

**What should a church member be? (3) *Someone Who Prays.***  
7<sup>th</sup> Sept. '03pm Matt.6: 5-15, 7: 7-12

A 'church member should be someone who prays', according to this little leaflet that we are following these weeks. (Make sure you have picked up a copy of the leaflet for these morning and evening services.)

We have no argument with this, because the great Bible people of faith were people who prayed – people like Daniel who would not give up praying or give in to any sort of pressure - although even these great faith figures didn't always find it easy.

And we also know that the great Christians down through the centuries have been people who prayed.

But, most of us also know that we find it pretty difficult to be a person who prays 'properly', and if you like, 'successfully! It just doesn't come easily to us., we struggle and sometimes we near enough give up!

Maybe sometimes praying seems too much like a duty to be fulfilled rather than a delight; maybe sometimes our praying seems to make little difference either to us or to the situations for which we pray

However, it may surprise us that when we struggle with being Christians who pray, we are in good company. I came across these words this week – from Anne Graham Lotz, daughter of the well-known evangelist, Dr. Billy Graham – in her own right, a highly respected Christian speaker: *Prayer has been one of the areas where I seem to be defeated the most frequently in my walk with the Lord. For me the struggle is rooted in the fact that real, heartfelt prayer takes time, demands effort, requires concentration and acknowledges need .....*

So maybe, in a strange kind of way, her words, give us a wee bit of encouragement – not that we should just conclude that we'll never make much of praying, but rather to spur us to want to learn something more about praying, and actually to learn to be people who pray. A challenge for me, as much as you!

We read some of Jesus' own teaching about prayer from Matthew 6-7 – I suppose that, although the Bible often refers to praying, we can't start anywhere better than with what Jesus said to his first followers about praying – which, of course, they saw put into practice in Jesus own praying life.

Matt.6:9 *This then is how you should pray* - he saw praying as a basic part of the life of faith, and he went on to teach them the Lord's Prayer.

Matt.7:7 *Ask .....seek .....Knock and the door will be opened to you* – the strong encouragement that we should be people who pray.

As I was thinking about these verses this week, I read part of a very famous, older book about prayer, and I found something very helpful – one of the books that are regarded as a 'classic' book about prayer, by a man called Hallesby (1948), who is quoted in the leaflet.

He begins his book by reminding us that long before we ask or see or knock at God's door in prayer, he is knocking at our door. He reminds us that alongside the encouragement of those words about knocking, we need to place these other words; *Here I am, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.* (Rev. 3:20)

In other words, we must never think of prayer as if it is us standing, knocking furiously at God's door, hoping that if we try hard enough, God might answer. As Hallesby rightly says, it is completely the other way round. It is whether we will open the door to him, and allow him to be involved in our lives and our living. He stands knocking at our door, long before we ask or seek or knock at his door.

This is the wonder of Christian faith – this is God's goodness and love and grace towards us – it is always about what God is like towards us, long before what we are like towards him.

It is always about how God's door is always open to us - how he has made that door open and keeps the door open.

It is God who has made the door open in the first place – as it says in 1 Tim.2, when it calls Jesus, *the mediator between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom* ( which is a passage about prayer)

It is God who keeps the door open – as it says, with wonderful assurance in Rom. 8, where it talks about us not really knowing how we should pray, but that the Spirit intercedes for us ...Christ Jesus, who is at the right hand of God, praying for us – and this in that passage where we are assured that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from his love.

So this is the foundation of all thinking about prayer, the foundation for being people who pray – not our great depth of spirituality nor qualities of living, certainly not our persistence in knocking at God’s door and twisting his arm to answer – but rather the wonderful promise that God is waiting in love, knocking with patience, and so delighted to be brought into our lives by prayer. Therefore, no matter how poor in our faith, how inconsistent in our living and how pathetic in prayer we feel ourselves to be, here is the true encouragement to ask and seek and knock – to be people who pray, as Jesus taught his disciples to do when he said: *‘This, then is how you should pray ...’*

But clearly, we cannot use this as an excuse to be careless and casual and lazy about the whole thing. There are essential things that we need to learn about prayer and practice in praying. Perhaps we can remind ourselves of these things from this passage where Jesus taught his disciples the Lord’s Prayer. Perhaps we can benefit by dividing up this prayer, which we maybe almost know ‘too well’, with the help of an acronym for praying that somebody once thought up - A.C.T.S. – 4 key attitudes and elements of praying.

