



## REFLECTION 2 : THREE PROBLEMS WITH PRAYING

Do you have a problem with prayer? I think if we are honest we may have three problems with it! We may have a “*who*” problem, a “*where*” problem, and a “*what*” problem. Allow me to explain.

#PLEDGE2PRAY

Often our prayers demonstrate that we do not really know *who* we are praying to. We have a *where* problem because it sometimes feels like God is so far off from us that God cannot possibly hear our prayers so they just drift out into the atmosphere somewhere. And we have a *what* problem because we simply do not know where to start. We think some things are too trivial for God to care about and others are so big that God could not possibly do anything about them.

Do you recognise something of yourself in these problems? I know I do.

So who should our prayer be addressed to? Jesus says it is to our Father in heaven. And this is important because knowing who it is that we are praying to should help us with a problem that plagues many people when they come to pray and that is the problem of wandering thoughts or mindlessness.

Now, for some folk mindlessness is a problem that affects them sometimes, for others it is more of a way of life and it's a big problem when it comes to prayer. Jesus counsels us not to babble like the pagans nor to engage in mindless repetition. Too often our prayers become silent monologues that just wander wherever they please. We need to stop and recognise that we really are speaking to someone and that someone is described by Jesus as “*our Father.*”

Now when in conversation we find ourselves using a name of some sort, it often has the effect of expressing the nature of a relationship. So, for example, if it is a formal relationship we usually say Mr or Mrs so-and-so. If it is an acquaintance we might use their first name. If it is a friend we may have a nickname for them, if it is a partner we might have a pet name. When I used to pick up the phone and ring my father and say those first words, “*Hello Dad,*” they provided the context in which the conversation that followed took place.

And so it is when we address God. Using the phrase “*Our Father*” establishes the context for the prayers that follow. And the Aramaic word is “*Abba*”. It's nothing to do with the seventies pop group! It's a name of great tenderness and as such it is not one to which we can easily associate our own human understandings and experiences of fatherhood because they are all, to a greater or lesser degree, broken and fractured images of true Fatherhood as seen in God. The Fatherhood of God is seen in the delight God takes in every single aspect of the children he has given birth to and whose intentions towards us are always for our good. So Jesus invites us to use this word “*Abba*” when we pray to help us recognise that we are praying to a loving, caring and gracious God.

But I wonder, what are the first thoughts that come into your head when you start to pray? If they are, “*I'm not very good at this,*” or “*I'm not sure if he'll hear me,*” or “*I feel so guilty because I have not prayed for so long,*” then consciously set those thoughts aside. Start with “*Abba, Father*” because it defines the relationship you have with God and there is no limit to the goodness of God's intentions towards you or to God's power to carry them out.

So that's the “*who*” of prayer but what about the “*where*”? What do I mean by that? Well, Jesus tells us to pray “*Our Father in heaven...*” but have you ever wondered how far away heaven is? Sounds like a silly question doesn't it? “*How far away is heaven?*” But my guess is that more often than not when we don't consciously think about it, we subconsciously think that heaven is way out there in outer-space somewhere and that makes it sometimes seem like God is very distant and remote. It's easy for us to feel alone. But Jesus' promise to us is this: “*Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age!*”

Now I want to just spend a moment dealing with the grammar of this part of the Lord's Prayer because it makes a real difference to our understanding here. The Greek word used for “*heaven*” is “*uranos*”, where we get the name of the planet “*Uranus*” from. But the form of the word that is used is not the singular; it is the plural. So we are not praying to “*our Father in heaven.*” We are actually praying to “*Our Father, the one in the heavens.*” But when it is used in the New Testament it is used to give the sense of ‘*atmosphere*’ or ‘*sky*’ or ‘*the air around us.*’ So the meaning that is implied is not that we are praying to someone who lived a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away but to “*our Father, who is in the heavens, the air all around us, who is closer than the very air we breath.*”

And once we come to recognise that we are praying to someone who is actually right here, right now, it pretty quickly concentrates the mind and reminds us that we are never alone. God is not so distant that our prayer cannot be heard.

So that's the ‘*who*’ problem and the ‘*where*’ problem. Finally, there's the ‘*what*’ problem. What should we pray for? There is nothing too small or too big to pray about. God is concerned with all our concerns. But we should note that the very first request or petition that Jesus encourages us to make is this: “*hallowed be your name!*”

Now, a name in the Bible is never just a label it is a reflection of a person's character and to hallow means to attach appropriate value to something or to give it its due worth.

A man went into an antique shop to try and pick up a bargain and as he was looking round he spotted a cat drinking some milk out of a pretty little dish. And as he looked closer he became convinced that the dish was in fact a vase from the Chinese Ming dynasty. He was astonished to find something so rare being used for such a purpose so he came up with a cunning plan. He said to the shop owner, *"That is a remarkable cat you've got there, I'll give you £100 for it."* *"Oh, I'm not sure about that,"* replied the shop owner. *"£100 pounds is a good price,"* the man said, *"but I'll throw in a tenner for the dish as well."* *"I couldn't possibly do that,"* said the shop owner, *"the dish is actually a rare vase from the Chinese Ming dynasty but since I've been putting milk in it I've sold 18 cats!"*

We are all used to attaching value to things but sometimes we don't recognise their appropriate worth. And it is the same in the world's relationship with God. Jesus tells us to make our first request, *"hallowed be your name."* In other words we need to recognise the appropriate worth of God and respond accordingly. It is a way of saying that we long for the indescribable goodness of God to become so clear that God is regarded with unstinting affection and boundless love. It is a way of saying that we want the whole world to recognise God's worth and we want it to begin in our lives.

For some reason that is completely beyond my understanding God has allowed the honour and holiness of his name to be bound up on earth with the character and conduct of God's people – you and me. We are a reflection of God's nature to the watching world. To pray these words and to mean them is to say *"I will live each moment of each day in such a way that God can put his signature on it."* And the truth is that when we come to realise that we are then led into a time of confession, forgiveness and renewing and we are filled with the desire for God's name to be hallowed by everyone. Can you imagine what kind of a world this would be if that were the case? That is what this, the greatest prayer in the world, is all about.

Perhaps you might spend some time now reflecting on your own experience of the "who, where and what" of prayer. Who is God to you? How do you experience God's presence with you on a daily basis? What does your life reveal about the character of God? Then pray again the words of Jesus:

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."*