

## Teach us to pray

A few years ago, I used Google search results to measure the popularity of bible verses, John 3:16 was the top one. Searching for John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” yielded an amazing 41.8 million results. Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” by comparison gave only 15.7 million.

I tried a few others, too: John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”, rated well, as did Psalm 23:1 “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

Sadly, I can’t update those figures, because Google just doesn’t work that way anymore.

I concluded that John 3:16 was the most popular bible verse. But in the last couple of weeks, I’ve realised that I was wrong. John 3:16 might be popular, but I don’t think it comes close to being the most quoted or most spoken bible verse – and it loses out to some of the verses we had in our reading from Luke’s gospel and the parallel verses from Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 6:9-13).

“Father,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come.  
<sup>3</sup> Give us each day our daily bread.  
<sup>4</sup> Forgive us our sins,  
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.  
And lead us not into temptation.” (Luke 11:2-4)

The most quoted bible verses are those verses that make up what we know as the Lord’s Prayer. We say those bible verses just about every time we gather for worship. As do most churches. People recite them in times of crisis. Many people recite those verses every time they pray.

The translations we prefer might vary, but we know the words. We know the words well, but we probably don’t know the words around the prayer quite so well. Our reading began “One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.””

As we read the gospel accounts, we find that Jesus prayed. He would frequently withdraw from the disciples and crowds and go to a quiet place and pray. Of course, Jesus didn’t invent prayer, and so it might seem a bit odd that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

The disciples were Jews, and they would have grown up learning to pray. By this point in the gospel they had also been with Jesus for some time; they’d got to know him as a teacher and as a friend, but they’d also witnessed him working miracles – healing people and casting out demons.

Clearly, to them, Jesus' power came from God. Clearly, Jesus had a special connection with God. So they were effectively asking Jesus how they could have a special connection with God too.

They asked Jesus to teach them to pray. These people who had grown up knowing the traditional ways to pray and knowing the traditional times to pray... but they felt there was something more.

In Matthew's gospel we read that Jesus said "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen." (Matt 6:5-6a)

We might wonder then, if it's okay for us to pray in church: After all, I pray out loud in church every week, Ross is going to lead us in our collective prayers later in this service, and we're going to say the Lord's Prayer together. I think the scriptures are clear that we should pray when we gather, and we should pray together... but we mustn't pray to be seen by others.

Our prayer life shouldn't begin and end with our prayers in public. Prayer is our relationship with God – our conversation with God. So, as well as praying with each other, we need to pray privately. I don't think we literally have to go into a room and close the door to do so, but we do need take time out, to withdraw from all the distractions of the world, and have our own conversations with God.

Prayer is an essential part of our Christian lives. We get to know God better through prayer. We are made stronger by our prayers. And, just like the disciples, we should be asking Jesus to 'teach us to pray'.

Like the pharisees of Jesus' time, who knew the prayers and the festivals, who prayed publicly, but didn't have a conversation with God, many Christians assume they know how to pray because they know the Lord's Prayer by heart.

And I think we have to be careful that we know the Lord's Prayer by heart, in the true meaning of 'by heart', on not just in the meaning of 'by heart' which is by rote.

Over the last two thousand years, many people have turned the Lord's Prayer into an icon and an idol of prayer; and so have missed the entirety of how Jesus responded to his disciples.

I think the prayer that we know as the Lord's Prayer was not the answer to the disciple's request. It is only an answer, we can look to it as model of what our prayers should be like; and of what attitude our should be as we pray.

Jesus answer begins with him telling the disciples – and us – how we should address God – simply 'Father' here in Luke, or 'Our Father in heaven' in Matthew. God is our father. He loves us like a loving parent loves their child. And we should address God, with the respect due to a loving parent.

Calling God 'father' reflects our personal conversation. And just like our earthly parent-child conversations, we should be having these conversations at all times: When we're happy, when we're sad, when we're in need, when we want forgiveness, and so on.

Jesus goes on: 'hallowed be your name'.

We don't use the word 'hallowed' a lot. Hallowed means holy and sacred and above just and consistent. The prophet Isaiah tells us that "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." Isaiah 6:3

So even though God is our loving Father, God is also holy. We need to respect that, and even be in awe of that. If God is our Father, then it follows that we will grow more like God. Just as a child carries their parents' DNA, so we need to carry the metaphorical DNA of God. Peter's first letter tells us: "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy"" (1 Peter 13-15).

Having recognised God as his Father, and recognised God's holiness, Jesus continues: 'your kingdom come.'

In Matthew's gospel we have the additional lines of "your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10), but here in Luke's account it is simply "Your kingdom come".

