When You Pray

Daily Bible reflections on the Lord's Prayer

Joanna Collicutt

Includes discussion questions for groups

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Joanna Collicutt

For Sophie O

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Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to several people who, mostly unwittingly, have helped by thinking and praying through the Lord's Prayer: John Barton, Brendan Callaghan, Phil Cooke, Penny Cuthbert, Bob Morgan, Nick Munday, Rosemary Peirce, Elizabeth Thomson and Henry Wansbrough.

Introduction

In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ let us pray to the Father.

The Lord's Prayer

This book is a series of Bible readings based on the Lord's Prayer as it is given us in Luke's gospel. The readings are arranged in seven blocks of seven, so they can be used in a weekly pattern, with the seventh reading of each block somewhat shorter than the others, as a kind of sabbath rest.

The book arose from my increasing awareness over the last decade that the Lord's Prayer contains all that Christians really need to know; it is the very essence of the gospel. This understanding of the Lord's Prayer is not at all new. It was the practice of the early church to prepare candidates for baptism during Lent by teaching them the Lord's Prayer and using it as the basis for instruction in the faith, sometimes supported by the creeds. In a society where most could not read or did not have access to a Bible, before the final canon of the New Testament had even been agreed, and where disputes about heresies raged, the Lord's Prayer could be held on to as the gift of Christ himself and a distillation of all that the church understood him to be. Well into the Middle Ages, the Lord's Prayer remained a central framework for preaching and formed the basis of expressions of popular piety, such as mystery plays.

It was wise of those very early Christians to use a prayer rather than a set of statements to prepare people for a life of faith, for faith is not our beliefs about God; it is, rather, the relationship of

trust with God that we live out. Learning how to be a Christian is not about academic study in the way we usually understand it. It is fundamentally about prayer, from which the rest of life, including study, flows. This means that, while the Lord's Prayer could be used as a kind of ancient Alpha Course manual, there is a lot more to it than that. Praying the Lord's Prayer is an expression of and vehicle for our relationship with God. It enables us to imbibe gospel values and motivates us to live them out.

Yet recently I have come to recognise that there is even more to the Lord's Prayer. This has been a gradually dawning awareness. It began with an understanding of the Christian life as one in which we not only follow *after* Jesus and not only enjoy a relationship *with* Jesus, but also are somehow incorporated *into* Jesus. A few years ago I mentioned this in passing in a book entitled *Meeting Jesus*:

> In walking the Christian way we follow [Jesus], remembering the past by walking the way of the cross (Luke 9:23) and looking ahead as we walk in newness of life. Through the Spirit, we also experience him by our side. Most mysterious of all, we find that we are walking into him… (Romans 6:3–11).[1]

This 'walking into' Jesus is a difficult idea to express. It's something about a deep belonging, a kind of identification with Jesus that goes beyond modelling our lives on his. We might want to use the term 'imitation' here. We are used to understanding this as copying something or someone. However, in the Christian tradition the idea of 'imitation' has sometimes been taken further. One of the first and most delightful books I read as a young Christian was *The Imitation of Christ* (*De Imitatione Christi*), attributed to the medieval monk Thomas à Kempis. For Thomas, imitation is about following in Christ's footsteps, but he also emphasises the direct relationship with Christ that his followers can experience. Thomas stretches the idea of imitation further, talking about Christ as the Way, speaking of walking the Way as a kind of 'entering into Christ' and so taking on a new identity: 'Christ [addressing The Disciple]: My son, you

will be able to enter into Me so far as you are prepared to forsake yourself.'[2]

I'd known about this rather strange idea (of being 'in Christ' or 'clothed with Christ' and so on) for a long time, and it had gradually been creeping to the forefront of my mind; but I don't think I fully 'got it' until a few years ago, when I was asked to read the New Testament lesson on St Stephen's Day in my local parish church. This was Luke's lengthy account of the life, witness and martyrdom of Stephen from Acts 6—7. It is a story that rarely gets a proper airing, among Anglicans at least, as so many of us don't go to church on Boxing Day, when his feast is celebrated. I hadn't read it right through in its entirety for ages, and I was unprepared for the effect it would have on me. As I heard myself recount Stephen's assertive denunciation of the religious authorities in Jerusalem and his dying words of forgiveness, I thought, 'How like Jesus!' But then almost instantly this was replaced by another thought: 'No – Stephen is not like Jesus; he has kind of become Jesus.' As I returned to my seat, my brain began to buzz and into my head popped a familiar phrase – words spoken on the road to Damascus, shortly after Stephen's death, to a young man who had held the coats of his murderers: 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'

Finally, in my own small Damascus road moment, I started to see what Saul of Tarsus had seen.

