

Luke 11, CCV

May the words of...

I wonder why you came to church this morning. Habit may have something to do with it. Your spouse or partner or parents wanted you to? It's a nice way to meet people? I like to practice my English? There are lots of possible reasons. To be honest though, I think it's rather patronising to think that that's the reason for most of you. After all you're all adults and I assume you're here because you chose to. So, I wonder how you would describe your motivations for making that choice. There are after all lots of other things to be doing on a Sunday morning. One of them is sleeping.

One thing you might say is "I want to pray". You want to talk to your heavenly maker, with other people who are also talking to Him, in the words we've been using to talk to Him for many years. I certainly think that's a good reason to come to church and if that is even partly your reason, then the Gospel reading is relevant to you. This reading is Jesus' answer to the disciples' question, Lord, teach us to pray.

Vv. 1-2: He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say:
Father, hallowed be your name...

He then teaches them this simple version of the Lord's Prayer. It's slightly different from the one we normally say liturgically, because that one comes from Matthew's Gospel and Luke's version is slightly different. I'm not going to get into a detailed explanation of why there are two, how they're related historically or which one came first. That is a question for a Soundings session or an academic seminar, but this is a sermon. But one important aspect of the difference is that Luke presents the prayer as an answer to the request, "teach us to pray". Matthew's version comes in the Sermon on the Mount, that wonderful, but in so many ways impossibly difficult, handbook of how to be a Christian. What Luke is doing is almost stabilisers on Matthew's bicycle. This version of the prayer is great for someone who doesn't really even know where to start with praying. Of course, sometimes that includes all of us.

So, how does this basic model work?

It starts with a one word address to God and then five simple requests. It starts with one word of address, Father. In that word, it's already taught us so much about who the Christian God is and what it means to talk to God in prayer. God is someone we talk to simply, affectionately and respectfully: simply, because there's no need for

grand or elaborate titles, because he's just Father; affectionately, because God's not a grumpy boss or an impatient client, he's a loving father; and respectfully, because God's not a heavenly AI who we ask for whatever we want, he's a Father who we honour. That one word says a lot about how we relate to God. We call him Father.

Many people have had difficult relationships or even no relationship with their earthly fathers and if that's you, then your heavenly Father is all your earthly father wasn't. He's like the photographic negative of all that is wrong in earthly fatherhood.

"Father" is obviously a gendered word and the Christian tradition has classically held that God is beyond all gender. God is neither male nor female, just like God is neither English, nor Austrian, nor American, and God is neither an Arsenal fan nor a Bayern Munich fan. God is beyond all our human categories. But terms like "creator" or "parent" are much too cold and clinical. Although God has no gender, we need a gendered word for God, because he is personal and the Bible and the Christian tradition have always called him "Father", though they also say that he is like a mother. We address God simply, respectfully and affectionately. We call him "Father".

Then we ask for five things.

First, we ask for his name to be hallowed, that is, for God's name to look good, for God to have a good reputation, for God to get glory. That's the first and most fundamental request. God is the most glorious and amazing being that could ever exist and the world works properly when everyone agrees on that, so that's what we pray for.

Then secondly we pray for God's kingdom to come. We pray for God's rule to advance in the world, both finally and gloriously, when all the world comes under God's rule and all evil is blotted out, and everyday, when more and more of the world comes under God's rule and is brought in line with his values. When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we're praying that more and more of the world would come under God's rule and be as he wants it. We pray for God's kingdom to come in Ukraine, as the different warring factions submit to God's rule and so make peace. We pray for God's kingdom to come in the economic and political sphere, as more and more people acknowledge God as king and their use their power to advance his values. We pray for God's kingdom to come in our environment, as people everywhere start to live as if the world were made by God. In the first line we pray that God looks better to the world, in the second we pray that the world starts to look a bit better to God.

Then we pray for our daily bread, that is our basic, practical needs. I take it food represents all our basic practical needs, warmth, shelter, sanitation, healthcare, a job so we can afford those things. We don't pray for more than that. We pray for daily

bread, not daily steak and lobster. We pray for money to buy the clothes we need, not Saville Row suits. We pray for a working car so we can take the kids to school, not a Ferrari.

Then we pray for forgiveness, something we need as often as we need bread. The Bible and the Christian tradition have always affirmed no-one's perfect; we all need God's grace and mercy everyday. Just like I can't go more than a few hours without wanting something to eat, I can't go more than a few hours without needing God to forgive me for something, whether it's a sharp word, an angry reaction or just a deeply selfish, malicious thought. That's why every Eucharist has a confession and absolution near the start. We confess our sins and ask God's forgiveness and then the service leader declares that God has forgiven us.

Next, we pray for protection from temptation. We ask for forgiveness for when we've sinned in the past, and protection from temptation in the future. "God, forgive us when we do sin and help us not to".

So, here are five very simple requests: God's name to be glorified, God's rule to be obeyed, our needs to be met, our sins to be forgiven and our future to be protected. God's name, God's rule, our needs, our sins, our future.

That's five good things to pray for, indeed, five things that encompass pretty well everything we could pray for. I'm not saying we only ever use these words or never expand on these ideas, after all Jesus himself teaches the longer and more complicated version that we normally use and our liturgy contains some beautifully elaborate prayers, but this is a wonderful summary of everything we could want to pray for. Framing the things we pray for in these categories will help us see them differently. Perhaps you want to pray about a difficult situation at work or maybe a new job. Well, you can pray for God's kingdom to advance as you do helpful and valuable work and for God to provide your daily bread through providing a good job. Perhaps you want to pray for your children or grandchildren, well these are great things to pray for them. Pray that God's name would be hallowed in them and they would see him as holy and glorious and pray that they would have their daily bread and not be led into trials. Perhaps you want healing in a relationship, well pray that God's kingdom would come, as all sides would more and more recognise God as king. These five things encompass most of what we pray for.

These five things are things anyone can pray for. You could teach those five to anyone and they're quite easy to remember. God's name, God's rule, our needs, our sins, our future. If you want to know how to pray, asking for these five things is a very good place to start. If you're quite a kinaesthetic learner, or you like to involve your body in your prayers, or if it's helpful for you to remember them, you can link these five to the five fingers of your hand.

With your thumb, you give a thumbs-up sign to God's name – that's hallowing of His name. With your pointing finger, you point forward – that's God's kingdom advancing. Your middle finger is the first finger that touches food when you reach for it, so that symbolises daily bread. Your FOURth finger stands for FORgiveness and your little finger looks little and scared and needs protection from temptation.

If praying is something you've never really done before, this is a very good way to start. It is the way Jesus taught us to do it. Find five minutes peace and quiet somewhere in the day and just say to God, your Father, five things based on these. It might feel very strange at first, but you will soon get used to it. If you want to pray with your children or teach them to pray, you can pray for five simple things with them, based on these and you can teach them to do it with their five fingers.

As we close I'm going to say this prayer, leaving a pause between each request for you to make it more specific to your own situation, in the silence of your hearts. If it would help you to unfold your fingers as we go through it, please do that.

Pray.