If we go back to the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, we read "... Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."" (Mark 1:14-15 NKJV)

The kingdom of God is God's rule. Restoring things to the way that God intended them to be. Restoring the broken relationships between us and God, and restoring the broken relationships between each other.

When we pray this part of the prayer we are saying – God, take control of my world and my life.

So when we pray we aren't asking God to do what we want – rather, it's about bringing things into line with what God wants; and that will satisfy our deepest wants and needs.

We can look to John's vision of the Kingdom of God in the book of Revelation "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Rev 21:3-5a)

If we pray that God's kingdom come, we can look to the time when all things will be made new and all things will be made right.

But in the meantime, of course, life is hard. It's a struggle, day-to-day and year-to-year. And Jesus, in teaching us to pray, doesn't ignore that struggle: He says to pray "Give us each day our daily bread."

Give us the food that we need for each day. In Jesus' time – and right up until last century, bread had to be made on a daily basis. Bread didn't contain preservatives – tomorrow the bread would either be stale or mouldy, and you couldn't just put loaves in the freezer.

We need our bread, our food, each day. And I think beyond our physical food, we need spiritual food too. We need to nourish our spirits and we nourish our bodies.

Jesus said, when he was tempted in the wilderness, he declared "it is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.' (Luke 4:4), which comes to us from Deuteronomy, where the full phrase is "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord".

Our spiritual food comes to us from God through Jesus, who said: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

After the request for basic needs be met - now Jesus asks that we be forgiven: "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us."

Forgiveness is central to our Christian faith. Forgiveness is hard. Forgiveness is costly. The cost of God forgiving us was Jesus dying on the cross.

We're really big on God forgiving our sins. But we're not quite so enthusiastic about forgiving the sins of others, are we?

And yet Jesus ties our forgiveness of others to God's forgiveness of us: "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." Or in our usual translation "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us".

My experience is that we aren't that good at forgiving other people, and we're even less good at forgiving ourselves.

We pray are prayer of confession in church each week and each week we are assured of our forgiveness. We pray the Lord's prayer asking for God's forgiveness too, and yet we will often not forgive ourselves.

CS Lewis wrote: "I think that if God forgives us, we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise it is almost like setting ourselves up as a higher tribunal than him."

We need to be assured of God's forgiveness, and confident of it. Paul wrote to the Romans "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1)

We need to know God has forgiven us, but we also have to forgive others.

Jesus tells us to pray "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". But it's not our nature to be forgiving. We want wrongdoers to be punished. But we should all strive to be forgiving people – when Paul wrote to the Ephesians he said: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." (Ephesians 4:32)

How do we do that? How do we change our natures so that we can be truly forgiving people. Well, as we grow in our faith, the Holy Spirit strengthen us, and the fruit of the spirit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, all contribute to our ability to forgive.

And I think at a practical – or pragmatic – level, we need to start small. We’ve probably all heard the hypothetical “could you forgive Hitler?” question, and your answer may well be ‘no’. But could you forgive the person whose shopping trolley bumped into you at the supermarket? Or the driver who blocked you from changing lanes on Mona Vale road? Or the family member who forgot your birthday?

Let’s start forgiving the small things, and work our way up. Remember that ultimately Jesus would pray “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)

And finally, in the model prayer in Luke’s gospel, Jesus says to pray “lead us not into temptation” or in the NRSV translation, which is closer to the words we normally use in church “do not bring us to the time of trial.’

The final phrase of the Lord's prayer is a cry from the depths of the human heart.

There are many temptations and trials in this world. There are many ways to be dishonest. There are many ways to be selfish. There are many ways to fall short of what God wants us to be. But Jesus says call on God to help us through them.

Paul writes to the Corinthians a verse which is often misused, but it reflects this prayer:

“No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” (1 Cor 10:13)

People often cut it down to “God won’t give you more than you can bear”, in terms of illness, or troubles, but Paul is specifically talking about temptation.

When you’re faced with temptation – whatever it may be – know and trust that God is faithful and will not leave you to face your temptations alone. Pray for God’s protection and strength.

There is more to this reading, and more to Jesus’ instruction on how we should pray, but I don’t want to go on for too long. But to summarise those next few verses, Jesus encourages us to be bold in our prayers – we might think that our prayers are too trivial or too annoying for God, but Jesus says that God will answer. Ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.

And Jesus assures us that God loves us, and will answer our prayers in a loving way – after all, “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ... If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

How much more indeed?

So let us be encouraged to pray – as individuals, as a congregation, and as a church – that God’s kingdom will come.

For God’s is the power and the glory, for ever and ever.

Amen