

Our Father - Participating in Jesus' Relationship with the Father

Series: Prayer

Date: 12 April 2026, 1st Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's

Texts: Psalm 63, Galatians 3.26-4.7, John 17.20-26

Christian spirituality

Some time ago I was talking to a friend who is into Buddhism and Eastern Spirituality. He's had little to do with church and Christianity. He asked me, "What spiritual practices do you do as a Christian?" It's a very different approach to finding what Christianity is about in contrast to asking questions like does God exist. There are 3 basic Christian practices or elements to Christian spirituality: Prayer, Reading the Bible, and going to church. Over the next 7 weeks we're going to look at Prayer in what I hope is a really practical way. Prayer is something we all can do, from the very young, to the very old, whatever our abilities or circumstances. It's our greatest privilege and the most powerful thing we can do, because in prayer we come before the throne of the infinitely powerful God who made all things. It's one of the easiest and the hardest things in life. At our vision and planning day last year Parish Council decided that this was to be our goal for 2026, to grow in prayer. All our Bible study groups will be doing studies on prayer, and will be places where we get to put into practice what we've been learning. My hope and prayer is that these sermons help us understand more about prayer, tackle obstacles that keep us from praying and move us to pray, so we actually grow in prayer.

What is prayer? Prayer is a universal part of human experience. It's a natural human impulse in response to wonder and fear, and our desire to reach for something beyond ourselves. Prayer is found in all cultures in all religions, in all places throughout history. Through the series we will see how Christian prayer is different from other faiths, but for the moment let me start by saying that prayer is responding to God. God has made us for relationship with him. He has created us to know him and to love him. The life blood of all relationships is communication. Without communication they grow cold. So when it comes to a relationship with God, he speaks to us primarily through his Word the Bible. And we respond to God through prayer.

If that's all prayer is, why do we find prayer so hard? Why don't we pray?

There's all sorts of reasons, but I think there are 2 big ones that are the biggest roadblocks to us praying.

1. We don't really understand who it is we're praying to and
2. We don't think we're worthy to talk to God.

So today we're going to answer those 2 roadblocks and look at Who God is and Who We Are. We'll do that by unpacking the first line of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples when they asked him "how should we pray?" *Our Father in heaven*.

Who God is: *Our Father in heaven*

There are 2 main ways in which we don't understand who it is who we're praying to.

First is that we only have a vague idea of who God is. We might think of him as some sort of cosmic spiritual force, or something that unites and pervades all things, or an ocean of being, or whatever. The point is it's a pretty *impersonal* picture of God.

Second, we might have a picture of God as a person, but he's just a bigger version, an infinitely bigger version, of the bad authority figures we've experienced in our lives. The language of Father itself may be unhelpful because of the failures of our own fathers. This is a picture of God as a cosmic tyrant and bully. He's certainly powerful, but is he good?

Jesus says when we pray we are to begin with the words, "*our Father in heaven*".

Jesus tells us that we are not praying to an impersonal force, but a person, to *our Father in heaven*. This is one of the major differences between Christian prayer and forms of prayer in Eastern spiritualities like Hinduism or Buddhism. There the goal of prayer is the dissolving of the boundary between the self and God because ultimately you are part of God. Prayer is mainly meditation and a turning inward to find God through an emptying of the self. Now meditation is one form of prayer Christians have used through the centuries, and there certainly is space for losing yourself in prayer, *but* this is always in response to God. It is in the sense of the words of the hymn, "Love Divine": *lost in wonder, love and praise*. We'll hear more about that next week.

Prayer is our response to the God who has made himself known. In John's Gospel we read: *No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*¹ This is why Jesus came: to make the Father known. He reveals the Father so that we might know him as *our Father*. This is in fact what Jesus prays for us, as we heard in our Gospel reading:

24 'Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

25 'Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. **26** I have made your name known to them, and will

¹ John 1.18

continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.’

In the great commission Jesus commands his followers to *go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*² Notice Jesus only says *in the name of* once. In the ancient world a person’s name was a key to who they were. So here Jesus shows us that God in himself is one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When we pray, all 3 persons of the Godhead are at work.

The New Testament tells us what God’s character is like as Father. He loves us and he sent his Son to die for our sins so that we can be adopted as his children. It’s a task the Son willingly takes on because of his love for the Father and for us. John says that when we believe in Christ we receive the right to become children of God.³ The apostle Paul says the same thing in our reading from Galatians. Did you see it there in 3.26: *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.* And he goes on in 4.6

God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, 5 to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. 6 Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”

This is the incredible news at the heart of Christianity - that not only did Jesus die for our sins, but that as we trust in him we are adopted as God’s children.

