Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity

27th July 2025

at St Mary the Virgin, Dorchester

by Canon Richard Franklin

Luke 11.1-13

Some of you know that earlier in my career as a priest I spent a number of years as a tutor in one of the Church’s theological colleges. These exist primarily for the preparation of men and women for ordained ministry or, as one of my more humorous colleagues puts it, they are ‘vicar factories’. As Director of Studies at Chichester Theological College one of my jobs was to interview every prospective student. One of the questions I perhaps naturally asked was why they wanted to come to our college in particular. I got a variety of answers, as you can imagine. Some liked the location, most liked the churchmanship – it was Anglo-Catholic, some had been told to go there by their priest or Director of Ordinands. But an answer that was frequently given was something like this, ‘it’ll teach me to pray’, or ‘it’ll help me say my prayers regularly and in a disciplined way’. It is true that Chichester stuck to a disciplined pattern of prayer and worship, attendance at the two main daily offices of the church, Mattins and Evensong, was obligatory, and attendance at the three other daily acts of worship, Mass, Mid-Day Prayer and Compline being normative. Alongside this, students were expected to spend time each day in silent meditation. At Chichester the chapel was just as central to the life of the college as the lecture room. All this contrasted considerably with the approach of the college I trained at, Salisbury, where a more relaxed attitude prevailed and where more experimental patterns of prayer and spirituality were encouraged.

I am loathe to say which of the two approaches to prayer in the formation of clergy is better, but the desire to be helped to pray is surely fundamental in any process to encourage growth in Christian discipleship. It was therefore not in the least unreasonable when, according to Luke, an anonymous disciple asked Jesus, ‘Lord, teach us to pray’. In Matthew’s Gospel the Lord’s Prayer occurs within the Sermon on the Mount in the context of Our Lord’s teaching about not being showy or long-winded in our prayers, whereas in Luke it occurs in a narrative section, the request for teaching being made after the disciples have witnessed Jesus himself at prayer. It follows Jesus’ Matthean instructions in being concise and succinct, but it meets the needs of those who are learning to pray because it contains at least two of the essential elements of prayer, praise and petition. The prayer begins by praising God – ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.’ It then goes on with a series of petitions, for the coming of the kingdom, for daily bread, for forgiveness, for the avoidance of temptation and for deliverance from evil. Important as praise and other forms of prayer like thanksgiving and meditation are, the Lord’s Prayer heavily emphasises petition, asking prayer. What is more, at least in Luke’s gospel, the Lord’s Prayer is followed by parables and teaching about petitionary prayer.

For many people petitionary prayer is more or less what they mean by the word prayer. There are many examples of this type of prayer. We pray for the sick, we pray for the departed, we pray for peace, we pray for the Church, for ourselves, for those we love; the list is almost endless. It is this kind of prayer which is often the butt of jokes, most of them pretty awful. Here is one which I rather like, though. You’ve probably heard it before. A man was walking in a forest in North America when he came across a bear. As the bear approached he prayed for help. Then he thought, ‘if that bear was a Christian I might be saved.’ So he asked God to convert the bear. Lo and behold the bear was converted. He crossed himself and as he got closer and closer to the man he himself prayed, ‘For what I am about to receive, may the Lord make me truly thankful’!!

In truth, though, petitionary prayer is an essential part, perhaps **the** essentialpart, of what we mean by prayer. It is at the heart of most people’s prayer lives and it runs through all our services. In the Eucharist we ask God for things over and over again. For purity, for forgiveness, in intercession, for the acceptance of our offerings, that the bread and wine may become the body and blood of Christ, for the Spirit’s power when we are sent out. Why, then, is asking prayer so important, so central in life and liturgy? There are, I believe two fundamental reasons, one which applies to virtually every human being and the second to all those who, however strongly or weakly, have some sort of a belief in God.

The first reason we pray is because all of us, sooner or later, find ourselves or those whom we care about, in difficult or challenging situations. We, or those we love, may be suffering from some sort of illness. We may be desperately in need of a job or food or clothing or shelter or we may care about those facing these necessities. We may have an examination or a job interview or a driving test coming up. We may have a deep concern for the peace of the world. These, and a myriad of other concerns drive millions to petitionary prayer each and every day. For nearly two years now I have been in despair about the plight of the people of Gaza. What can I do? It is so difficult to respond meaningfully and helpfully. But at least I can pray that their suffering will end. If and when possible, however, I do believe petition should be followed up by action. Sometimes people don’t use the word prayer to describe what they are doing when responding to needs. They may say ‘I am thinking about you’ or ‘I’m rooting for you’. It doesn’t much matter, does it? I know that when I was ill over the autumn and winter I really appreciated it when people told me they were praying for me. But I was just as buoyed up by those who said they were thinking of me. There are many kinds of petitionary prayer. Some even hedge their bets in their prayers, as in this prayer supposedly uttered by a soldier on the eve of the Battle of Blenheim: ‘O God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul’! To pray in response to challenges and difficulties is a natural thing to do and I am unwilling to disparage any form this kind of prayer takes. If it is sincere that is all that matters.

The second reason for asking prayer is, perhaps, a little more subtle. Those who believe in God or the gods almost universally feel that we can have some sort of connection with the divine. We want to connect ourselves to the god we worship. Very few are those who believe in God, yet want nothing to do with him. A prime means of connection is asking. It would be a strange person who, living with other human beings, never asked them for anything. So too with God. It would be strange to never ask God for anything. And here, of course, we come back to our gospel reading. For Jesus compared asking prayer to the simple requests that friends or relatives put to one another. ‘Could you possibly lend me some bread for my guests, please?’ or ‘can I have fish fingers for lunch, mum’, or ‘I’d rather like a boiled egg for tea, dad’. By using these very mundane, very down-to-earth examples Jesus is teaching us that our relationship with God is not just about things mighty and magnificent but also about the everyday. Jesus reminds us that God is present in the ordinary and the unremarkable as well as in the wonderful and glorious. Our prayers can and should contain references to our basic needs and concerns, because these are part and parcel of who and what we are and God wants us to walk with him just as we are. If I was wearing my philosopher’s hat this morning I might say a few things about how and indeed whether petitionary prayer ‘works’, but what I want to emphasise today is that prayer is, in the words of Cardinal Newman, ‘heart speaking to heart’. In prayer we bring our inmost selves into communion with God, a personal, loving God who is open to all our needs and concerns. At the beginning of this sermon I spoke about the importance of learning to pray. Let us never forget, though, that God accepts with gladness whatever prayer we bring before him. There are really no right or wrong ways to pray. In the end the most important thing is that we are open and honest in his presence, for only then can God speak to us as we speak to him. In this way his heart can speak to our hearts as our hearts speak to his heart of love.