## 1. A for Adoration

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name* – that when we pray we so much need to learn to come to God, before we come to our needs! And that is exactly how the Lord's Prayer does it.

Maybe we know it so well, that we miss this opening adoration that is the perfect blend of being awesome and yet being assured.

*Our Father in heaven* – what an amazing assurance that God is not some distant deity who might or might not be interested in us, but that he is *Our Father* – infinitely better than any parent in his readiness and resources to give good gifts to his children. He does not have to be cajoled into listening by people babbling on meaninglessly, as Jesus refers to in vs.7. He is so ready and so glad to receive us and hear our prayers.

But nevertheless, his name is to be hallowed – we need to be very aware of his greatness and his glory.

- We need to be like Moses as he came near the bush, remembering how God said to him, *Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.*

- We need to understand what David understood in Psalm 8, *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth ..... What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you should care for him?*

-We need to feel something of what John felt when he began to have that great vision that led to the book of Revelation: *I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ..... someone like a son of man..... his face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.* He had this very deep sense of God coming near to his life, and he coming into God's presence, and he realised the awesomeness of it all – and yet, at the very same time, he heard God's gracious words, *Do not be afraid ...*

Perhaps we need to think a lot about this Adoration aspect – this strange, amazing blend of awesomeness and assurance that is the beginning of Christian prayer. Maybe we need to learn to take a

bit more time to bring ourselves to God, before we rush into bringing our needs and requests to God – to concentrate upon him, rather than concentrating on what we would like him to do for us.

I think that we find this quite difficult. We are very inclined to rush straight into prayers of asking and requests to God. This is probably true of our own private prayers, and it is certainly true in our church prayers and prayer groups. Perhaps if we could learn to take time to say, *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name*, and to begin with the emphasis on awesomeness and assurance which is represented by those words, we would make more progress in being people of prayer. We almost certainly need to work hard at this fundamental foundation for praying.

## **2. C for Confession.**

*Forgive us our debts* ..... It's kind of 'old hat', this, isn't it – and yet we need to learn it over and over again. We need to remind ourselves that when we pray, it is not us doing God some massive favour by making the time and taking the trouble to pray (over and beyond prayers of desperation) – rather it is God, incredibly, ready and willing to receive to our prayers – and that mustn't be very easy, sometimes – given the people he sees us to be, and given the fact that our best prayers are often so limited, and too often our prayers are shallow and silly.

When we come to pray, we need to remember that God knows us well and sees us thoroughly. Therefore no amount of grand sounding words of adoration and worship will conceal how much we fail to adore and honour God in our daily lives. No amount of prayer for God's work and for other people's needs will cover over how most of our time is taken up thinking about ourselves and our own needs.

Therefore as we come to pray, to ask and seek and knock, we need to come openly and honestly – no putting on a special religious appearance, but rather admitting and confessing how much we forget and fail and fall down as people of faith. It is

absolutely essential – confession needs to be for real, and it needs to be repeated regularly.

Do you remember the words in 1 John 1: *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

Unless we honestly confess our sin to God – probably confessing the particular sin in our lives at that time, rather than just the general idea that we have sinned – we are in great danger of simply observing a religious duty, even putting on a religious performance for God – and it won't be prayer that is real.

Jesus saw this happening sometimes – ch.6: 5-6, where he refers to the religious people of his day praying impressively in the synagogues and at the street corners – but it was mainly about making them feel religious and good about themselves, rather than about coming honestly and earnestly to God – it wasn't much good, said Jesus, and it wouldn't do them much good.

So our praying must be open and honest – it must be a confession of our poverty of faith and our sadly, sinful lives – otherwise it may not be praying at all.

Perhaps we should add too, that when we confess our sin, it must not be merely a form of words. Confession must be about genuine sorrow for our failing, and true desire to resist the sin that attacks us, with the help of God's grace – *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* Perhaps even the phrases about us forgiving others are a reminder that confession must be for real, even though we cannot do it by ourselves.

I wonder how much time we take for confession when we pray – facing up to our sinfulness and our helplessness.

When we take time for Confession, perhaps it makes us all the more aware of the privilege of prayer – that God is still be glad to receive us and hear us, and the power of God that we so much need if we are to be people of faith ourselves, and if we are to do anything useful for him with our lives.

