

Sermon preached by the Revd Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

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How much more: praying in struggle with confidence in God

How often do you struggle with prayer?

What does it mean when we keep asking God for an answer and don't seem to get one?

Often in times of trial and suffering prayer is difficult.

What happens when we ask to be saved from a particular time of trial and nothing seems to happen?

30 years ago when I was as a music teacher in Triabunna in Tasmania I got whooping cough and asthma together and was very sick for a few months.

I remember praying to God to get better.

I had bible study group members say to me 'we've been praying for you and you're still sick so you must not be in right relationship with God.'

The implication was that this time of difficulty was my fault.

This was the reason God didn't seem to be answering peoples' prayers.

There were times when I could not even pray. It did not feel as if God was answering me. God seemed to be silent.

That illness did resolve in the end. It just took a bit longer than I expected.

I learnt a lot about myself and God and others in that time.

I wonder if you have experienced times like that.

Prayer is something we grow in over our lives and we can often find to be a struggle.

This is what comes to mind as we hear the gospel reading today.

The disciples see Jesus praying and they ask him 'teach us to pray'. They want to learn more about praying.

Jesus gives them the Lord's prayer and broadens out his teaching with the stories that follow.

The Lord's prayer is *the* prayer that we have from Jesus.

It is a prayer that most of us learnt early on in our journey of faith.

It is the bedrock of our prayer.

It is a prayer I pray at times when I'm not sure what else to pray.

It is a prayer that sits deep within us.

There have been many times with people who are sick and unconscious will join in when I pray that prayer at their bedside.

They rouse themselves to join in and pray it with me.

The Lord's prayer is our prayer.

It is a community prayer that reminds us that we are not praying on our own.

To pray it not only are we joining in with millions of people around the world, but it is a prayer that Jesus prays in us.

As we pray, we become open to the God who is already in us.

Jesus prays that prayer inside us, with us.

We pray to our Father – which speaks of the intimate relationship we have with God.

We pray also acknowledging that God is also beyond us in holiness and pray for God's reign to come in full.

Prayer begins with being open to God.

It is also about what we need – nourishment, forgiveness and protection.

The Lord's prayer gives us words and a structure for our prayer, but Jesus does not leave it there.

The stories that follow are there to give us confidence in prayer.

If Mr host's friend, Mr Sleepy will get up in the middle of the night because he won't be shamed by the village for refusing to provide hospitality, how much more will God give us what we need.

If we who are frail and often stuff things up know what to give our children how much more will God give us?

Jesus is reminding them of the attitude with which they can come to God.

God wants to hear our prayers, God wants to meet us within them, and how much more will God give to us.

He is basically saying have confidence in God's goodness and love that when you ask it will be given, and if you knock on God's door it will be opened.

What does this say to us when we struggle with prayer?

It is easy to hear it as 'you should be more confident'!

I wonder at why Jesus feels that he needs to spell this out to his followers?

Jesus is teaching them this as he has set his face to Jerusalem and is going towards his suffering and death. Hard times are coming.

Jesus himself will ask for this cup to be taken from him.

Luke's community also knew their own fair share of struggles in living under Roman occupation.

They didn't know when Jesus would return, Christianity was still very new and there was so much they were not sure about in what it meant to follow Jesus.

They probably needed to hear these words as much as we do.

When our confidence is shaken, when we face struggles as to what it means to be Christian now, we need to hear Jesus' reassuring words.

We are tired from the last few years.

When we are experiencing difficulty we are worn down and it is easy for our trust and confidence in God to be shaken.

What this reading says to me is to keep praying anyway, to keep opening myself to God anyway.

As Henri Nouwen says 'when we pray we are asked to open our clenched fists'. He also wrote 'I cannot pray but Jesus prays in me'.

I find that helpful. It is a reminder that Jesus does pray in us and is with us even when we don't know it.

To pray is to open our hands and to let go, to put our own wants aside and place ourselves in God's hands.

To put the situation in God's hands is knowing that the answer might be different from what I expect.

Somehow God does meet us where we are, within the struggle even though we do not quite know it.

Prayer is something that we grow in even as we struggle.

Perhaps the message is to keep at it, even if it is to stop a few times a day and say 'Jesus have mercy' a few times a day and to pray the Lord's prayer and somehow the rest will follow.

[Silent God](#)

*This is my prayer—
That, though I may not see,
I be aware
Of the Silent God
Who stands by me.
That, though I may not feel,
I be aware
Of the Mighty Love
Which doggedly follows me.
That, though I may not respond,
I be aware
That God—my Silent, Mighty God,
Waits each day.
Quietly, hopefully, persistently.
Waits each day and through each night
For me.
For me—alone.¹*

*Lectons:
Hosea 1.2-10
Psalm 85
Colossians 2.6-15
Luke 11.1-13*

¹ From Edwina Gateley, *There Was No Path So I Trod One* (1996, 2013).