

How should we Pray

By Aaron Harper

This is the contemporary word delivered at St James Uniting Church, Curtin, ACT Australia.

Based on the Readings

Understanding Prayer – The Breath of Life in Us, from ‘Praying a New Story’.
Michael Moorwood (adapted). As a meditation and **Luke 11:1**

These readings can be found at the end of this exploration.

How should we pray

Before I begin, I want to credit Val Webb, Marcus Borg, Michael Morwood, Bishop Spong, Bishop Holloway, and particularly Jean Shannon and my Uncle Dave for guiding my thoughts today.

The Gospel reading today incorporates Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer.

Given that Jean spoke on the Lord’s prayer so wonderfully just a few month’s ago, I’ve decided to stop at this verse and ponder its meaning.

Why did one of the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray?

Surely they had been taught to pray as young children.

The Jewish scriptures were full of examples of prayer.

Adult Jews were expected to pray three times daily in the direction of Jerusalem both before and after meals.

I believe they needed to be taught to pray because their old systems of prayer no longer satisfied their new visions of God.

Jesus had showed them new ways of seeing, and new ways of being.

He showed them that the distant, absent Jehovah was their Father.

That God’s Kingdom was in Heaven, but also on Earth.

That this Kingdom was not exclusive, but inclusive, and was not built on power but on love, acceptance and forgiveness.

Jesus went on to teach his Disciples what is commonly called ‘The Lord’s Prayer’, a prayer that still has deep, profound and ongoing meaning to us today.

However, many are again having problems with a traditional Christian view of God.

Like the Disciples, they are coming to new ways of seeing, and new ways of being.

They can no longer believe in a being who supernaturally intervenes in the world at either our behest or God's whim. For these people, the problems of suffering and unanswered prayer have proved insurmountable.

Some, rather than perceiving God as a being to be prayed to, now experience God as the Ground of Being.

Many have stopped believing in God, full stop.

The challenge for us today is to find new meaning in prayer to match our evolving experience of God.

A Joke from Val Webb's Book, *Stepping Out With The Sacred* (adapted):

"Paddy, an Irishman, was late for a job interview and couldn't find a parking space.

Desperate, he paused, raised his eyes to Heaven, and said "God, I know you are almighty and I am nothing. But I ask that you have pity on me. If you find me a parking place, I will attend the St James Sunday morning church service faithfully for the rest of my life".

Suddenly, before his eyes, a car reversed and a parking space became available.

Paddy raised his eyes to Heaven again, and said "Don't worry God, I've just found one".

It is tempting for me to look back at my days of evangelical faith in an external, all powerful, interventionist God, and convince myself that faith was easier and simpler back then. But when I honestly reflect, it just isn't true.

As many of you know, I was raised in a Pentecostal church – The Assemblies of God. One day each month, we would gather to pray for revival in Canberra.

A day of fasting would proceed it. I perceived this as a type of blackmail – God I've starved myself for a day, so you must listen to and act upon my demands.

We would then enter a period of praise. This seemed like a type of flattery. Of getting into God's good books. It did not accord with my view of a God who washed people's feet, or the Christ who called us friends, brothers and sisters.

We would then quote God's promises back at him, as if he might somehow have forgotten them.

We then brought our requests to God, like as a helpless child might ask something of their parent, or a servant might request something of their master.

We would then finish with worship, which was another attempt at flattery, all in a vain hope that our wishes would be granted.

Most remained unanswered.

For many years, I went through the motions of prayer without it according with my experience of God. It left me with a deep unease.

I'm sure you all have similar stories. A walk with God is never easy.

So where does this leave us.

Bishop Spong suggests that prayer, for him, is now silent meditation, and then living fully, loving wastefully and being all that he can be, and helping others to do the same. Prayer is action.

He also believes we must leave behind the word 'prayer' as it is so shaped by theistic understanding that it is almost useless in a post-theistic world. Maybe he is correct. Val Webb explains that the word prayer comes from the Latin '*precare*', to beg or entreat, something that many of us would be uncomfortable with for differing reasons.

In this context, the question we might ask Jesus today is, "Is there still a role for prayer, particularly spoken prayer"?

I believe the answer is yes.

