

## Part 1

This morning I am splitting the sermon into two parts and I'm doing that because both of our readings have really important things to say to us as a church today – but I want us to think about those messages separately. So, let's have a brief look at our first reading we have just heard.

Paul's letter to the Colossians is an interesting letter. It is written to a group of people who Paul had never met and it is written to a church that he didn't start. It was started by a man called Epaphras who was from that area, and he had recently visited Paul in prison (where he had written the letter from) to tell him how well the Colossians were doing, but he also mentioned some of the cultural pressures that existed which were tempting people to turn away from Jesus. So Paul wrote this letter to respond to some of the issues that Epaphras had raised and to challenge them to a greater devotion to Jesus. The reading we have just heard is addressing those pressures.

The Colossians were confronted with two pressures: first to worship the multiple Gods of Roman life such as Hermes, Aphrodite, Apollo and so on, and some saw Jesus as just one more of these deities who they could worship, and second to observe the laws of the Torah - there was great pressure from the Jewish community on these non-Jews to complete their commitment to the Messiah by obeying the laws of the Torah – specifically mentioning eating a kosher diet, observing sacred days, and circumcision.

For Paul, to give into either of these pressures is compromise; it is the failure to recognise who Jesus really is, and what he did on their behalf. The Colossians used to live in fear of spiritual powers, but Jesus triumphed over these by his death and resurrection – he freed the Colossians from any obligation to them. In the same way Jesus fulfilled on our behalf all the laws of the Torah – we don't need to follow those laws because Jesus is the reality to which the laws pointed.

At least the first part of this issue is still, actually I would suggest even more, prevalent today than it was when Paul wrote his letter. The amount of non-Christian spiritualism which is around these days seems to be growing. We are forever being encouraged to become more and more materialistic, and to be honest this materialism is a much more attractive proposition to most people than what we, as the Christian church, are offering as an alternative. This is an enormous challenge which, if we want our churches in these four villages to still be here in 10 years' time, we need to take on – and win.

How do we do that? Well, I'm sure many of us have our own ideas, but one thing is central to what we must do. And that is addressed in our gospel reading which is all about Jesus teaching his disciples how to pray. And in a few minutes time we will have a look at that reading.

But as we leave the Colossians, Let's just remind ourselves of the sort of conversations they, and we, are able to have with our God. This is an extract from Psalm 32.

For you are my hiding place;

you protect me from trouble.

You surround me with songs of victory.

The Lord says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life.

I will advise you and watch over you.

Do not be like a senseless horse or mule

that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control.”  
Many sorrows come to the wicked,  
but unfailing love surrounds those who trust the Lord.  
So rejoice in the Lord and be glad, all you who obey him!  
Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure!

## Part 2

So, we now come to look at the gospel reading and, not for the first time, it is worth looking at where this reading comes in Luke's gospel – and that is at the end of a section which could be described as a manual of discipleship. From the beginning of chapter 9 up to and including this opening section of chapter 11 there is a whole sequence of instructions from Jesus to his disciples:

- There is the disciples saying, “Shall we command fire to come down from heaven and consume a group who were opposing Jesus”, and Jesus ‘rebuking’ them – in saying No. Jesus teaching them how to deal with opposition.
- There are the demands which are placed on would-be disciples – no you cannot bury your father first, I have called you – come now
- There is the sending out of the seventy to evangelise – but don't take anything with you
- There is ‘what does it take to love my neighbour?’ in the parable of the Good Samaritan – a practical guide to being a disciple
- There is the need for devotion to Jesus – as seen in the disagreement between Martha and Mary
- And after all those, the disciples said to Jesus, “Teach us to Pray”. Does it not seem a bit late in the day for the disciples to ask to be taught how to pray?

Well, actually No. There is no suggestion that the disciples had not been praying up until this point; the actual request was, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”

It was a common occurrence for a rabbi to instil in his followers something that made them recognisable, and we are told that John's disciples frequently fasted and prayed. And now the disciples want a prayer of their own so that they will be recognisable as Jesus' disciples - and Jesus provides one.

The Lord's Prayer, as we now call it, appears in two of the gospels – Matthew gives us a longer version – more in line with the prayer that we will say later in this service, but Luke's version teaches us all we need to know about how to pray and what to pray for.

