

Teach us how to pray

24 July 2022

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME ...

Today we're focusing on **prayer**.

What do you think prayer is?? ...

Prayer is simply talking with God, sharing what's on our mind and listening to what God might say to us. If talking to God sounds scary or odd, one person suggests we sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of us, and in faith imagine Jesus sitting on the chair. Jesus promised to be with us always. Then we just speak to Jesus and listen in the same way we might with any other person.

I've got three questions about prayer before we go any further:

1. Who can pray? ... Anyone! Everyone!
2. Is there just one right way to pray (e.g. sit, close eyes, hold your hands like this)? ... No!
3. Does God like long and fancy prayers? ... I'm not sure but I suspect not so much. The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples was short and to the point.

Let's spend a moment in quiet prayer now before we have our Bible readings and pray that God might speak to us through them ...

BIBLE READING

Amos 8:4-6, 11-12; 9:11-12, 14-15

Hear this, you who trample the needy
and do away with the poor of the land, saying:

'When will the New Moon be over
that we may sell grain,
and the Sabbath be ended
that we may market wheat?' –
skimping on the measure,
boosting the price
and cheating with dishonest scales,
buying the poor with silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
selling even the sweepings with the wheat. ...

'The days are coming,' declares the Sovereign Lord,
'when I will send a famine through the land –
not a famine of food or a thirst for water,
but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.

People will stagger from sea to sea
and wander from north to east,
searching for the word of the Lord,
but they will not find it.

[Then, finally, some measure of hope for the future ...]

‘In that day, I will restore David’s fallen shelter –
I will repair its broken walls
and restore its ruins –
and will rebuild it as it used to be,
so that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations that bear my name,’
declares the Lord, who will do these things.

... and I will bring my people Israel back from exile.
They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them.
They will plant vineyards and drink their wine;
they will make gardens and eat their fruit.

I will plant Israel in their own land,
never again to be uprooted
from the land I have given them,
says the Lord your God.

[Luke 11:1-13](#)

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

He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:

“Father, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation.”

Then Jesus said to them, ‘Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.” And suppose the one inside answers, “Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.” I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your persistence he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

So I say to you: ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the

door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 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!'

MESSAGE Teach us how to pray



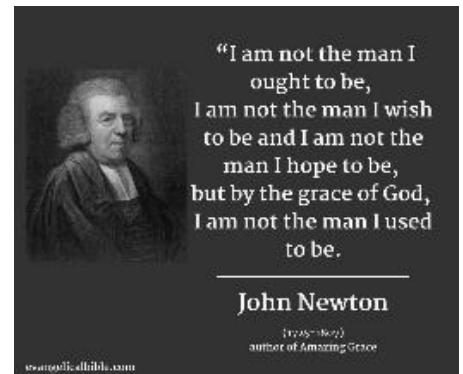
Prayer is a deeply spiritual practice that crosses many religions.

People pray for all sorts of reasons – for protection and security from evil, for rain or a good harvest, for the healing of a loved one, to connect with one's god.

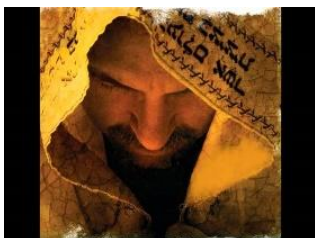
Even non-religious people pray in times of extreme anguish.

People like the slave trader **John Newton** – who afraid he was about to drown during a fierce Atlantic

storm – and who cried out to God to save him – promising to turn his whole life around. Newton survived the storm, gave up slave trading and became a Minister and hymn writer, whose best known hymn is the classic *Amazing grace*.



Jewish people also pray, usually at least three times a day, often following set prayers. As a Jew, Jesus would have been taught how to pray from a young age. In today's Gospel reading, the disciples observe Jesus praying and ask him to teach them **how to pray**, presumably to pray like he does.