The young Saul had looked at Stephen and had seen Jesus. The words he heard on the Damascus road confirmed what he already knew in his heart but had been resisting at all costs with his mind: Jesus of Nazareth was alive in his followers. This was not some kind of metaphorical 'living on' but a literal reality. For the voice he heard did not say, as it so easily could have said, 'When you persecute these people it's as if you are persecuting me'; it did not say, 'When you hurt them I feel their pain, for I am in solidarity with them'; it did not say, 'I live on in these people's minds, and when you do violence to them you violate my memory'; it said, 'I *am* Jesus, whom you are

persecuting.' Saul took this statement at face value; Jesus and his followers were one. The rest of Paul's life can be understood as a response to this literal understanding.

I, too, have come to an understanding, helped greatly by Paul, and it is centred on the Lord's Prayer. It is simply this: *in praying the Lord's Prayer, human beings take on the character of Christ*. We don't just act in obedience to Christ or in conformity with Christ, although, of course, we do both of these. In some very deep sense, we are incorporated into Christ and are 'in union' with Christ. In this series of biblical reflections we shall explore this mystery further.

As Paul discovered, this is a transforming work of the Spirit, but it is also a work that is wrought through the medium of words. The words are very important, and the most important of them is *Abba*; for through the work of Christ, human beings are offered the possibility of an intimate parent–child relationship with the divine. Here, at the outset, we find a trinitarian framework: we pray in union with Christ through the power of the Spirit, and our prayer is directed to the Father. Thus we are caught up into the Godhead.

The very special significance of the words of the Lord's Prayer is something that has been held on to over many generations and, from time to time, has become distorted and debased. Bitter – indeed, violent – conflicts have raged over the translation of the prayer. At times its words have been treated as a magic formula. There have existed subcultures in which ten Paternosters have been thought to do ten times as much good as one. I have even had something of this attitude myself.

When I was a child of about seven, my Sunday school class was given an assignment to learn the Lord's Prayer. The next week, when my turn came to recite it, I promptly went ahead at breakneck speed. 'You don't get a prize for getting to the end first,' the teacher remarked. 'Have you any idea what it means?' I did express my vague thought that 'temptation' was what I had felt when my mother left

a freshly iced coffee walnut cake unattended on the kitchen table, but I couldn't get much further than that. The teacher wasn't best pleased. Nevertheless, I felt aggrieved rather than abashed: I had quite a sense of achievement at being able to get my tongue around those archaic words, and I thought she was expecting too much in requiring that I understand them as well.

With the hindsight of many years, and perhaps oddly in view of the high premium that academics like me place on understanding, I think my childhood self had a point. For Jesus does not ask his followers to understand this prayer; he asks them to pray it. The legendary words of Jordan of Saxony, the medieval Dominican Father, are illuminating here:

> A layman once put this question to him: 'Master, is the Our Father worth as much in the mouths of simple folk like myself, who do not know its full meaning, as in the mouths of learned clerks who understand all that they are saying?' To this he answered: 'Of a surety it is; just as a precious stone is equally valuable in the hands of one who does not know its full worth as it would be even if he did.'[3]

My prayer for those who read this book is that you will have a sense of the great privilege that has been granted to us of holding a precious gem in our hands, of being able to delight in its radiance, play with its many facets, plumb its depths, gain a sense of peace and security from its touch, and in so doing deepen our awareness of our union with Christ.

1

When you pray…

There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament: Matthew 6:9–13 and Luke 11:2–4, but the first Christians were praying the prayer long before it was written down in the gospels. Matthew and Luke each recorded the version used by his own community, and they both took care to place it in the context of Jesus' wider teaching on prayer. The Lord gave us a special form of words, but these words sum up an *attitude* of prayer.

Matthew places the prayer in the middle of the sermon on the mount, as part of an extended piece of teaching on how to live as a disciple of Jesus. Luke places it later in his story, at the beginning of a section devoted exclusively to the nature of prayer and directly after the parable of the good Samaritan and the account of Jesus' visit to Martha's home. It's not often noticed, but the Samaritan and Mary, Martha's sister, have a lot in common and can perhaps be treated as a pair. Both have a correctly attentive attitude and both are held up as models of Christian discipleship. Both are contrasted with other, no doubt holy, people who are preoccupied with their religious obligations in the public or domestic sphere. The Samaritan is not distracted by the legal demands of the temple cult, and he can thus see and draw near to the man who is so desperately in need of help (Luke 10:33). Likewise, Mary is not distracted by the duties expected of her as host or deacon, and she can thus listen at the feet of Jesus (v. 39).