I believe there is a mysterious power to the words we speak.

Jesus spoke of the power of words to bring life or death. Or how a word of faith could move mountains.

We have seen the power of words of forgiveness in the mouth of Nelson Mandela, or more recently, Lindy and Michael Chamberlain.

We have seen the speeches of Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King change communities and the course of nations.

I'm sure many of you have experienced the power of words in your lives – both for good and bad.

Words change things.

Why this is true, I'm not sure. But maybe it is because, as Michael Morwood suggested in our meditation today, in prayer we give the mystery we call God a way of coming to expression in this physical universe.

Prayer is a pathway to the sacred within and beyond each of us.

Psalm 85: 4-7

Help us again, God of our help;
 don't hold a grudge against us forever.
 You aren't going to keep this up, are you?
 scowling and angry, year after year?
 Why not help us make a fresh start—a resurrection life?
 Then your people will laugh and sing!
 Show us how much you love us, God!
 Give us the salvation we need!

Another question we might ask Jesus today is, “Why pray if there is no God being to supernaturally intervene?”.

There seems to be something powerful about expressing our need for help or, alternately, our great thankfulness. It is a very human act to cry out, whether in voice or silently from the depths of our being, to the that mystery which is beyond.

What moved me about this Psalm is its timeless humanity - that its words could be that of a person suffering today in Syria, starving in Sudan, or homeless in Canberra.

In prayer, we share our highest hopes and darkest fears. When a prayer is spoken, others can share in that joy or that pain. The God in me speaks to the God in you and the mystery that is God moves within and between us. Something distinctly profound and spiritual happens.

That's why I believe sharing our joys and concerns each Sunday is of vital importance. It is a type of prayer, as Sandra regularly says. It enable us to unite together in faith and care and thanksgiving.

And whilst some may not believe in an external God who supernaturally intervenes, we, as bearers of God, can. We are ministers of God to each other – literally the body of Christ.

In her book “Stepping Out With The Sacred”, Val Webb quotes an Australian Uniting Church Minister, who spoke in a sermon about the many thousands of emails received from people around the world praying for those threatened by the 2009 Victorian bushfires. It poetically encompasses these thoughts.

“They didn’t expect their prayers to put the flame out; they didn’t expect their prayers to change the wind; they didn’t expect their prayers to save a particular life or to spare a specific building – they were praying to make a connection, to weave a kind of fabric of compassion – they were building a network of attention and concern, and shared sadness, and because they often came from people and places who’d also suffered heartbreak in the past – they also offered an affirmation that this event would pass, and there was hope, and there would be healing, and people would bring good things out of the bad – and if we’re looking for God, that’s where God was.

We have asked “Is there still a role for spoken prayer” and “Why pray if there is no God being to supernaturally intervene?”

A final question we might ask Jesus is “What does prayer achieve?”.

Let me share two personal experiences with you that have shaped my thoughts on this.

The first was what I think I can call the miraculous healing of my cousin, Heidi, when she was a baby. My Uncle Dave wrote a brutally honest account of the miracle. A copy of the account was provided to the five specialists involved in Heidi’s treatment to ensure that the medical history was accurate and without exaggeration.

My Uncle and Aunt first realised there was a problem with the pregnancy when my Aunt’s abdomen became grossly swollen, indicating a problem with the baby.

After an ultrasound, a doctor explained that the baby’s chest was full of fluid causing problems with the lungs, and there was a problems with the heart.

A specialist then confirmed that both lungs were surrounded and compressed by fluid in the chest, that the baby was not swallowing, that there was a large growth which protruded from the right side of the neck, that the heart rate was irregular and that a flap in the heart was not working. He explained these circumstance were unique and the outlook was grim.

My Uncle and Aunt came to the realisation that even if the baby was to be born, she would greatly suffer at birth and suffer an ugly deformity. There was also the fear of brain damage if they baby could not breathe soon after birth.

My Uncle admits their thoughts were black with despair and even desired at one time that God would take the baby to prevent any suffering. But they surrendered to God and allowed God room to operate.

The Church and many hundreds of Christians prayed. God was present. God moved.

The swelling in my Aunty's abdomen subsided. Three days before birth, the fluid around the baby's lungs and chest cleared.