I wonder how Jesus prayed. ... I'm guessing that he regularly prayed the Shema, a prayer taken from Deuteronomy chapter 6 that Jews around the world continue to pray every morning, afternoon and evening:

*Hear, O Israel,
The Lord - Yahweh - is our God.
Yahweh is one.*

*You shall love Yahweh with all your heart, soul and strength.
Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.*

Jesus may well have also prayed a morning prayer that dates back to at least the third century BCE that begins ...

*Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe -
thank you for giving the rooster the ability to distinguish between day
and night, and thereby being able to wake us up in the morning;
thank you for restoring my soul when I awake;
thank you that I was not born a Gentile, a slave or a woman ...*

As an aside, the line about not being born a Gentile, a slave or a woman may lie behind the apostle Paul's claim in Galatians that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female – these Jewish distinctions have been abolished in Christ.

Jewish people also prayed the **psalms**. Overall, their prayers were generally short, often repeated verses from Scripture and were prayed several times a day, to raise one's awareness of God throughout the day.

The **Our Father** prayer that Jesus shares with the disciples fits this pattern.

In Luke's version of the prayer it is quite short – comprising less than 40 words in Greek.

Matthew's version is longer – but still only 60 words in Greek – and similar in English. The prayer is easily memorised and we are encouraged to pray it often, at least every day.



The prayer is addressed to God as **Father**, the address for God favoured by Jesus, quite possibly derived from Psalm 2 where God calls the Messiah his Son.

What follows are five short petitions ...

***Praise** – may God's name be holy or sanctified*

***Perspective** – May God's kingdom come on earth – a central theme for Jesus*

***Provision** – give us each day our daily bread – what we need to survive*

***Pardon** – release us from our sins as we release those indebted to us – which is about freeing ourselves and our neighbour from what binds us*

***Protection** – do not bring us to trial or testing*

So in Jesus' short prayer, we are encouraged to lift up our eyes to get God's perspective on our situation, to pray for our direct needs and freedom, and to pray for security.

Interestingly we are not told to pray for the sick (although Jesus often prayed for healing), not to pray for wisdom (although some psalms do) and not to pray for peace in the world (though more on this later).

Jesus' teaching on prayer has two other lessons for us.

The first of these is about **persistence** and not giving up. A friend knocks on your door at midnight requesting food – it's an **unwelcome** request at that time of night, and it's **unlikely** to be granted. Yet for all that, Jesus argues, if the friend persists you **will** – eventually – get up and give them what they want so you can get back to sleep.



So with prayer. Keep praying. Keep asking. But remember that prayer is not about twisting God's arm – prayer is more about changing **us** and **our** perspective – so the more we pray, the more our attitudes and requests will line up with God's.

The last lesson is similar. Keep on **asking, seeking** and **knocking** because unlike our sometimes mixed motives, God only wants to give us good gifts, especially the gift of the Holy Spirit. The opposite is **not** to ask, **not** to seek and **not** to knock – in other words, to **stop praying**. If we don't pray we can't expect to receive answers.

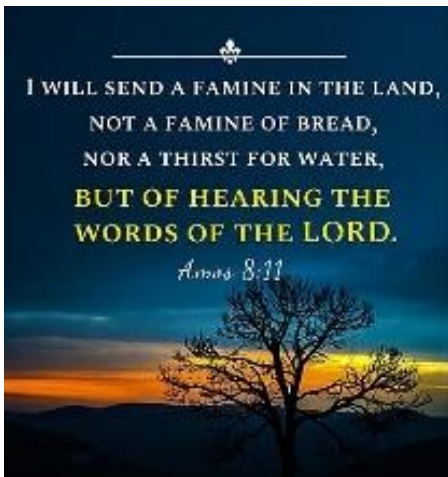
Sounds simple then, this prayer thing? Short prayers, prayed often, focused on our direct needs but giving us a godly perspective, encouraging us to see the world and its needs through God's eyes.

What could possibly go wrong with prayer?

The first mistake is to **forget to listen**. Too often we can pour out our heart in prayer or present God with a great long shopping list of prayer requests and then log out. We often don't stop to listen to God's response. In his letter, Jesus' brother James

warns us to be slow to speak but quick to listen. Maybe that's why we have two ears and only one mouth!

