

Lord teach us to pray

God knows everything. Our heavenly Father *knows* what we need (Matthew 6:32). Then why is it still necessary to pray? How should we pray? And how often? Does God hear us when we pray? Does he answer our prayers? In this pamphlet we reflect briefly on these questions.

What is prayer?

God is not merely an impersonal force or being somewhere far above us. He is a living person; he is *our* Father that is close to us. He invites us to enter in an intimate and personal relationship with him. This relationship is established through prayer. It is impossible to have a relationship with God without prayer. Without it our belief in God remains empty; our love becomes blunted and our gratitude remains unexpressed.

God made us as people distinct from the rest of creation. To us alone he gave the gift of language. Through this gift he makes it possible for us to enter in conversation with him; he thus gives us the ability to hear, understand and answer his words.

Just think, we can hear God's Word, we can hear him call when he cautions or comforts us or when he wants to show us the way! And when we listen carefully we hear the hushed voice of the Spirit of God. We can hear God speak to us in different ways and we can answer him. This we do through prayer. Prayer is the language in which we express the deep longing and joy of our hearts and the sure knowledge of our minds. This is how we enter in conversation with God.

It is through prayer that we can reach outside and above ourselves. This is why prayer goes so much further than communication with other people or inside conversations with ourselves. Prayer is faith in action. It gives growth to our spiritual life. We cannot live without it.

How should we pray?

There are many ways to pray and each of them can be sincere. Prayers are mostly expressed in simple and respectful words. Sometimes they are expressed in the form of beautiful poetry, songs of praise or magnificent works of art. Sundays, when we sing together "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:18-20, Colossians 3:16), we are in reality engaged in prayers of worship, thanksgiving, praise, confession, supplication and devotion.

Sometimes prayers resound loudly when a crowd prays together in a stadium, more often they are haltingly expressed by members of a prayer group somewhere in a big city or small town. At other times, prayer goes beyond ordinary words, they are wordless sighs. When someone becomes quiet before God, alone in a private room, this is also prayer.

The essence of Christian prayer is that it is addressed to the one and only God (Deuteronomy 6:4), the God that makes himself known to us in the Old Testament as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 3:14-15), and in the New Testament as the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. When prayer is addressed to other gods or to images, or if the mediation of ancestors, supernatural forces or saints are sought it can no longer be regarded as Christian prayer.

God invites us to approach him directly, wherever and whenever we want to. We can draw near him with "a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:19-25), enter the inner sanctuary of the Most Holy Place of the Trinity – God's arms are always open to welcome us into the love and fellowship of God's children, in communion with the Triune-God.

When we pray, all three persons of the Triune God come into motion in order to meet us. The heavenly Father in his knowledge of what we need – who wants and can give us what we need – invites us: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9). When we approach, we do it in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In ourselves, we do not deserve to appear before God, but Jesus opened the way for us through

his grace and salvation. We can approach freely and as we are. Jesus who is now seated at God's right hand intercedes for us; he pleads with the Father and prays on our behalf. And, finally, it is the Holy Spirit, praying inside us who interprets our deepest needs to God. It is the Spirit who teaches us and helps us pray (Romans 8:26-27).

Where do we learn to pray?

The Book of Psalms

For the most part in the Bible, we hear God speak to us. But in the Book of Psalms God makes us listen to women and men who speak to God, that is, who pray to God. This is why, throughout the ages, people used the Psalms as prayers. They sang them, reflected upon them, and, in so doing, learned to pray. Even today, the Psalms are the best "school of prayer" and we can learn two special lessons about how we should pray here.

First, we do not have to put our best foot forward as if we first have to impress God before he would listen to us. In Psalms, there are people who weep before God, who struggle with God and even accuse him. They bring their fears and anguish before him, all their anger and grievances. They place also their sins and guilt before him speaking this prayer in repentance: Lord, have mercy upon us, forgive us our sins! They intercede for King and nation with God. Then there are also people singing and dancing before God, praising his greatness and goodness, or finding rest like an infant at its mother's breast. The Book of Psalms teaches us that we can come to God just as we are and offer ourselves up to him.

