

Luke 11:1-13

*The Dean considers how Jesus teaches us to pray.*

Many years ago, I stood with a small group of pilgrims in a tiny church in Bethlehem and listened to the priest recite the prayer that Jesus taught his friends, in Aramaic, almost certainly the language in which these words were first heard.

It was like opening a door into the heart of Jesus, full of sweetness and mystery, yet profoundly simple and humble. It was a reminder of what a great gift we have been given in this prayer, because of all the words in the gospels, these are most authentically the words of Jesus.

Jesus knew how to compose prayers and stories that that were memorable. And if you put the Lord's Prayer back into Jesus' own language of Aramaic then the rhythm and even the rhyme of the words come through very clearly.

He taught an easily memorable form of words, an easily memorable form of prayer. Words that are meant to be transmitted, meant to be passed on, learned and taught. This may well be the only prayer you know by heart – and perhaps in your heart language rather than in English or in the form that we use on Sundays here.

It is a deceptively simple prayer.

But it is only simple if we consider it as a thing, a form of words, rather than the orientation of a heart.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them about prayer, they weren't asking to learn technique, they were not wondering how to achieve the proper balance between praise, confession, and thanksgiving. They wanted to learn more about Jesus' love for God and God's purpose for the world. "Teach us to pray" says "Show us your heart" or "Tell us — what is it like to be so close to God?"

With that in mind, let us turn to the prayer and consider what it shows us about the heart of Jesus and his, and our, relationship with God.

The prayer challenges us to think differently. We generally do not place God at the heart of our lives. We forget our dependence on God, even when crisis faces us, where we feel anxious and uncertain about tomorrow, and where evil is powerfully at work in our world.

In such circumstances, to stand with dignity and freedom, we need to *know* that God is Our Father. We need to know that whatever happens to us God is God, God's name and presence and power and word are holy and wonderful and that that glorious God has made us members of his family in a very intimate and direct way.

With that confidence, that kind of dependence, we're set free. We know that there is a relationship that nothing can break.

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer that requires our lives change. It requires that we become different sorts of people, but it is honest about the reality that that will only happen when we learn how to depend freely and lovingly on the God who has made himself Our Father.

It is also a prayer that goes beyond our personal concerns. It is the prayer of the whole church, indeed the prayer of all humanity. It's about what it's like to be a human being: "And lead us not into temptation deliver us from evil. Give us this day our daily bread."

When we pray, we can expand our consciousness to remember and pray for and with our sisters and brothers.

*Give all of us what we need for life, the dignity and the hope. Keep all of us from being plunged into crisis we can't handle. Save all of us from the destructive power of evil.*

And what it's praying for, and again this is something we forget because we use it so often, what it's praying for is the most revolutionary change you can imagine in the world we live in.

A change to a situation where what God wants can happen, to a situation where all the hungry are fed, to a situation where forgiveness is the first condition of all our relationships.

And, it goes without saying, that's not the world we inhabit at the moment. Yet, we dare to ask for a radical change in our world.

It does require courage to pray this way.

We are bold to call God our Father, we are bold to use the words that Jesus used from a position of intimacy with the Father, we are bold to ask for what we need for today, we are bold to ask for forgiveness in our sin and frailty.

Praying the Lord's prayer is like practising scales as a musician, it is a way of strengthening your prayer muscles so that you can go deeper into your

relationship with God. St Francis, gathering a community around him of men who could not read, in an age where prayer books were expensive, taught his brothers to say the Lord's Prayer three times a day. That simple routine would shape their days and orientate their lives in simplicity, humility and joy. It is not a bad model, and one that even the busiest of us can manage.

One final thing, which is central to Jesus' teaching, although I've not mentioned it yet, is to hang on in there. Persevere. Keep at it! You don't build a relationship with God in one enthusiastic burst of prayer any more than you can build a marriage by having an intense honeymoon and then just resting on your laurels for the next ten years.

Over the Summer months, the clergy often have a bit more space in our diaries, if you want to talk about your prayer life, please ask.