So a key part of prayer is **listening**. God's character and will are revealed in Scripture, so we can listen to what God's Spirit is saying to us when we read the Scriptures. God's beauty and character are also revealed in creation, which helps us gain a better perspective of our place in the wider world.



In the section we heard from Amos this morning, there is a **warning** – that if we fail to seek justice and to care for the poor among us, then God will send a **famine** even worse than hunger or thirst – a **famine of hearing from God** – no guidance, no reassurance, just a deadening silence. If the people continue to ignore God, then God will ignore the people.

Instead they are called to listen and to change their ways. Amos finishes with just a small glimmer of hope for the future, on **that day** ... God will restore the land and the people. History suggests that Amos' prophecies of destruction and exile did indeed come to pass, but these people never returned to their land.

So a question: is prayer a **nice-to-do activity** for some or a **necessity** in our walk with God?

Many people never or rarely pray and they often seem to get along okay, but given prayer was a central and habitual practice of Jesus, it suggests that we should observe and learn from Jesus, just as the disciples did.

Prayer doesn't have to take hours. It can be very simple, with few words.

The focus is on **God first** and then on **our key needs**.

We need to **persist** ... and to **listen** to what God may be saying to us.

Prayer may not change God, but it may well **change us** and that is perhaps the main point of prayer.

My personal practice of prayer is to pray the Lord's prayer before I get up in the morning to orient my day towards God's perspective. Last thing before going to sleep I quickly review the day and offer God my thanks. In between I pray when I feel

prompted. I find going for a walk is a good time for me to pray. But there is no **one** way to pray.

For a while now we have made a practice of choosing to pray for peace in our world on a monthly basis. Given what we've seen and heard this morning, I wonder what that might look like for Jesus?

There are two issues that come to mind.

First is, **what does peace look like** for Jewish people? Is it mostly about the **absence of conflict** ... so that peace in Ukraine would be an end to the fighting?



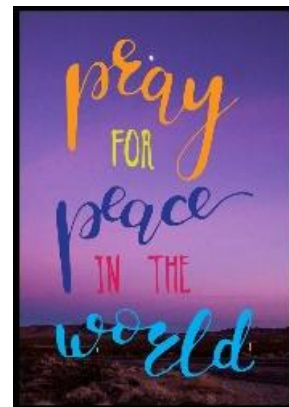
For Jewish people, the word for peace is **shalom** – which is a deeper and richer concept than the absence of war. It is based on the verb **to complete**, so shalom literally means **completeness** or **wholeness**. It has various shades of meaning then from health and well-being to prosperity, kindness and salvation.

In some of the final words from Amos this morning, **shalom** is planting a vineyard and drinking the wine that comes from the vines or planting a garden and eating the fruit that comes from it – there is a sense of well-being – represented by the wine and the fruit – that comes from tender care and focusing on what is good in life.

In imagery from Isaiah, **shalom** is present when former enemies like the wolf and the lamb can live alongside each other, when people live to a good old age, when neighbours live in peace with each other but also in peace with God. The so-called Aaronic blessing ... the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you ... ends with the words **may the Lord give you peace, shalom**.

So peace – or shalom – points to wholeness and fruitfulness, peace with neighbours and with God.

But how about Jewish attitudes towards the nations of the world? ... this is tricky because much of the OT was written in an age of **violence** when you killed your enemy or they were likely to kill you. Israel was often invaded and conquered by its neighbours – whether by Egypt, Assyria, Babylon or Rome. So Jewish attitudes were often pretty negative towards the surrounding nations.



Jesus, however, showed remarkable kindness and compassion to **everyone** – including to Israel's enemies like Roman officials and Samaritans. Paul adopted this inclusive attitude in his ministry and welcomed everyone to the Christian community, seeing every person as a potential follower of Jesus.

So Jesus – and Paul – and eventually the Christian communities scattered throughout the nations – saw their calling to extend the peace of Jesus to every nation. Hence we are invited to continue this practice of praying for peace in the world.

I have surely spoken enough words.

So it's time to be still and silent for a while and to contemplate and to pray for peace – **shalom** – in our world.