Prayer requires us to be attentive and to turn our attention in the right direction. This attitude of attentiveness may be a contemplation of the person of Christ; it may be a noticing of the needs of others in the world and his church; it may, like the prodigal son's

(15:17), be an insight into our own deep need of God and a turning towards him. What it won't be is ruminative worry or mental attempts to solve problems. Worry and problem-solving, focusing on the job in hand, do have their place in this life, but they are not part of the prayerful attitude, which, as Jesus says to Martha, is fundamentally 'better' (10:42).

To cultivate this kind of prayerful attitude is to be obedient to Jesus, but it is also to identify with Jesus. Praying 'in the name of Jesus' means to pray 'in accordance with his nature', and this is the essence of the Christian life: 'Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus' (Colossians 3:17). We often end our prayers with phrases such as 'In thy name we pray' or 'In the name of Jesus Christ', and it can rather be like a signal that the prayer is coming to an end (as, for some years, our children thought grace before meals was a way of saying, 'Ready, steady, eat!'). But we need to remember that acting, thinking or praying in the name of someone is far more than this. When we pray in Christ's name, we are placing ourselves under his authority and protection and taking up an intentional stance that is in accordance with his nature. So, for instance, it would be self-contradictory to pray for harm to come to our enemies in the name of Jesus; in fact, to do so would be taking his name in vain. That's what Jesus means when he talks about people who do great deeds 'in my name' but whom he never knew (Matthew 7:22–23). He is playing with two meanings of 'name'; such people use Jesus' name as a verbal label, but they have not identified with his nature. As he says at length in John 10, Jesus knows the identity of his sheep because they conform to his nature, and so they can be easily recognised. Apart from this, the issue of outward names is irrelevant.

Whenever we ask in Jesus' name, gather in his name, welcome strangers in his name or are hated because of his name, it is in accordance with his nature, just as he acted in accordance with the Father (John 10:25) and the Spirit acts in accordance with him (14:26).

So, before we begin our study of the Lord's Prayer itself, we will prepare ourselves by paying attention to Jesus' attitude to prayer, as it is told us by the gospel writers.

1 Teach us to pray

> **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.'**
>
> LUKE 11:1

Was Jesus of Nazareth a religious man? I think many of us would be inclined to answer 'no' to this question. He certainly appears to have been critical of several aspects of the religion of his day, sitting rather lightly to its purity demands, and he came into marked conflict with the religious authorities. It was, after all, an incident in the courts of the temple that led to his arrest, trial and conviction for blasphemy. He seems to have had little patience with outward religious forms that did not express inner spiritual realities.

Is it, perhaps, better to describe him as a spiritual man or a holy man? If we look more closely at his way of life, we find that here too he seems to subvert what we usually think of as the spiritual or holy. Our ideas of spirituality have become very much bound up with silence and stillness, 'being rather than doing', asceticism, withdrawal from the corrupting influences of the world (Thomas à Kempis was strong on this), sacred space and ritual and, above all, a regular discipline of prayer that supports a rule of life.

It is, then, quite surprising that not until we are eleven chapters into Luke's gospel do we find any real discussion of prayer. Luke presents us instead with a man who bursts on to the scene in Galilee with an assertion that 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me' and a proclamation that the year of the Lord's favour has arrived (4:18–19). It is a time marked by healing and social justice, and, indeed, Jesus moves on from this proclamation to carry out a whole series of healing and liberating acts. If you were to try to answer the question of what sort of man Jesus of Nazareth was on the basis of Luke 4—11, you would have to say that he was a highly charismatic, somewhat controversial figure who gathered a group of followers and went around speaking

at local community centres, proclaiming a vision of social justice and making it real in the lives of ordinary folk. He comes over as an activist, perhaps even a political activist, and he likens himself to a physician – someone who goes about fixing broken people (Matthew 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31).

If you want a model of a holy man, it is to be found not in Jesus but in John the Baptist. John lives in the desert, away from the fleshpots of the town; he and his band of male disciples follow a strict regime of prayer and fasting, and he has his own distinctive sacred ritual – baptism for the repentance of sins.

