



by the Right Revd Peter Hancock

Lord teach us how to pray

Matthew 6: verses 5 to 13

This then is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.'

Zeno of Citium was a Greek thinker who lived in about 300BC and was the founder of Stoic Philosophy. He famously said: 'We have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen more than we say.' And there is much wisdom in that. Most of us have noisy, busy, fast-moving lives and sometimes it is difficult to find the necessary time, space and quiet in which to pray and to listen to God. John Wayne is reported to have said something similar, but in a somewhat blunter way - 'You're short on ears and long on mouth.'

Praying in secret

Jesus also warned his disciples about this telling them not to be like the hypocrites who love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners. When we pray, he said, we should not be looking for the praise and admiration of other people, but the approval of our Father in Heaven. So in this passage from Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus saying 'When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.' Jesus warns against babbling and jabbering when we pray, as if the more words we say the more likely we are to be heard. 'Your Father' he says 'knows what you need before you ask him.' He then goes on to illustrate how we should pray using what we now call the Lord's Prayer.

Praying for our needs

The shape of the Lord's Prayer is a bit like a meal. It has a starter, two main



Detail from *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*, Heinrich Hofmann, 1890.

sections and an ending. It starts with 'Our Father in Heaven' and concludes 'For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen'. The starter tells us whom we are addressing and the ending lifts us to God's eternal glory. Both are necessary and like the rest of the prayer are concise. All true prayer begins and ends with God. But what about the two main sections? Each consists of three petitions. The first section is about God: 'Hallowed be your name; Your kingdom come; Your will be done'. The second is about us: 'Give us today our daily bread; Forgive us our sins; Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'. It is right that we begin with God, praying for his name to be hallowed, for his kingdom to come, for his will to be done. But it is also right that we pray about our own needs, the things that concern us, the things that we need, physical (bread) and spiritual (forgiveness and protection).

May your kingdom come

The world needs to know that God is a heavenly Father, that he is holy (hallowed), that he is King, that there are things he 'wills' for his creation. We should pray about these things. Many of us will remember the chorus 'He's got the whole world in his hands' - and indeed he has. Although at times when we look at the evil, violence and brokenness that surrounds us today we sometimes

have cause to wonder. 'Your Kingdom come' is the prayer Jesus taught us to pray and the Book of Revelations ends with the words of Jesus, 'Behold, I am coming soon.' The Lord's Prayer calls us to pray that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven; that we may forgive others even as God has forgiven us. Jesus came to bring heaven and earth back together, to unite the heavenly and the earthly. As St Paul said: 'Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come'. (2 Corinthians 5:17). And God has done this in Christ. He has reconciled us to himself through Jesus. That is what we are praying for when we pray the Lord's Prayer, the coming of the Kingdom. We live in a world where often God's will is not done; where many people do not honour or hallow God's name, where his rule as King is not acknowledged. We live in a world where many are hungry, where bitterness excludes the possibility of forgiveness, where many find themselves led into temptation and where evil is rampant.

Resting in God

We live in a world that needs to know God as Our Father in Heaven. Augustine's prayer reminds us that ultimately it is only in God that we find meaning, purpose and peace. 'Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.'

Let each of us pray the Lord's Prayer now, quietly and thoughtfully, thinking about each word, each phrase, each petition. May God's will be seen and done in our lives, our words and our deeds. Amen.

about the writer

The Rt Revd Peter Hancock became Bishop of Bath and Wells in 2014. Before ordination he read Natural Sciences at Cambridge and he is a member of the Society of Ordained Scientists. He has a passion for the countryside which translates into a strong interest in rural and environmental issues. This, alongside encouraging children and young people, and supporting the most vulnerable in society, forms what Bishop Peter describes as the 'three threads' of his ministry. Bishop Peter is married to Jane and they have four grown-up children.