

Praying for ourselves

We often think hard about how to pray for other people – the sick, the bereaved, or people who are in some other sort of need – and we pray for them in our intercessions either by name or silently in our hearts week by week. But what about ourselves? When we pray for those few moments in silence in our service, or in our prayers during the week at home, on the train, in the office, or wherever we may find ourselves, what do we ask for? What words do we use? Should we do something special?

Well, in this, just like in every aspect of our prayers, I think it's important to remember some very good advice I was once given: "Pray as you can, not as you can't". This is a very wise summary of the whole business of prayer, because the more we try to take on methods and language we feel we "ought" to use, the more difficulty we can encounter.

The essence of prayer is establishing a relationship with God, and then speaking to God in our own way and allowing God to speak to us. So this involves at least as much listening as it does talking, but when we do talk, it's very important simply to be ourselves. So we will naturally want to ask God for help when we're afraid, or tired, or overwhelmed with the problems of daily life. And sometimes we will just want to ask God for a bit of guidance, or to lay a particular part of our lives before God for God's blessing and care. At other times we may feel angry or frustrated with God, and it's important to acknowledge that in our prayers as well – if our relationship with God is going to be genuine, then God needs to know how we really feel.

This sort of prayer is perhaps best summed up by a beautiful description in Michael Ramsey's book "Be Still and Know", in which he describes prayer as like spending time in the company of a friend:

"When you have a great friend you may plan to spend a time with [them] and may be careful not to miss it. The use of the time is unlikely to be planned, but within the time news may be shared, requests may be made, regrets or gratitude may be spoken, and minds may be exchanged sometimes by talking and listening and sometimes with little word or gesture... Might not our prayer be rather like that?"

That sort of relationship works best when we have the courage simply to say what's on our mind and then give our friend – and therefore God – time in which to answer. And as we wait, so we allow our own thoughts to settle in the silence, and listen out for the voice that will speak to us in ways that we may, or may not, be expecting...

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