

Prayer, how to do it...

At the Children's focus I took a ball on a string and whirled it around my head. I said this was like prayer. The whirling ball pulls away and the hand pulls back, and you have to do some work to get it going, and take a risk that you don't break a window or hurt someone nearby.

This is, I tried to say, a bit like praying.

Prayer is the place where we do our relating to God.

We take a bit of a **risk** praying.... "What will So and So say if she catches me praying?" "What will God think if s/he actually looks in to my soul when I open up to pray?" "What will I say, if when I am praying, I put myself directly in front of Jesus, my Lord?"

When you pray you **pull God towards** you. Jesus said to go to a quiet place, a private, or secret place, and pray to your Father in secret. It is an introverted, or inward-pulling activity. You are pulling God in to your quietness, into the glories and into the mess of your life. Prayer begins, whether you know it or not, by saying to God, "Here I am, this is my life, will you please come in and help me with it?"

And when you pray God is **pulling you outwards**. Outwards because God can only help you as you help yourself, your family, your friends and even your enemies. "God has no hands on earth but yours...." is part of an old prayer. (see quote below) When you pray for someone or something, essentially, you are asking God to help you to help. Pray for old Mrs. Thingummy because she is lonely, and there is a good chance you will find the (God-given) courage to go and visit her.

Prayer is always about entering in to a conversation, a relationship with the Divine.

Prayer is not like sending a letter to Santa

Prayer is not like ordering a book from Amazon.com

It is not about sending out for food.

It is not about getting someone else to do something that you want done but don't want to do yourself.

Prayer is always about opening up to God.

Prayer has elements of friendship, of deep intimacy and trust, of crying out for help and being open to following a request from God to change or act in some new way.

Someone once said that in grade school the teacher told them that "Sorry, Thank you and Please" were the most important words to use in a schoolyard. The same is true in church, at home and in prayer.

The best place to think about the beginning of prayer is in thankfulness.

Saying "**Thank you**". When you say thank you to someone you are inviting them into deeper friendship.

Beginning with thanking God is part of the in-breath of prayer, drawing God towards you, and you towards him. It is the string pulling. And thanking is important because it distracts you, for a moment, from all the neediness you may be feeling. Neediness is exhausting and clamouring and corrosive. Thankfulness calls you to attend to the blessings you can count. From the delight of sunrise, to the taste of your breakfast, to the smile of the TTC driver and on and on. It brings peace and light to your meeting with God.

The Scriptures repeatedly call us to give thanks to God. It is not because God thinks we are ungrateful wretches! It is because, like walking into someone's home, they open the door for you to step in, and without thinking you begin by saying, "Thank you". And that changes everything that follows. Being aware of your blessings begins in thankfulness. It changes everything that follows.

The next thing in prayer is saying "**Sorry**".

Sorry, in the service today, is what we call "Confession". When I come to God I often feel a need to say sorry for being too busy to spend time with him, or because I know I let the side down when I avoided eye contact with a beggar, or for all the times I fall short of being Christ-like in my life. Which is, pretty much, most of the time! It is not just sorry for the things I've done. It is much more for the things I have not done. (sins of commission and sins of omission as they used to be called)

Learning to say sorry has two powerful consequences. Sorry is the word that often leads to reconciliation. When you and your friend have had an argument, and there is a cloud hanging between you, the way to move the cloud away begins with sorry. When we fail God in some quiet or loud way, we tend to let a cloud of avoidance put a distance between us. In prayer, sorry is the necessary beginning of getting that cloud to disperse.

“Please” should always be after these two.

“Thank you” has changed you. “Sorry” has changed and restored your friendship with God to clean and clear. Now is the time when you can actually look at what you want to ask for.

Oddly, that list of requests you had built up over the last while might now be a lot shorter. Odd, but true. But there are things and people that we want to lift up to God.

Prayer of this sort is like asking for God to help you carry a log. It is too much for you, so you say, “God. I have this log, you see. It is too heavy for me. Could you get hold of one end and I’ll try the other. Then maybe we can carry it together.”

I don’t know how I hold the log of the mess in Syria. I know my people, the Europeans, callously set it all up over the last several hundred years. I know bombing people doesn’t help. I know innocent people are being butchered. I know that the news I receive is biased and I cannot comprehend fully. But I know my heart aches for people who I will never know, and I long for peace that makes sense to those who live there. This is a log so big, so heavy and so slippery, but God has put my heart to it so I need to ask him for help. I don’t know where to carry it to, and I am not sure even what lifting it means. My “lifting”, I think means at least, aching in pain along with those who suffer pain. So I try to learn, comprehend and put faces to that. And I share that with God in prayer with a “please” that has no instructions attached.

When I pray for someone in this congregation in hospital, still it is not quite clear to me. Sick people should not all get better all of the time. We need to be allowed to die. It is OK to die. Death is not the end, you know. So in prayer I share my anxieties, my care for relatives and friends affected and my love. Instead of a shopping list of things God should be remembering to get right, eventually, and “hurry up *please!*” I think of our intercessions as lifting up a plate of cares in offering to God, saying, “This is what we care about as a church this Sunday. Can you help us carry them? Thank you.”

Going back to the image of the ball on the string, this is the string. The string is tense with the pulls in opposite directions. That tension is us and God working together. When you say, “God didn’t save my child!” you let go of the string. When you say, “It’s too hard to care.” You let go of the string. The string is the activity of prayer, it is the friendship, it is the love, the hope and the trust.

I want to invite you, in weeks to come, to try a different way of writing in the prayers for intercession. It has begun to feel like a shopping list. The same names come up and mostly, most of us, have no idea who these people are and why we are praying for them. We don’t need to batter at God’s door for weeks on end. God is not deaf or forgetful (unlike your Incumbent). We do need to know and own what we hope for. When you ask that we pray for Terry, write why, and what you hope for, and who you are that asks. It may not all be read out. In fact, the praying is mostly done in the act of writing. So don’t scribble it off in haste, but write it with the love you bear for each person/cause you will name. We may, as I suggested, lift up that list at the altar as part of the offertory. Perhaps after Easter we can have a conversation after church about how that is going.

I want to end by saying that prayer matters.

If you are not spending time each day praying then you are slowly letting your relationship with God dry up. Like a house-plant, if it is alive it needs water. If your God is alive to you then you need prayer. If your God is dead to you, you need lots of prayer in your life. Prayer pulls God to you. Prayer pulls you out to God and action. Prayer is the moving action of the ball and the hand and the string. Without energy it goes limp and falls to the ground. Pray and watch the life return.

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,

Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.
Theresa of Avila c. 600 years ago