The second lesson of Psalms is that we gain entrance to all that God is and to all his riches – his holiness, his goodness and justice, his grace and blessings, love and redemption, protection and care – through prayer. It is here that we learn that God gives his blessings to us when we approach him in prayer. Moreover, when we pray he gives himself to us, completely.

The Lord's Prayer

To Jesus Christ, prayer was at the centre of his life and work. We read in the Bible that he often made time for prayer. He prays for us and, even today, he intercedes continuously for us, his church (John 17, Hebrews 4:14-16).

When Jesus' disciples asked: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1) he taught them the Lord's Prayer. (Compare also Matthew 6:9-13.) This short prayer leads us with such simplicity to a richer prayer life. It teaches us above all that prayer is not an attempt at forcing God with many words and clever strategies or with a big display to do what we want. Prayer is not, in the first place, about us and our needs, our "wish list" so to speak.

The first three pleas are about God. First of all, it is about hallowing and honouring his name. Then, it is about the coming of his reign as King in our hearts, in the hearts of others, and also in the world around us. The third plea is about listening to his voice and bowing before his will. In reality the three pleas are inseparable; God's kingdom comes and his name is hallowed precisely there where we obey his will. In the next three pleas, however, we learn how to pray for ourselves and for one another. We learn to pray for our daily bread, for the fulfilment of all our needs. Next, we learn to confess our sins and to ask for forgiveness as well as for the strength to share with others the grace and forgiveness we have received. Finally, we learn to pray for deliverance from evil. Evil, the forces and powers threatening and tempting us every day, is a reality we are not strong enough to resist on our own. For this reason we learn to find refuge in prayer to the Lord, our Lord who has already conquered the world. This prayer teaches us especially to pray to the Father that is also *our* Father. It is especially a collective prayer, we pray it together with others as children of the one Father. We are taught to pray it for one another.

Does God hear and answer our prayers?

Is prayer not just words spoken into empty space? Does God really *hear* when we pray? God certainly does hear us! The Word tells us so in so many places. He does not listen to us because we deserve it, because we are important, because we pray in special ways or because we are many people gathered in prayer. No, God listens because Jesus already prepared the way for us and intercedes for us. He listens because we come to him in the name of our Lord Jesus. And,

because the Holy Spirit prays in us and for us. He listens because he loves us and cares about us.

But does God *answer* our prayers? Does he always do what we ask and when we ask it? Yes, God does not only hear, but he always answers our prayers. Most of the time God gives us what we ask, even much more than we have asked for. Sometimes, however, God answers in an unexpected way, even in a way opposite to our wishes. This happens because he is our heavenly Father that knows what we need; he knows much better than us what we really need. In whatever God gives us, however much of a burden it may seem, he is with us and his mercy and strength will be enough for us. It is important to ask, to keep on asking, until we hear God's answer.

When we pray we must also listen carefully. We must become still and make time to listen. When we eventually hear God's answer, we can accept it because we know that in all things – also in the bad things – he who loves us works for our good (Romans 8:28). This is why God invites us to ask and to keep on asking in expectation. Even when he does not give us exactly what we asked for, God knows best and helps us find rest through the process of struggling prayer and in the answer that he finally gives.

Do we pray enough?

Of course we do not pray enough. Even in our churches we do not make enough of prayer. This is why all is not always well in our spiritual life or in the life of the church. We need more discipline in our lives to make time for prayer, worship and intercession. We must especially devote more time to praying for peace in our country and for the propagation of the gospel (Colossians 4:2, 1 Timothy 2:1-7). We must pray alone and together – also across denominational, language and cultural borders. We must pray when we rise, when we go to sleep, as well as throughout the day, travelling, eating, working, playing. We can undoubtedly benefit from a fixed prayer routine and finding ways to keep to it.

Our whole lives must finally be a path followed in prayer. Our ordinary lives are not separate from prayer; our prayer time should spill over into the rest of our daily life. We should live and work in prayer. In this way our every action, our bodies, relationships, yes, our whole lives, become a prayer, a living sacrifice to God, a sacrifice of prayer that gladdens God's heart like an offering of fragrant incense.