

As you know, I prepared last week's sermon but was not well enough to speak so hopefully Jon brought out what I felt was the key point about the Lord's prayer: it is a template for all our prayers and so with that in mind, today we start looking at each of the individual sections which make up the prayer. We hope this will provide a greater insight into not only how to pray, but also what we should be praying for and praying about.

The Lord's prayer is on page 31 in our order of service. The traditional version starts "Our Father who art in heaven" whilst the more contemporary version uses the words direct from our gospel reading: "Our Father in Heaven"; it is a matter of personal choice which you prefer.

As Maria would sing to the Von Trapp children in the Sound of Music "Let's start at the very beginning; it's a very good place to start" - and that means with the word 'Our'. 'Our' immediately speaks of a shared experience; it speaks of relationship.

Earlier this week we took out two your old granddaughter, Sophie to the recreation ground. It was quiet and there was only one other slightly younger toddler there who was very keen to play with Sophie's scooter. The little girl's attempts to get close to the scooter were rebuffed by Sophie with the words 'Mine' and 'No sharing' repeated over and over and after Grandma resolved that little issue it was left to Grandpa to adjudicate between 'my slide' and 'not your slide' when both wanted to go on it at the same time.

The words 'me' and 'my' or 'you and your' speak loudly of isolation and selfishness whereas the word 'our' immediately speaks of inclusiveness and relationship. To date, Sophie's life experience is self centred, just as it is for every two year old, but there will come a time when she learns that 'our' denotes an inclusive mentality and a commitment to engage with others.

And it is just the same with our prayers. Some of us lead a very social life, others prefer to be more private. Some are very happy to pray within a group, others prefer to pray alone; some silently others out loud.

There are no rights and wrongs here because we don't pray 'My Father' we pray 'Our Father' which immediately tells of a life shared with others; a life in which God works through us as individuals for the greater good of others.

And yet we live in a broken world where connection with each other is more often a disconnection – broken homes, failed marriages; the lonely widow or widower. Or when we choose to withdraw into ourselves to avoid the pain of being let down by someone.

Although I do not subscribe to any such website I am aware that social media has some very positive attributes, but I am also conscious of the danger that the intimacy of a relationship can be replaced by the anonymity of supposed relationship.

Intimacy and anonymity are mutually exclusive terms. Authentic relationship can not be formed in a virtual environment and immediately we say the word 'our' at the start of our prayer we overcome the danger of anonymity and isolation.

Because 'our' is the language of inclusion. 'Our Father' becomes the common glue which binds all believers together; we do not stand alone before God in prayer, we stand side by side with all other believers – without favoritism or exception.

The Apostle Paul was quite explicit on this point in Galatians 3:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ.

Being united as one in Christ through the Holy Spirit also means that when we come to Our Father we do so as loved member of his family, not as a servant.

As Paul wrote in Romans 8 *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family – calling him 'Father, dear father'.*

We are children of God We have the privilege to personalize our relationship with God, by calling him the same name as Jesus did – Father.

When we say *Our Father* we affirm something very special, very foundational about our relationship with him. Which is why I love Jesus' parable of the prodigal son so much.

When the wayward son returns and even before he gets the chance to offer an explanation and apology the father wants nothing more than to lavish his love on the son because his love is unconditional. Jesus' use of the father figure in this story is not to highlight power or authority, but the love of his father.

And when it comes to praying, prayer is not so much language about God as it is speaking to God. But at the same time we recognize that God is different from us. God is “in heaven” above, whereas we are on earth below.

We have already said that the Lord's prayer is a template for all times and seasons, for all situations, and for all people. Above all, it draws us into the prayer of Christ himself, because we address (as he did) our prayers to our loving Father in heaven.

But alongside this template of the Lord's prayer I also want to highlight another template which is suggested in Pete Greig's book *How to pray*, - the clue is in the title – and Pete offers an easy four step method of how to pray. Using the acronym P.R.A.Y.

Pause, rejoice, ask, yield.

Before we start to pray, first we must pause – to collect ourselves, to sit quietly, be still. If you haven't already done so, take note of how Jane pauses before starting to say each of the prayers in our liturgy. The stillness and silence are there to help calm our mind and heart to be able to pray from a greater place of peace. Of course, for some people, stillness and silence does not bring about this state of calm but find strenuous exercise much more effective.

However you come to that place of calm, you will have prepared yourself; you will be paused and ready to pray. In future weeks we will look at rejoice, ask and yield. But for the moment let me show you just one simple way of pausing before prayer that works for me.

First, I will have found a place to relax and simply sit doing nothing for a few minutes. This is my equivalent of when Jesus tells his disciples to go into a room and shut the door. As I'm relaxing I take deep, slow breaths. And as I'm sitting quietly and breathing slowly I mentally say *Our Father* as I breathe in and *in heaven* as I breathe out. *Our Father....in heaven...Our father...in heaven.*

When I feel ready I start to pray out loud. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.....and of course, hallowed be your name is the starting point for Jane, next week.

Let us pray.

