

HOW TO PRAY

Sermon for Pentecost 10C (Proper 12) – Lk 11:1-13

LPC, 7/24/16

(Read by Lay Reader)

So, you want to know how to say or write a perfect prayer. Perhaps all of you here are known to be church people in your circle of friends or associates. So when an occasion arises, like some sort of official meeting, or perhaps when you are gathered in the hospital room of a mutual friend, when a corporate prayer seems called for, and people look to you. You are about to hear how to deal with this situation, to the admiration of all.

Take heart, because as Anglicans we have a leg up in this department. We have the Prayer Book. And even if you don't have your Prayer Book with you when you are called upon to pray in public, you can always use the Prayer Book model of prayer, which is both simple and sure to impress. Follow the Prayer Book pattern and you will quickly gain a reputation as someone with the right words to say.

To get started, look at today's Collect in your bulletin. In fact, look at just about any Collect in the Prayer Book. They are concentrated in pages 159-261 and 814-835. You will notice that most Collects have three parts: an address, a petition, and a closing.

The address in turn usually has two parts: the first is your name for God, and the second is some attribute of God's. The name you use for God can be "O heavenly Father," or "Lord Jesus Christ," or "Blessed Trinity." In Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, which we hear today, Jesus uses simply the name, "Father."

The attribute in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is, "hallowed be your name." In other words, the person to whom this prayer is directed is the one whose very name is holy and worshipped. That is the attribute of God's that Jesus wants to emphasize in this prayer.

The attribute in your prayer can have something to do with what is being prayed for. Look at today's Collect. This is a prayer that we may maintain our heavenly citizenship as we pass through our earthly life. So the attribute we include in our address to God is protection. God is the one who will protect us as we pass through this life, with strength and holiness.

Next comes the petition. The petition is what you're praying for. This can be as simple or as elaborate as you like. In today's Collect the petition is "Increase and multiply upon us your mercy: that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal." That's pretty fancy language. The words that come to you may be more like, "Rule us and guide us. Keep us true to you in all things." The important thing is to be honest and ask for what you really want from God.

In Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer the petition has four parts:

- that God consummate God's will for creation by bringing about the kingdom
- that God provide for us daily
- that God forgive us and help us to forgive others
- that God protect us from the things that deeply challenge us.

Finally, a good three-part collect concludes with a doxology: a closing word or phrase, or the name of the Lord who gives us authority to pray so boldly to the almighty God. In today's Collect, the closing is, "through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen." That's common phraseology for a Collect, and it will surely impress the people you're with if you can remember it all. But all that is necessary is to say, "Through Jesus Christ our Lord." This has the virtue of letting people know you are done praying and they can say, "Amen."

Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer does not include this kind of closing. Why not? Probably because it would be odd for Jesus to say, "through me," wouldn't it? We add a doxology to our prayers because we do pray through Jesus, as Jesus himself taught us, but it was unnecessary for Jesus himself to do so, because he was already obviously praying through himself.

Put this all together and what have you? That of course depends on the situation. Say you are asked to give an invocation at your school reunion. Because this type of occasion has to do with the passage of time, you might say in your address, "O God of all our years..." or "O eternal creator, to whom the passage of time is but a breath..." Then would come the petition, which might go something like, "Be with us all, the alumni of Everyman High School class of 1816, as we draw together to renew friendships and celebrate our memories. May we recall with gratitude the rewards and challenges of those past years, and honor the memories of those who shared our youthful experiences but are no longer with us." Then comes the closing, which, if you are among fellow Christians, can just be "Through Jesus Christ our Lord," or, for a more ecumenical group, "through God the source of all our strength," or "In your strong name we pray."

To use the example of praying by a sickbed, your address might be, "O God, whose Son went about restoring health to the suffering..." Your petition might be, "we call upon your healing Spirit to comfort and restore our friend..." You might add prayer for the person to have patience and forbearance, or for the skill of care providers, or for the sustenance of the family through their ordeal, and then close with your doxology.

Follow these simple guidelines and everybody will think you are an expert at prayer. But don't let it go to your head. We are all amateurs at prayer, needing continually to come before Jesus as the disciples did, saying, "Lord, teach us to pray." Because it is not just the words we are looking for, is it? It is the closeness, the attentiveness, the providence, the love of God. And these things are what the evangelist Luke emphasizes that we have in abundance, through Jesus Christ our Lord.