

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 28/7/2019

Hosea 1:2-10
Psalm 85
Colossians 2:6-19
Luke 11:1-13

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

One of the most fundamental aspects of our faith is that of prayer. It is one of the few common aspects of every faith - the concept that the deity being worshipped in a particular religion desires prayer, praise and petitions directed towards it. In our own case, of course, we believe in a God who so desires a relationship that this God has communicated with us since time began, who was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, and continues to be revealed to this day.

The truth is, people have been praying to God for millennia now - and the vast majority will never have attended a workshop on how to pray, or even had a discussion with anyone else about how they pray or what they do. And it seems to me that part of the reason is because it is almost like second nature; that our instinct as human beings is to call to mind things that are bothering us, or issues that we know of in the world, and ask God for help. And in many cases this is not even a conscious thing.

And yet, many people feel that they do not know how to pray - or that they might be “doing it wrong”. Indeed, in today’s Gospel the question is asked of Jesus by the disciples - “Lord, teach us how to pray?”

Prayer, real prayer, is something that takes us into unfamiliar territory. And the deeper we journey into the experience of prayer, into the experience of intimate communion with God the more unfamiliar the territory becomes and the fewer and fewer people you will find who’ve actually been there. And so the question arises: how will we find our way? How do we negotiate this unfamiliar terrain when we haven’t been there before?

Thank God for the desire to pray. Most of us are here because we want to pray, or maybe to discover what prayer is all about. Bishop Michael Ramsey used to speak of “wanting to want to pray” on his bad days. Brother Roger of Taizé said that some days he dragged his tired old body to Chapel as a sign of his desire to pray. Give thanks that you actually want to communicate with the creator of all.

Don't panic when darkness engulfs you. Don't make things worse with guilt or despair. However you're feeling, GOD simply IS. When you can't, then let others do the praying or the believing. You'd do the same for them. Find out what lifts you up. Close your eyes, listen to healing music. Or open your eyes, look at the sky, the clouds, the sun. Whatever lifts you up, there is the grace of God. If nothing seems to make sense, hold a little wooden cross in your hand, and with that symbol be alongside Jesus. That, in itself, is prayer.

Pray as you can, not as you can't - but do experience different ways of praying. So, go on retreat - join the monks in their silence and chanting at an Abbey, for example. Hear the joy and beauty of the choir of the Cathedral at Evensong one week, or find a choir with whom you can sing - remember St. Augustine said “whoever sings prays twice”.

Importantly, be honest in your prayer, be the real you: “all hearts are open and no secrets are hidden” before God. Shout and scream at God if you need to. The Psalmist did. And Jesus commended the honesty of the tax collector who would only say, “God forgive me, a sinner.” (Luke 18.13). Remember, your personal or peculiar way of praying may well be God's gift to you.

Use the Lord's Prayer. Pray it phrase by phrase, as well as saying it. It contains praise and penitence and petitions for sustenance and guidance and protection. That's pretty comprehensive.

And, finally, remember it is **God's Spirit praying within you**, maybe with groans rather than words, as Saint Paul says (Romans 8.26). "We don't pray. God prays in us," another Benedictine monk said of his community.

In one way, given its centrality to our faith, it's a bit surprising that we don't, as Christians, have little cards that demonstrate our competence in prayer - you know, like your Baptism certificate, or a card that sits in your wallet next to your drivers' licence or your Working With Children's Card!! But on the other hand, prayer is not like that.

Prayer is individual - as different as each one of us is. And prayer takes different forms and has different structure depending on our situation or circumstance.

Michael Ramsey, the great former Archbishop of Canterbury, was a man known for his prayer life. People would often ask him for advice about praying, or for tips on how to do it. One such conversation was recorded between Ramsey and a young ordination candidate, who asked the great Archbishop - "how long do you pray each morning?" Ramsey replied - "only for about a minute". This was a bit of a shock for the young man, who pressed him a bit further - "only a minute?". "Yes", Ramsey replied, "but it can take me an hour to get there."

Prayer is not just the minute that Ramsey might have spent saying something, or praying for something, but the whole experience; of being attentive; of stilling the mind and the heart; of being open and honest before God.

The great poet, Mary Oliver, who died earlier this year, wrote widely, and her collection of poems includes numerous religious poems. This one sums up for me something of the experience of prayer - I leave it with you this morning:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, It could be weeds
in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak

Speak into the silence, O Lord - your servant is listening...

In the name of Christ. Amen.