Jesus, on the other hand, doesn't fast, nor does he require fasting of his disciples. In fact, when they are hungry, he is quite willing to flout the sabbath laws to satisfy their wants, and he regularly breaks the sabbath in order to pursue his agenda of healing and liberation (Luke 6:1–11). Furthermore, Jesus does not obviously engage in ritual, and he inhabits profane, not sacred, space. He journeys to centres of population rather than permanently inhabiting the wilderness and calling people to him. He touches people who suffer from health conditions that have the power to pollute those with whom they come into contact; he keeps company with folk whose morals are at best questionable and at worst utterly unacceptable; and he counts women among his close friends and followers (Luke 8:1–3). To cap it all, he attends rather a lot of parties, where the food is plentiful and the wine flows freely. In this spirit, when Jesus sends out 70 disciples (Luke 10), he gives them instructions to journey to centres of population to proclaim, to heal and, of course, to eat – but nothing is said about prayer.

None of this sits quite right with conventional ideas of a holy man pursuing a spiritual agenda. The scribes and Pharisees are constantly pointing this out. Rather more surprisingly, John the Baptist, who had expected such great things from Jesus at the time of his baptism, seems to have had his doubts too, for he sends messengers to ask Jesus, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for

another?' (Luke 7:19). Jesus' answer is illuminating. He doesn't point to his personal spirituality or holiness of life. Instead he gives a pragmatic response, rather like a doctor reporting the outcome data from a trial of a new medicine: 'Look what is happening to people – you do the maths!'

Now, this is all very well, but if you were a follower of Jesus it may not be quite what you were expecting, especially if you had previously been a follower of John, as was probably the case for some of Jesus' disciples. A regular conventional pattern of religious devotion would be rather helpful. In a world that is populated by signs and wonders, where everything seems to be changing, where the holy man behaves in unconventional ways, piety can provide a sense of security. Perhaps this lies behind the request, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'

Notice, though, that this request doesn't come out of the blue. Luke tells us that the disciple who makes it has observed Jesus at prayer and has seized the moment. There are, in fact, several references to Jesus praying, made almost in passing, in earlier chapters of Luke's gospel (6:12; 9:18, 28), and from this we see that prayer was habitual for him.

This is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of Jesus of Nazareth. Because for him the difference between sacred and profane is blurred, his prayer is not an act of piety but the essential heartbeat of his whole life. All his activism is powered by prayer, and, like the beating heart or the breath of life, that prayer is so fundamental and so pervasive that it seems to require little in the way of self-conscious reflection.

The fact that prayer is hardly mentioned before this disciple raises the issue is a measure not of its absence from the life of Jesus but of how much it is taken for granted as the basis of his life. When he sends out the 70, to mention prayer would be like saying, 'Don't forget to breathe!' Jesus is so in touch with his Father, and the

relationship of prayer is so natural for him (we see this from his joyful and intimate outpouring to God in the previous chapter: 10:21), that to instruct people in 'how to do it' may seem somewhat contrived. Yet when asked to do so, Jesus graciously accedes. People can, after all, benefit greatly from training in good breathing techniques.

Prayer

God, in whom we live and move and have our being, teach me to breathe deeply of your Spirit. In Jesus' name I pray.

Notes

1 J. Duff and J. Collicutt McGrath, *Meeting Jesus: Human responses to a yearning God* (SPCK, 2006), p. 7.

2 *Quod nosmetipsos abnegare et Christum imitari debemus per crucem* ('That we ought to deny ourselves and imitate Christ by way of the cross'), from Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Penguin, 1952), book 3, chapter 56.

3 'The Legend of Blessed Jordan of Saxony, Second Master General of the Order of Preachers', part IV, ch. 31 in Bede Jarrett OP (ed.), *Lives of the Brethren of the Order of Preachers 1206–1259*, trans. Placid Conway OP (Blackfriars Publications, 1955), **opne.org/Library/LIVES_OF_THE_BRETHREN.pdf**. Accessed 4 February 2019.

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'This book arises from my increasing awareness that the Lord's Prayer contains all that Christians really need to know; it is the very essence of the gospel… My prayer is that you will have a sense of the great privilege that has been granted to us of holding a precious gem in our hands, of being able to delight in its radiance, play with its many facets, plumb its depths, gain a sense of peace and security from its touch, and in so doing deepen our awareness of our union with Christ.'

In this updated edition of a classic text, Joanna Collicutt shows how growing as a Christian is rooted in the prayer Jesus gave us. As we pray the Lord's Prayer, we express our relationship with God, absorb gospel values and are also motivated to live them out. As we pray to the Father, in union with the Son, through the power of the Spirit, so we begin to take on the character of Christ.

'Throughout the book, Collicutt displays a sure touch, and I felt that, in whatever direction this definite polymath took me, I was safe in her hands. Homely examples from her family life and upbringing sit side by side with substantial psychological insights, and biblical interpretation that is positively encyclopedic, all seasoned with a wry and informed look at church practices across all traditions.'
David Wilbourne, former Assistant Bishop of Llandaff

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