# Luke 11.1-13

27th July 2025

## Teach us to pray

**INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME**The other evening I tuned into a fascinating programme about Shakespeare. It was one of those docu-dramas they do so well these days. I wished they’d been around in my schooldays, perhaps my grades would have been higher!

Well, in the programme the beloved Dame Judy Dench, so obviously an actor formed in the Shakespearean tradition said *I’d have loved to have met him,* before sighing, looking straight into camera with a smile and then saying, *oh, how I wished I’d met him!.*I wonder what she would have asked him? And perhaps if we could meet face to face with Jesus, what might we want to ask him? I guess one of our questions or requests might have been similar to the one asked in Luke 11.1 – a passage we’ll hear read in just a minute: *Lord, teach us to pray.*

When I served as a trustee with the Retreat Association people came to its national Conference from all Christian traditions and none. And that meant there was never just one understanding or practice of prayer during the time we were together. Each day began with four or five communion services dotted around the conference site; all led in a different tradition using different prayers. Baptists encountered the rites of Eastern Orthodox, and I couldn’t help but smile observing that some giving a Methodist Communion Service a go for the very first time, just kept on pinging back to their own tradition in various points in the service, automatically genuflecting or crossing themselves. It was all fine because these conferences were so liberating in that they displayed a hundred and one different ways to pray without those attending being told that someone else’s tradition was in any way wrong or inferior to their own.

This morning we’ll look at Luke’s version of what we call *The Lord’s Prayer.* And we’ll do so seeking to note broad principles from it rather than hone it down to just a set of prescribed words.

John Hapgood, a former Archbishop of York, wrote of a rather lovely moment from his childhood. In his later years he rediscovered a letter written by him in his boyish hand – one that had obviously been kept by his parents and then passed back to him. In the letter he asks God if he would like to come and stay at their house saying *I think you’d like it.* What struck him was the address he’d put on the envelope: *Our Father, who art in heaven.*I wonder if it would ever have got there? Perhaps that’s a question we ask about our prayers too. So, let’s think about that together in a sermon this morning reflecting on the prayer that Jesus taught us.

 **THE SERMON**

*Gracious God, may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning. So, touch, we pray our minds and hearts with
 your grace and truth. Through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*
When taking a service at either of the two care homes we regularly visit from AFC I’m always struck by the enthusiasm with which the residents join in with the Lord’s Prayer. It’s said with such conviction and becomes something of a heartwarming moment. These words go deep. Probably learnt in childhood and now, all these years later, still giving comfort, hope and peace.

The Lord’s Prayer is one of the most famous and widely said prayers in the world. It’s also one of the most flexible, lifted from scripture, tweaked here and there and then inserted into a Sunday liturgy or daily office, or maybe a prayer that teaches us how to pray, one that becomes a pattern prayer showing us its multifaceted nature.

In our Lord’s day it was common for a Rabbi to give a short prayer to his students. It was a gift they no doubt both treasured and used. And maybe that’s what’s happening here; Jesus the teacher offers his disciples a pattern prayer. An answer, if you like, to that request: *Lord teach us to pray.*

I’m always struck by just how important prayer is in all the world’s religions. We human beings seem to have an urge to pray. Whether that’s flying a prayer flag in the Himalayas, singing a prayer song at Taizé or simply taking a moment at home to purposefully and prayerfully remember before God people we love.

Ghandi said his idea of prayer was so important to him every day that he described it as the key of the morning and the bolt of the evening. In other words, he wanted a spirit of prayer to be present alongside him during his every waking moment.

Jesus’ prayer gives us an understanding of God in its opening as we pray: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*To call God *father* wasn’t common in his day. It would be more usual to address God as Lord. Yet *father* becomes a term of choice for Jesus, just as he often spoke of God as *king.*

Both titles are today somewhat contentious because of the baggage that comes with cruel kings and unloving fathers. So, in a sense, if we chose to use them, (and we do have choices when it comes to addressing God) we have to do so subverting their negative meaning and purposefully embracing the idea of God as a loving father or a just and benevolent king.

So, in the Lord’s Prayer, from the first moment, there are two understandings of God that we are invited to hold in creative tension . We approach God in this corporate prayer as *Our Father;* a term of intimacy and gentleness – sounding like an invitation to be comfortable in the presence of a God of love and welcome. And yet the very next line *hallowed be thy name* calls us to honour God with our worship and respect.