### 3. T for Thanksgiving.

We know that this should certainly be part of our prayers, and yet, surprisingly, Thanksgiving is not very obvious in the Lord's Prayer. However it is almost certainly implicit – that as we trust and ask God to *give us our daily bread*, we are acknowledging that the needs of our daily lives come from God and we are therefore, giving thanks to him, as we ask our Father in heaven to continue to supply these needs.

Perhaps the fact that Thanksgiving is not a very obvious part of the Lord's Prayer, is a reminder to us that Christian prayer is much more about God's readiness to hear and listen, to give and to respond, than we are to ask or trust – the emphasis is on God, much more than on us.

However, prayerful thanksgiving is something that is important. Remember the story of the 10 men with leprosy who were healed by Jesus, out of which only one returned to give thanks. Jesus expressed surprise that only one came back: *Where are the other nine? Was no-one found to return and give praise to God, except this foreigner?*

Through Jesus these men had been rescued from a leprosy existence that did not give them much quality of life – but once healed, they were not seen again!

Are we ever like that – almost in danger of 'using' God when we need him – finding that he does 'rescue' our lives in all sorts of ways, but showing very little on-going thankfulness.

Is it even like that in the ordinary routine of life – where we receive our 'daily bread', take it for granted, and are more likely to pray when daily life is disrupted, rather than to give thanks when daily life is good.

Praying needs to be a daily discipline in our lives – not least because we need to give thanks for our daily bread.

Perhaps there is no better expression of thanksgiving than in Psalm 103 – it covers both our 'daily bread' and the deeper, deepest realities and needs of our lives:

*Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul and forget not all his benefits – Who forgives all your sins, and heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, Who satisfies your desires with good things ...*

When we pray, there should certainly be Thanksgiving – almost certainly it should come before we ask for more, and should be the foundation for doing so.

#### **4. S for Supplication.**

This is not a word we use much, but I suppose it just means ‘asking humbly’. Perhaps this is what we think mainly about when we think of praying – asking!

And, Jesus encourages us to ask: *Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be open to you.*

In the Lord’s Prayer, itself, *Give us today our daily bread.*

But this has got to be so much more than a ‘cold’ asking - maybe that is why the Adoration, Confession and Thanksgiving needs to be the context for our asking, and usually should come first.

Maybe indeed the Lord’s Prayer, itself, helps us with this.

*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven* – this is much more than us asking for what we need or would like to happen. This is praying in the context of God’s priorities, perspectives and plans – his kingdom and his will – which, at its most extremely difficult and painful, we see in the life of Jesus, when in the garden he prayed, *My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.*

How we need to know that when we pray it is not like putting a coin in slot machine and getting what we want in return – a danger in a world of ‘instant’ thing.

But having said all that, Jesus and the whole Bible encourages us to be people who pray seriously and pray patiently in humble asking prayers. Listen to some of these examples:

Phil.4:6 *In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

Paul often told the little churches he had started that he was continuing to pray for them, and he asked them to pray for him and his ministry. (Phil.1:4 and Ephes.6:19)

1 Tim. 2:1 I urge, then ..... that requests, prayers, intercessions .... be made for everyone – for kings and those in authority that we may live peaceful and quiet lives.

Rom. 10:1 tells us about one of Paul's most frequent and heartfelt prayers – how he longed so much for his fellow Jews to come to faith and be saved: *My hearts desire and prayer to God for the Israelites that that they may be saved.*

So here we have these strong examples of humble asking prayers for the churches and their people, for the emperor and the nation, and for the spiritual needs of those not yet in Christ's kingdom.

This is to be our model – these are to be our prayers too.

Maybe our praying for these things shows how much we really care.

Maybe it is only when we pray that we are facing up to the fact that we cannot deal with these challenges by ourselves – admitting that we are involved in a struggle *against the rulers, authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms* – as Paul reminds the Ephesians.

Maybe it's only when we pray that we take Jesus' words in John 15 seriously: *Apart from me you can do nothing .....if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you.*

So often we go on as if we can do it ourselves – and we only pray as back-up or as the last resort. Here is the encouragement of Jesus for us to be people who pray. Sometimes we feel we can't pray too well. Sometimes we feel that prayer groups are only for the very 'religious' or those who think they are!

Let me finish with this description of a prayer meeting which I came across in Hallesby's book: P.15

Maybe this will encourage us to be praying people – praying ACTS!