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Prayer **St.Lawrence 10 March 2019** **BH**

Those of you who are regularly here for worship and are also involved in other activities of the Church – Lent groups, house groups, Pilgrim course and the like – are going to hear a lot about prayer in the next few weeks. It's the main theme for the lent course and it's the theme for sermons for the next few weeks.

Which immediately takes me to an observation made by an American Baptist pastor, Calvin Whittman, who wrote "Prayer is, for the most part, an untapped resource, an unexplored continent where untold treasure remains to be unearthed. It is talked about more than anything else and practised less than anything else!" I would not for one minute assume that the picture he gives is in any way a reflection of the prayer status of 'this congregation here present' – but I will just say that the abundance of words you will hear over the next few weeks will have been totally ineffective if at the end of it all prayer were to remain much talked about and little practiced. So if you hear about it and it comes across to you as right and good, do it.

When I was a teenager and a member of the Kings Own Bible Class, we were taught that our prayer life would develop well if we were to follow what was called the 'Acts' of prayer – A – adoration; C – confession; T – thanksgiving; S – supplication. That last one – 'supplication' – wasn't and still isn't a word that was part of our everyday language so it was explained that it simply means 'asking'. I remember thinking even then 'well why not say that in the first place!', but I suppose Acta doesn't trip of the religious tongue so readily as Acts. Any way, we will be following the Acts of prayer for the next few weeks.

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What exactly is prayer then, if it's so important and we have to be taught how to do it? Well basically, of course, it's the development of a personal relation with God. It's often compared to the relation a person has with a wife, husband or partner. It doesn't develop well if you don't spend time talking together and the kind of talking together that helps the relationship to grow does involve the same kind of approach as those 'Acts' – adoring one another, confessing – admitting when we're wrong – thanking each other for what we do for each other, and asking

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when we need help and that significant other is the one who can give it. Doing the same with God is what prayer is really all about.

Jesus taught quite a lot about prayer. We're all familiar with the pattern prayer he taught his disciples, the one we call 'the Lord's prayer'. For me, that's the prayer into which I can fit all my other prayer needs. It begins by adoring God, thinking of him (or her) as 'in heaven' with all that phrase can conjure up, and with characteristics that are 'hallowed'. I think of all the dreadful things that happen everyday in this world and pray that his Kingdom will come and his will be done on earth, as in Heaven. I know I have human needs, so I ask that the things we need, symbolised as 'daily bread' will be available to us. I know I am totally unworthy to talk to him in such an intimate way so I ask him to forgive all that is wrong in me, and that increases my confidence and trust that he does so. I tell him that I will try to do the same for anyone who offends me or causes me harm. There's plenty around me that can make me selfish or arrogant so I ask him to help me keep away from such things. I am also well aware that harm and danger are never far away and while I don't expect him to alter the natural laws of life in my favour I do feel reassured when I ask him to help me keep safe, or 'deliver me from evil'. And then I want to end as I began by finding some way to express my adoration by reminding myself that the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory are his to all eternity. I do recommend that if all other aspects of prayer fail to come to mind, use the words of the Lord's Prayer to keep your relationship with God alive and well.

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Interestingly, Jesus did also teach his disciples how **not** to pray! Mostly, he said 'don't make a big public show out of it' – he was very critical of religious leaders who liked to make a big public show of their prayer life to impress people with their piety. He called them 'hypocrites', play actors. He also said 'don't use prayer to show off to God how great and good you are' – he gave the example of the Pharisee and the Publican, Of the two in the story it was the one who had a genuine sense of humility when approaching God who went away at peace rather than the one who was so sure of himself.

I want to suggest two other examples of 'how **not** to pray'.

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First, I think we should not trivialise prayer. I know it is a way of developing our relationship with God, which means trying to share with God every aspect of our lives. But never forget we are developing a relationship with the God who is 'Immortal, Invisible, God only wise', the Transcendent One whose Mind is beyond all we can ever imagine, who is Sovereign Lord of all creation, maker of all things, seen and unseen. To ask such a Sovereign Lord to help you to choose what make of car to buy, what colour clothes to wear today, who to ask round for dinner next week – these, it seems to me, are issues of everyday triviality and well within our own grasp to achieve. I hesitate to speak on God's behalf, but if we start trying to persuade God to make trivial decisions for us the answer may well be "I created you with the ability to think for yourself and act on those thoughts, not abdicate your responsibility to me." In fact, I suggest the answer to many of our prayers to the Lord will be "I have created you with the perception, understanding and power to do it yourself." Always, in your prayers of supplication, keep in mind the 'do-it-yourself' principle. We are, after all, the Body of Christ, his hands and feet in this world.

Second, and here, we may have to differ, yet still be able to pray together. I suggest that ,when it comes to the 'supplication' aspect of prayer, it doesn't help the development of our relationship with God if we see it as trying to persuade him to change the way the world he has created works in order to achieve what we desire. I hope none of us would still ask God to send good weather for the Church Garden Party. We know that our weather is determined by the speed and direction of wind and the temperature of those air currents influencing the Gulf Stream together with other forces of nature which are part and parcel of the way those natural laws operate. If God alters those natural forces in order to give us a dry Garden Party, then those laws are no longer sufficiently trustworthy for us confidently to fly aeroplanes or float ships, or even to put a bridge over a river. No, our prayer, surely, should be more along the lines of asking for encouragement and help to use the resilience and resourcefulness which we individually and corporately are given to cope with and manipulate situations which are not quite as we

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would prefer them – and then to thank God afterwards that it turned out to be such a good day!

But what about other miraculous interventions? Jesus did say “ask and you will receive...”; so what about those prayers for people in great pain or severe illness? What, exactly, are we asking God to do? We’re intelligent enough to know that this or that natural cause leads to this or that effect. This or that combination of factors leads to this or that cancer for example. This or that deterioration of the human body leads to this or that condition of the ageing process. Do we ask God to stop those causes and effects? Do we try to persuade him that it would have been better if he had created the world in such a way that this or that cause leads to this or that effect but only under certain conditions of our choosing? Or might the answers to our intercessions for those in need of healing actually be in our own hands rather than God’s? Perhaps not our own personal hands but, rather, the hands and minds of those trained to understand the processes of illness and injury and to use nature’s provisions and human ingenuity to bring about healing and health? In any case, does health and wellbeing necessarily mean recovery from illness or accident, or could it mean having the peace, calm and mental wholeness to be able to live - or die- with the very condition we would like to see ‘cured’?

Jesus himself sweated blood in the Garden of Gethsemane over what he feared lay before him within the next few hours. As God now become human I suspect he was also sweating blood over the same dilemma we face – what exactly are we asking? “What I really want, Father, is that you take this terrifying cup away from me; but what I know I ought to be asking is that your will should be done rather than mine.” I don’t believe it is ever God’s will that anyone should suffer. But the will of God may well be shown and expressed through the way this world operates and the way we humans have the ability to use and manipulate those processes. The practice of prayer, then, is, perhaps, the practice of understanding and accepting the ways and will of God and coming alongside him, as it were, in trying to bring our way of thinking into line with his. But don’t let’s ever stop praying for those who need our prayers.