It's rather like in Lewis’ *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe,* when the children are beginning to take Aslan (who represents God in the story) a little too for granted and have to be reminded that *he’s not a tame lion.*The Lord’s Prayer begins with an invitation that blends childlike intimacy with respectful worship.

It then moves on offering an understanding of life: *Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,* alongside that most basic of existential requests of *give us this day our daily bread.*Once again Jesus is subversively contrasting the often times cruel empire in which this prayer would be said with the peaceable kingdom of God for which it longs. Whenever we pray The Lord’s Prayer we are challenged with the ideas of justice that are central to the Gospel’s understanding of God’s peaceable kingdom in which the last becomes first and the margins of society are valued. And nothing grounds faith more than the phrase that God’s kingdom will come *on earth as it is in heaven.* And nothingunites the spiritual and material more, and makes us realise that faith is about the whole person, body, mind and spirit, than the prayerful request for God to *give us this day our daily bread.*

Bishop Spong used to say that when we pray *Thy Kingdom come* it’s a call to *: live fully, love wastefully and become all that we are capable of being.*Now this truncated version of the prayer in Luke, it’s a little longer in Matthew, ends with the request that God might keep us safe and out of temptation. However, it also adds a welcome dose of realism praying that if and when we fail and fall may we both know forgiveness and offer it willingly to others.

A prayer that ends with an understanding of relationships, so whenever we pray it, daily or weekly, we are placing forgiveness, grace, mercy and new beginnings at the centre of the way we seek to live here at church, back at home or out in society.

The Lord’s Prayer is a wise one, for deep within it is an understanding of God, life and relationships.

And then Luke does an interesting thing by inserting a rather grumpy story to teach us an important lesson about prayer.

There’s something wonderful about the way Jesus teaches theology, especially by using these stories. So, whilst there’s been a plethora of books written about how to pray, and countless conferences on why to do it, Jesus offers up a story; because that’s his way. He seemed to know how to catch our attention and so he becomes a brilliant communicator using everyday experiences and weaving into them a spiritual lesson. Perhaps it was his way of saying anyone can do theology – just look at life – and learn theology, lessons about God, from the way a shepherd cares for its flock or the way a loving parent welcomes back a wayward child.

Well, in today’s story he imagines a custom of hospitality being taken to its absolute limit. For, although it was common in the ancient middle eastern world for there to be an open door and table for neighbours, friends and passers-by. No one expected a caller in the middle of the night, yet this man kept on knocking at the door so long that the grumpy householder eventually opens up and gives him what he needs.

And Jesus concludes that if the rattled owner of the house could be that generous, albeit grudgingly, how much more, says verse 13: *will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.*

From quite a negative story Jesus plucks a positive truth urging his hearers to keep on praying, in his words to *ask, seek and knock,* because the door will be opened. It’s the Present Imperative Prayer principle, a call to keep on praying.

I suspect that our prayers change with the passing of the years, even if the words don’t maybe our expectations do. So, a child’s prayer for God to *bless mummy and daddy,* develops into a more complicated request when that child become a parent and asks God to help their own children navigate life. And then, as our years progress perhaps our prayers become even more nuanced still, often with the knowledge that often we are called to answer our own intercessions by the way we live.

But one understandable temptation which we probable all face is to give up praying altogether. To give up because we fear our prayers aren’t being answered or the situation never seems to get resolved; for there have surely been too many Gazas, Ukraines, Kosovos and Syrias.

Our Lord’s grumpy parable on prayer this morning speaks directly to that temptation: Never stop asking, seeking or knocking. Oh, that doesn’t stop us asking the question of what prayer is, or trying out new ways to pray, or settling upon a different understanding of prayer. But the important thing is not to give up seeking to pray. That is what Jesus says; don’t give up on prayer – and, when all’s said and done, it might be the best of reasons as to why he gave us the Lord’s Prayer in the first place.

Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. Keep trusting and hoping. In short - keep praying!

We must close. And here’s another story with which to do that.

The daughter of Karl Marx once confessed to a friend that although she had never been brought up with even the slightest trace of any religion at home, the other day she said, *I came across a beautiful little prayer which I very much wish could be true.* And slowly the daughter of Karl Marx began repeating in German, ‘*Vater unser im Himmel, geheiligt werde dein Name:* *Our Father, who art in heaven…’*

May God bless both your prayers and mine. And may we, with faith and hope in our hearts, never stop saying them. Amen
 *Ian Green Amersham 26th July 2025*