Now some people might object to this and say, “Aren’t we all God’s children?” In a general sense that is right because God made us. In Acts 17 Paul quotes the Greek poet Aratus who says, “we are all God’s offspring”. But becoming God’s children by adoption is of an entirely different order. It means we enter into a *personal* relationship with God. And the key is that Paul says we are all *sons of God* through faith in Christ. This is not Paul using the sexist language of a patriarchal culture. No, it’s much more profound than that. What Paul is saying is that as we trust in Christ, *we share in his very relationship with the Father as the divine Son.* And so God sends the Spirit of his Son, Christ’s very presence, into us so that with Jesus we can call out *Abba, Father.* That Aramaic term of affection by which Jesus’ himself addresses his Father - *Daddy.*

² Matthew 28.18

³ John 1.12-13

Paul is simply restating what Jesus himself had prayed to the Father: “I will continue to make you known to them that the love you have for me may be in them, and that I myself may be in them.” Can you imagine that? The infinite love that the eternal Father has for his beloved Son from all eternity, Jesus wants you to know that, to share in it, to experience it, to be caught up in it. And this is what Jesus prays for *you*.

And did you notice that not only is it through Christ that we come to the Father. It is also in the Holy Spirit. In Romans we read, “the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘*Abba, Father.*’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”⁴ It is by the power of the Spirit that we experience being a child of God. He makes sharing in Jesus’ relationship with the Father real in our lives. So in Ephesians Paul prays for us:

17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. **18** I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, **19** and his incomparably great power for us who believe.⁵

Claire and I really enjoyed the Netflix series *The Crown*, especially the seasons about the early life of queen Elizabeth II. Some of the most moving scenes are where the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret as young girls simply enjoy time with their father, King George VI. There’s a whole lot of protocol and formality and distance that everyone has to go through to get an audience with the king. But they can just go straight through all of that into his arms - because they are his children. That’s what being children of the king gets you - free access into his presence. And that’s what we get in prayer. Free access to God’s own throne room as his children. The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians, *through [Jesus] we ... have access to the Father by one Spirit.*⁶

Who we are: children by grace.

Do you remember our second problem when it comes to prayer? We often think we can’t come before God because we’re not worthy. Our problems aren’t big enough for him to be interested and we’re much too small or too dirty for him to bother listening to us. Well, there’s some truth in that. By nature we are unworthy to come before God. And yet do you remember Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector? The Pharisee stood confidently before God and paraded how he was better than others - just look at my CV. But

⁴ Romans 8.15-16

⁵ Ephesians 1.17-19

⁶ Ephesians 2.18

the Tax Collector would not even look up to heaven but beat his breast and said, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” And Jesus says it was the Tax Collector who went home in the right before God and that’s because it’s only by his grace, his undeserved, unmerited, unwarranted favour, that we stand. Of ourselves, yes, we’re not worthy. But by his gracious free gift we are adopted as his children.

And what is more, both the Son and the Spirit intercede for us. So we read in Romans 8,

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

We might not know what to pray. We might not feel worthy. We might be at our wits end. But the Spirit intercedes for us. Later in the chapter Paul writes that Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us.⁷ It’s why we pray as Christians, in Jesus’ name.⁸

The book of Hebrews is acutely aware of our own sense of unworthiness and failure and how this can mean we can run from God instead of coming to him. It draws on the symbolism of the curtain in the temple, torn in two from top to bottom when Jesus died and shows how Jesus is both the complete and final sacrifice for our sin, and also our high priest who speaks to God on our behalf. And so we read,

14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, [f] Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. **15** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. **16** Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.⁹

Do you see both God’s majesty and his mercy there? We approach the *throne*. It’s Almighty God who we talk to in prayer. The one who made and sustains all things. The King of kings. The Lord of lords. The Judge of all men. And yet it is the throne *of grace!* Because of the blood of his Son poured out for us we’re brought into his presence. He knows our

⁷ Romans 8.34

⁸ Cf. John 14.13-14, 15.16, 16.23-24

⁹ Hebrews 4.14-16

weaknesses. He has shared in them! And he lives to speak to the Father on our behalf. By the power of the Spirit, his gift to us, we're brought into his presence. And so as the Son to his Father so we can speak to our Father. And we can ask.

Some may still find the language of "father" difficult. Your own father may have wronged you. This need not be a barrier to prayer, because only in Christ will you get the love that you need to heal the wounds of your unhappy family history. All of our parents fail us, some spectacularly. None of them are what they should be. Psalm 27.10 says: *though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will bear me up*. The relationship that God offers us in Christ is what we need, be our family background good or bad. Because Jesus our brother was forsaken by his Father so that we could be accepted as children of God and call him our Father. So great is security of this relationship that Jesus brings that the apostle Paul can say *neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*¹⁰

I began by saying that prayer is our response to God. I want to finish by saying that such is the Father's love and grace towards us that he invites us by the power of the Holy Spirit to share in the very relationship his Son has enjoyed with his Father from all eternity, so that we know him as our Father and know his love for us as his children. The Son and the Spirit intercede for us with the Father. Our prayers then are simply participating in Jesus' own prayers. In prayer we are stepping into the communion of the Son with the Father by the Spirit, the life of the Holy Trinity. To pray is to breathe in the life of God. It is to live, by God's love and grace. So why not start today? Indeed, why not make this the centre of your life and all you do?

¹⁰ Romans 8.38-39