

# Why pray? I really need God

Sunday 13 January 2019

## Introduction

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be always pleasing to you, our Lord and redeemer. Amen

This morning we start a new mini series on prayer. Over the course of the next few weeks we will be looking at different fundamental reasons why prayer is such an important, even essential, part of the Christian life. Today we are focusing first on our own needs – ‘I really need God’.

Our first reading this morning from the book of Samuel highlights one such situation par excellence. If ever someone were to think of a situation in which you really needed God’s help, confronting Goliath would be pretty high on the list. The disparity in height, weight, strength, experience, skills is so extreme. For the rugby aficionados, one only has to think of Jonah Lomu in full flight running straight through Tony Underwood. Of for fans of the Marvel film series, Thor in full throttle action, Liam Hemsworth filling the big screen with his presence – of course there are some, indeed some in the Penney household, who might think that a good thing but that’s a whole other story.

But the story of David and Goliath has come to epitomise the struggle between perceived strength and weakness, between perceived invincibility and vulnerability, between perceived inevitable victory and inevitable defeat. However, as we know, that is not how the story turns out. God’s power overturns the perceived wisdom, the seeming inevitability of defeat into the victory of the vulnerable. But there is another dimension to this story which is

why Andrew selected it for us at the start of this series on prayer. For we can also see here the contrast between one individual totally immersed in his own power, so proud of his personal prowess, so wrapped up in himself. A person who has total confidence in his own ability, seemingly with no need of anyone or anything else. A person who despises faith, supremely arrogant, a giant amongst men – v 42 “he looked David over and saw he was little more than a boy, glowing with health and handsome, and he despised him. He said to David, ‘am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?’ And the Philistine cursed David ... ‘come here and I’ll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals.’

The contrast between the two could not be greater. Goliath’s confidence in himself as opposed to David’s total reliance on God. It is not for nothing perhaps that ‘Philistine’ has become part of our lexicon to refer to someone beyond the pale, with little understanding of culture, definitely not ‘one of us’. David, on the other hand, personifies youth, vulnerability, innocence even. But, above all, in this context, faith. V 45: “David said to the Philistine, ‘you come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, who you have defied”. In film versions of this encounter, at this point, the camera will typically pan around as if to say ‘well where are they? Which armies? Where is this Lord Almighty? The point is that David’s faith in God is so great, his reliance on God is as deep as Goliath’s reliance on himself. David’s sense of his need of God as powerful as Goliath’s need of himself.

So if ever there were a situation in which one could say I really need God, David’s pause to pray before taking on Goliath is exactly that.

But, lest we think that prayer is only necessary in extremis, in David and Goliath type situations, we need to remember that prayer is a fundamental

characteristic of the Christian life. Prayer was absolutely essential for Jesus throughout his ministry. On numerous occasions the evangelists record Jesus going up into the hills, or leaving the crowd, or going outside alone to pray. It seems that for Jesus the context of prayer, the privacy of prayer is extremely important. As we heard in the gospel reading just now, Jesus commends the disciples to pray in private, as opposed to the hypocrites who pray in public in the synagogues, on the street corners just to be seen. Instead, Jesus says v 6 'when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your father who is unseen.'

And I think this emphasis on where to pray, or at least the solitude of prayer, is both important and rich in what it teaches us about prayer. Someone once said that prayer is like a love letter to God. Prayer is in one sense intensely personal. When you express your love for someone, talk about your relationship with them, most people (at least most British and Northern Europeans) tend to prefer to do so in private, alone with the beloved. This image of prayer is quite frequent in the New Testament, going off to pray, leaving the disciples to pray. It is part of the intimate communion with God.

So in this sense, I think, Jesus' encouragement to the disciples to go into a private room and close the door to pray gives us a clear direction about how to start prayer. To be clear, this morning I am very definitely not trying to tell you how to pray or what to pray, there are many here much better qualified to do that than I am, rather I want to reflect on our readings and on our theme of why pray?