Heidi was finally born. The cyst on the neck was barely evident despite three days earlier the specialist warning it would be so large that it would appear she had no neck.

There were other problems, prayers, and then miracles that neither specialists, doctors, surgeons or nurses were able to explain.

At the beginning of September, Ryan and I are travelling to Fiji to see Heidi get married to her partner, Steve.

One of the great conundrums and ironies is that my Uncle dedicated the account to my Mum, who left Canberra at the time to live and provide support to my Uncle and Aunt during this time.

My mother died in 1999.

She had breast cancer which quickly spread to her liver. She died besides a Church of over 500 praying for her, sometimes 24 hours a day.

One of the great questions of my life is to synthesise and understand these two events.

At this point, I want to quote Marcus Borg, for I think he wraps up my thoughts better than I can.

"We have good reason to affirm that 'paranormal' healings have happened throughout history and continue to happen today, many of them involving prayer as a factor. So I think these kinds of things happen.

But I refuse to use interventionism as the explanation. I also refuse to use psychosomatic explanations. Of course, some are psychosomatic; body and mind are related in ways that we do not fully understand. Yet some healings are not so readily explained.

But the point is that interventionism and psychosomatic explanations both claim to know too much. Both claim to know the 'mechanism' at work in the relation between prayer and healing. I myself have no clue what the explanatory mechanism is, and I am content not to.

This leads me to my final reason for continuing to do prayers of petition and intercession. To refuse to do them because I can't imagine how prayer works would be an act of intellectual pride: if I can't imagine how something works, then it can't work. To think thus involves more than a bit of hubris"

There are times in life when I feel I have encountered God. They are, admittedly, fleeting, or as Val Webb says, like trying to catch water in a net.

Sometimes, it has been when I am surrounded by the majesty of nature, or looking up at the starry night sky, and I have experienced God beyond

Other times it has been in moments of great personal despair or ecstatic joy, where I have experienced God within.

Perhaps, it is in these moments, where we reach beyond ourselves with openness and humility, when prayer comes alive.

After all, whilst I find the Lord's Prayer intellectually stimulating and sustaining, it is Mary's song of joy after Jesus' birth, David's prayer "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit in me" after committing adultery with Bathsheba, or Jesus' cry in Gethsemane "Father, take this cup from me", that move my heart. Perhaps they move God's heart also.

In moments of openness and humility, perhaps we open ourselves to the possibility of what my Uncle calls 'droplets of grace' – a term he once used and for some reason has always stayed with me.

We don't know where these drops come from, or why they come at all. We only know them when we experience them. When we do, they are unforgettable.

Today, I don't expect that many of you will agree with all of what I've said. Some will say I have incorrectly dismissed the role of a sovereign, graceful, intervening God. Others will say I have placed too much faith in the activity of prayer.

That's OK. If I haven't made you think, and rethink, then I have failed in my intention.

So, this morning, I'm not asking you to open your mind to that which you cannot accept, for I know the heart cannot worship what the mind rejects.

But I'm also asking you to not close your mind to the power of prayer, to the mystery of our human expression of God in the spoken word, to the moving of God in our spiritual community, and to those unexpected drops of grace that prayer might bring to our lives.

Sources:

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Morwood, Michael. 2003. *Praying A New Story.*

Spong, John Shelby. 2001. *A New Christianity For A New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How A New Faith Is Being Born.*

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Readings

Meditation

“We gather today,
Believing that God,
Source, Empowerer,
Breath, Enlivener,
And Energizer
Prays in us.

We pray
Aware that God at work
In the vastness of this universe
For billions of years
Comes to visible
And audible expression
In our words
Of appreciation.

We rejoice
In the wonder of who we are,
Bearers of the Breath of life,
Privileged
In our awareness of this,
And challenged
By our privilege
To allow the Breath of Life
Full expression
In our living and loving.

We call to mind
Jesus of Nazareth
Who opened minds and hearts
To this awareness
And to this challenge.
The Breath of Life
Moved so freely and openly
In his life
That people recognised
The relationship
At the deepest level of being
Between God and a person.

Amen.”

Luke 11:1

Once Jesus was in a certain place praying. As he finished, one of his disciples came to him and said, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”