

What is prayer?

The Bible, from its opening page to its last page, is the story of God's engagement with human life. One of the chief things that it records is that there is constant communication between him and us: that we can communicate with him and he does communicate with us. Prayer is that communication or conversation between human beings and God.

One of the mysteries of prayer is that God, who is everywhere and knows everything, even the number of the hairs of our heads (St Matthew 10:30, St Luke 12:7) or the death of so insignificant a thing as a sparrow (St Matthew 10: 29, St Luke 12:6), still requires his people to communicate with him.

Prayer is asking God to help us, to protect us, to provide for us, to be with us. Prayer is communicating the deepest yearnings of our hearts to the Lord.

Jesus teaches in St John's Gospel that there is nothing that we cannot pray about, 'Indeed anything you ask in my Name I will do' (St John 15:16). This does not mean that Jesus will do everything that we ask, but that he will hear us about whatever is in our hearts.

Prayer is the chief way of drawing close to the Lord. The others are reading the Bible, receiving Holy Communion, and giving loving service to others, especially Christians, but also to non-Christians. Prayer is something that every Christian should attend to daily. Prayer is, in a practical way, the very foundation of Christian life.

Prayer is also something that we do not understand (it is beyond intellectual comprehension), but it is something the reality of which we know, because of answered prayer. It is because of our prayers being answered, in small things and in large, that we know that God is with us and that he hears us and responds to us.

But not all prayers are answered. That is also part of the mystery. The Lord spoke through the Prophet Isaiah saying, 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts' (Isaiah 55: 8-9).

Two types of prayer: Public and Personal

The Church presumes two types of prayer as the common practise of her members: the formal public prayer of the gathered community (i.e. Church services) and the informal prayer of persons alone (or in small groups). Both are essential to the life of the Church, and each informs other. Both are evident and seen as normative in the New Testament.

For example, in Acts 2: 42 St Luke records the activities of the church in the first days after Pentecost: 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer' – in other words, to gathering together with the Apostles, and for common meals and prayer (both of which indicate the observance of the Lord's Supper). Also in I Corinthians 11 and 14, St Paul is discussing the public worship of the Church. In chapter 11 he writes about what to do and what not to do at the Lord's Supper. In chapter 14 he writes about order in public worship, mostly about not speaking in Tongues in public worship, but keeping that for personal prayer.

In many other places we are instructed in how to pray personally. Jesus speaks about personal prayer at length in the Sermon on the Mount, particularly in chapter 6 where he teaches the Lord's Prayer, 'And when you pray go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret...' (St Matthew 6: 7), and in chapter 7 where he says, 'Ask and it will

be given to you, seek and you will find...' (St Matthew 7: 7-11). St Paul, throughout his letters, speaks again and again of prayer being the constant cry of the Christian heart to God the Father through Jesus Christ (Thessalonians 5:16, 17).

Public prayer

For us Scottish Episcopalians public worship using a written liturgical text is integral to who we are. Even for non-liturgical churches, from the Reformed (Presbyterian) tradition to Baptists and Pentecostals, there is still a distinction made between the public weekly gathering of a congregation on Sundays, and personal prayer engaged in at other times.

Public prayer for us has two particular aspects which are the celebration of the Eucharist or Holy Communion, chiefly on Sundays and Holy Days, and Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. The design is that all three services can be observed on any day or even every day. Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer are the (ostensibly daily) public recitation of the Psalms and reading from the Old and New Testaments together with praise (saying the Canticles which are 'songs' from Scripture set out to be recited or sung), confessing our Faith (saying the Apostles' Creed), and intercessory prayer.

The Eucharist or Holy Communion is the principal and characteristic public service of the church. Its function is principally that by the offering of bread and wine to God the Father (by placing them on the Holy Table) and the accompanying prayer (which includes saying the 'Words of Institution' or the words Jesus used at the Last Supper) we plead the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf (that is of all present) and on behalf of all of those for whom we pray; that is we ask God that by the prevailing sacrifice of the death of his Son, that he will hear our prayer. Also, our prayer is in union with Christ's own intercession at the right hand of the Father for his Church (Hebrews 7: 25). By receiving Holy Communion, Christ renews his Covenant with his people, forgives their sins, and fills us with his eternal life. Public prayer is the prayer of the Church as the Body of Christ in a very particular way.

Personal prayer

Personal prayer is the 'coal-face' of prayer; it is where the deep work is done. The subject of personal prayer often scares people. They can think that they don't know enough, aren't holy enough, don't have enough time, aren't clever enough, or many other things, none of which are true.

All anyone needs to be able to pray is the ability to formulate a thought, even of the most basic kind, and direct it to the Lord. We can express our thoughts silently or aloud, it makes no difference. In both we speak to God the Father through Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit.

How long should one take in personal prayer? Well, how long is a piece of string? There are no rules, it is entirely up to the individual. A Scottish Episcopalian writer of the 19th century, George Hay Forbes, wrote that nowhere in Scripture is there any mention of the time the Lord requires of us – that is for us to decide. Anything from a second (saying the name of Jesus, or crying out, 'Help me, Lord!' are both perfectly valid prayers) to hours.

But it is by engaging in personal prayer that a person gets to know the Lord, and that a genuine personal relationship takes place. It is also the place where in getting to know him, we learn that we can put our trust in him absolutely, as the Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, testify.

Douglas Kornahrens

Rector, Church of the Holy Cross