So a starting point I believe is to take Jesus' direction to pray in private. What I take from this instruction is the need to prepare oneself to pray, as one would in meditation, to try to shut out the noise of the everyday, to leave outside the

door everything that you have been thinking about and working on so that you can concentrate on prayer. This is an attempt to answer the question ‘where to pray?’ it doesn’t mean that it has to be in private, there have been many occasions in my life where I’ve felt the need to pray irrespective of the people all around me. So this ‘go into your room and close the door’ can be figurative as well as literal. There may be many times when you need to, as it were, shut out the world, the noise of those around, closing your eyes to be in a private place, to prepare yourself for prayer, for the encounter with God the father.

For above all, prayer I think is communication, an encounter with God, a dialogue with God. As with all relationships, as they say, it is good to talk. Talking to God through prayer is an essential dimension of the Christian life, nurturing, encouraging and challenging sometimes in different moments, sometimes all at the same time, but fundamentally this dialogue is at the heart of faith. Tim Keller in his excellent book, ‘Prayer’ (which I thoroughly recommend), talks about the need to pray first for ourselves and then for others. He differentiates between what he calls communion prayer and kingdom prayer. Communion prayer is about ourselves, our own needs – we pray because we really need God. Kingdom prayer is about the needs of others, about the world, about the realisation of God’s kingdom.

I found this distinction very helpful in thinking about prayer. It gives insight into how to pray, or what to pray for. What Keller suggests is rather like the pre-flight ritual on an airplane, in the event of a loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks like these will appear – fit your own mask first before helping others. In some sense, a similar point applies to us. Prayer is the oxygen of our relationship with God, we need to make sure that we are breathing that oxygen before we look after the needs of others. We need first to acknowledge the

source of our own life. And this ordering, I believe, follows Jesus' example, as he teaches the disciples how to pray. First, go into a private room, then, v9, 'this is how you should pray:

Our father, who are in heaven

Hallowed be your name

Your kingdom come, your will be done'

The first part of prayer is to recognise our father as Lord. The first commandment – love the Lord your God with all heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength'. We need to understand how privileged we are to call god our father, how transformational that is for us. In acknowledging God as our Father, we open ourselves to his loving grace, we understand our weakness, our vulnerability, our powerlessness – 'your will be done', as Jesus prays, may it be according to your word.

So we need to pray first for ourselves. We need to recognise our need for God. Through prayer we can enrich our relationship with God, we can deepen our conversation, we can nurture our faith. And it needs practice. People often say that one can help one's mental health by taking up a musical instrument. The same is true for our spiritual health, for prayer is like an instrument – it requires a discipline, is improved by regular practice, there are if not rules at least guidelines, it is something that if you played it in your childhood, you can pick up again quickly.... Anyone can do it.

Keller reminds us of George Herbert's magnificent poem 'Prayer'

Prayer the churches banquet, angels age

God's breath in man returning to his birth

The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage  
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth

Engine against th'Almightie, sinner's towre,  
Reversed thunder, Christ-side piercing spear  
The six daies world-transposing in an houre  
A kinde of tune which all things heare and fear

Softness and peace and joy and love and blisse  
Exalted manna gladness of the best  
Heaven in ordinarie man well drest  
The milkie way, the bird of paradise

Church-bels beyond the stars heard, the souls bloud  
The land of spices, something understood.

What a fabulous word painting of prayer. Such powerful images – the soul in paraphrase, the heart in pilgrimage, heaven in ordinarie. Recognising our need of God, our need to pray doesn't always mean we need words, often I think we cannot find the words to express what we want to say. Thought pictures will suffice – softnesse and peace and joy and love and blisse – what an image of the encounter with the Father in prayer.

So this morning as we reflect on why we really need God, on how we can deepen our relationship with him through prayer, on how we can prepare ourselves for that glorious encounter with him, let us open our hearts to

receive his Spirit, his grace, his everlasting love. In the prayer of Bianco di  
Siena,

Come down o Love divine

Seek Thou this soul of mine

And visit it with thine own ardour glowing

O comforter draw near

Within my heart appear

And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

Amen