It begins with the single word Father. Immediately Jesus is giving his disciples a prayer which makes them feel very personal when it comes to talking to God. And by calling him Father we know that God is someone from whom gifts don't have to be unwillingly extracted but who delights to supply his children's needs.

We then get two statements about God – Hallowed be your name, Your Kingdom God. The important point here is that things are being included in the right order. Before we ask for anything, we must give God the reverence that is due to him.

Hallowed be your name. We are saying to God that we want to re-establish the holiness of his name. We want to honour him for the amazing loving God that he is, and implicit in this is we are saying that we want to do things in our lives that will, honour his name.

Your Kingdom come. It is God's kingdom that will come; only God can overturn the powers at work in the world and establish his universal reign. But that process has already started with the coming of Jesus – and we must help that process today.

And then the rest of the prayer covers our life.

First, it covers our present need – Give us each day our daily bread – we are back to the Old Testament story of manna from heaven, where God gave the Israelites food for that day and that day only, and we are asking God to do the same for us each day, although this time we are not just talking about food – it's anything and everything we might need this day.

Second, it covers past sin. When we pray, we surely cannot do anything else except pray for forgiveness, because we are all far from perfect, and will make mistakes.

And third, it covers future trials – very specifically. “And do not bring us to the time of trial.” We will always be tempted – and this is what is being referred to here. We will always be challenged by difficult situations, and these are covered here. The result of our request will not be that we do not come across these situations, but we will not face them alone.

So in answer to the request, “Teach us to pray”, Jesus, in three short sections teaches his disciples, and us, to address God as Father, to help us feel close to him, to recognise just how special he is and what he is working to achieve in this world, and then to ask for what we need to play our part in that work.

Then, having taught the disciples a prayer to pray Jesus tells them a parable about someone receiving an unexpected guest late at night, and the reluctant neighbour. And the reason he tells them a parable is to teach them about prayer.

The house the neighbour lives in would almost certainly be a one roomed dwelling, and all the family would sleep together on a slightly raised area around a fire. Often on the lower area the animals would be brought in at night. So, getting everyone and animals settled would be quite a challenge. So, he would rather wish the knocking would go away. But such is the persistence of the knocking that the neighbour relents for his friend.

So, is Jesus saying, “Keep on badgering God until you get the answer you want?” in the same way the man kept on banging on his neighbour's door? No, but what he is saying is that if a churlish neighbour can eventually be persuaded to part with some bread, how much more will God, who is a loving father, meet his children's needs.

Finally, we get to the most challenging part of this reading. "Ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you." Challenging, because we all know that we don't always get what we pray for. There seems to be many times in our lives when our prayers go unanswered.

But, and this is a big but, there is no such thing as unanswered prayer. The answer given may not be the answer we desired or expected; but even when that answer is a refusal it is the answer of the love and the wisdom of God. Jesus also doesn't say when your prayer will be answered. Is one prayer enough? Do we need to pray the same prayer for several days, or months, or even years? We simply don't know, but we do know all our prayers will be answered, in some way, at some point in time. And what we believe to be the right time may well not be the time which God knows is the right time.

So be persistent in prayer. When you are facing a real difficulty in life, and don't know how to pray – and let's face it we are all in that situation from time to time – then pray the prayer that Jesus taught us. If you need practical help in your prayer life there are many tools available to help: I'm currently using one called Lectio365 from the 24/7 prayer organisation, the Church of England produces a Daily Prayer app and other short-term tools around Lent and Christmas. And when I say, "Other apps are also available", I actually mean just that.

I might be giving the impression here that I have all the answers to how to pray, and that my prayer life is perfect, and you should all follow my example. Far from it. I find having a regular, disciplined, meaningful prayer life is one of the hardest things to get right. There are times when I fall into a good pattern of prayer, and I feel very close to God. And then something can happen which means that pattern gets disrupted and I feel far away from God. All I can say is have a plan and try to stick with it. I try to start each day with a time with God, about 20 to 30 minutes, and that will usually include reading the bible, some quiet time just thinking things through, and mentioning some people or activities that I know need God's attention that day. That works for me – but you may need to do something very different to fit into your life.

But to finish I say this. Prayer is central to our lives with God. Without a regular pattern of prayer we can easily get distracted by many other things in life – as we heard earlier were the Colossians.

So find a method that suits you, and try and stick with it. And if things go wrong – don't beat yourself up over it – just pause, come up with a new plan, and start again. God will understand.

Amen