty as David says or sings: Lord, hear my plea for justice, give heed to my cry.

He simply dispenses with the opening pleasantries and dives straight in – banging, as it were, upon heaven's door.

I confess to having a pet hate when it comes to prayers in church and that is the idea that as we assemble for worship we somehow leave our worries at the door and have a glorious hour of worship that is in no way connected to the life we live the other six days of the week.

Our worship, our hymns, our prayers need to be honest. And sometimes we simply want to call on God to help us – what does David pray: Lord, hear my prayer for justice, give heed to my cry.

We don't have to couch our liturgy in suppressed politeness or Elizabethan verse – instead, as the Iona Community has taught us over recent years, there is a time when earthy language, questioning phrases and heartfelt lament find an honest place in liturgy.

Psalm 17 is yet another example of the human spirit 'yearning' for God. Its importance is not that David is considered Israel's archetypal sovereign, the best of kings, but that as a human being assessing his life he calls out for God's help, God's perspective and God's strength.

These are telling phrases: God, I call upon you. Bend down your ear to me. I am guided by the words of your lips.

Prayer subverts a modernist view of life – it never devalues the place of the material in our well-being, indeed it often asks God for material blessings, but it goes further and deeper because prayer, at its heart, seeks to make a connection with the spiritual, with a God of Love.

A few months ago I preached at Union Baptist Church in High Wycombe and just before the service began I felt as if I had been highjacked into a prayer meeting!

Everything was ready for the service so I was led through winding corridors to an upper room and offered a chair around this big table, and gradually over the next ten minutes the other chairs were filled and there was a time of prayer.

Well this was a Baptist Church so the prayers were fervent and heart-felt – perhaps not really my way of praying but I so appreciated this sense of seeking a connection – a yearning for God to be present in the hour of worship that was to follow.

We can prepare the music. We can prepare the flowers, the hymn books and the coffee. Let's not forget to also prayerfully seek to prepare ourselves for worship. To seek God with an open heart. To value this dedicated time together as a meeting place between heaven and earth.

Prayer is one way for us to reach out to God – it's about yearning for his touch and presence – it's about making a connection.

One of the ways David does that in Psalm 17 is that as he prays he is in the business of reminding himself of who God is. This is the God who leads because, verse 4, David is guided by God's words. This is a God worth praying to because, verse 6, You will answer me. This is the God worth trusting in because, verse 7, he shows unfailing love.

Sam Wells, the Vicar of St Martin's alongside Trafalgar Square in his book on how to lead Prayers of Intercession encourages those who write their prayers to use different titles for God. God of Compassion. God of Love. Lord of Life. Spirit of Truth.

He says using these titles when we pray is a way of us affirming our faith in God. They remind us of who God is and why we come to him on our knees. And David does that here – he cries out in crisis yet he also cries out in faith because it's clear that he believes the God to whom he speaks is one who guides and answers.

And I wonder, how does God answer us when we pray?

For many that is the 64-thousand-dollar question – does prayer make any difference?

Our fridge magnet Danish theologian Kierkegaard once said: Prayer changes me more than it changes God.

There may well have been times in your life when you have prayed and things beyond your imagining or expectation have unfolded and it's felt to you as if something of God has touched your life – and for those moments we give heartfelt thanks.

But, in truth, there may be just as many moments when the heavens do not open and nothing spectacular happens after we have said Amen.

Over the years Kierkegaard's dictum has become more central in my theology of prayer: Prayer changes me more than it changes God.

As I pray, as we pray – I think we change. As we affirm our faith, as we try to make this connection, as we pray with yearning and with honesty – we change. We, maybe, see with a deeper perspective, we find new strength and enthusiasm in tackling an old problem, we keep the door open in a dispute so that reconciliation becomes a possibility, we face a new or old challenge with renewed strength, hope, and peace – or we simply find the courage to go on.

In short as people made in the image of God, we discover and rediscover the God like particles in our DNA such as enduring love, open hearted forgiveness, faithfulness, endurance and loving self-sacrifice.

Prayer changes us and helps ignite within us and energise around us the God given qualities which bless every life.

As Psalm 17 unfolds and is sung by a young man on the run, scared of what's around the corner – it teaches us that such yearning, such honesty, such affirmation and such trust can come together and in a moment of spiritual alchemy be transformed into something we dare to call prayer.

May it be so in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Ian Green: Amersham 3rd November 2016