
Let's bow our heads for a few moments

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 22 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Everybody does it. And everybody wishes they were better at it. I could be talking about a lot of things, but in fact I'm referring to prayer. 15 years in ministry have taught me that everybody does it, although many, perhaps most people think they do it so poorly or their experience is so mundane that it doesn't count. And everybody wishes they were better at it. I want to address three questions about prayer this morning. What is it? How can I become a person who can do it? And how can we become a community that can do it?

So, what is prayer? Prayer is when we self-consciously turn and listen to God, seek his mercy, call upon and open our hearts to him, celebrate and meditate on his wonders and place ourselves in the company of his creatures and servants. Prayer is when we stop closing our ears and eyes, and let ourselves become part of the conversation the members of the Trinity are having with one another. The life of the Christian disciple is unrecognizable without the moments or pattern, the resort or habit, of personal prayer. Why unrecognizable? Because God gives his people so many gifts this way that if you do not open yourself to receive them you will be deeply impoverished.

Many of us were taught the mnemonic ACTS – adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. As a checklist it's pretty good. Let's look at each one for a moment.

Prayer certainly, perhaps centrally, means number (1) adoration, or wonder. It means being taken out of the mundane and routine and being astonished and dazzled by the breadth and detail of creation and the depth and passion of redemption. This often doesn't need any words.

Prayer means number (2) confession, or recognition of our error. It means painful admission of purposeful sin and participation in widespread evil, and resolve to be done with such ways of thinking and saying and doing and begin again the new life made possible in Christ. This really only needs one word: sorry.

Prayer means number (3) thanksgiving: it means receiving all the contours of life as the gifts of a gracious God, it means renarrating the events of each day as a letter of love from God to oneself, it means expressing love and joyful thanks in return. This only needs two words, carefully spoken: thank you.

And prayer means number (4) petition: it means explicitly looking to God to transform all in life that does not reflect his glory and specifically requesting him to meet needs, heal bodies and change hearts. Unlike the other kinds of prayer, this often involves a lot of words.

There's just a couple of alterations I'd make to this checklist. The first is, I'd strongly encourage you to put supplication first. And while you're about it, you might want to change the word supplication to petition, because PACT sounds a little better for your career than SACT. Good manners always says put your own needs last. But prayer isn't really about good manners. I say put your own needs in God's hands straightaway, and then your heart is ready to be filled with the needs of others. I was very encouraged to discover from a friend who became a monk that at dinnertime the monks who were serving the food had a light meal before they served everyone else. So when the dinner came round their mind was fully on the job of attending to the needs of others and their tongues weren't hanging out. I think petition works the same way.

The other alteration to the ACTS checklist is that it leaves a couple of things out. Prayer also means silence: it means humble meditation, the simple offering of time, the stillness that attests to the fundamental priority of God's activity, the simple opening of the ears of the heart. And prayer also means reading the Bible. You look to Scripture to enrich and inform these various modes of prayer. Scripture shapes your understanding of the awesome goodness and grace of God and the mysteriously yet invariably inhibited character of human response. Scripture places your act of prayer within a great sequence of divine-human conversations. Don't be surprised if God answers back.

So that's what prayer is. And so to my second question. How do you do it? How do you become the kind of person that can pray?

Let's look at those 4 main aspects of prayer again, this time starting with

(1) Petition.

- Petition teaches you the meaning of solidarity. If you're going to pray for a person or a people regularly, it's going to push you to discover more about them. Quite possibly you're going to get to know them or their circumstances personally, to visit their country or learn about their condition, to walk a mile in their shoes and thus to pray with and alongside them rather than from a safe distance.
- Petition also teaches you how to watch television news. When you watch a news story, you don't have to join the hasty scramble for blame and the thirst for clashing opinion and unyielding conviction. You can simply ask yourself, 'Who or what might I pray for in this story?' Thus the two-dimensional news 'story' becomes instead a multi-dimensional human drama, in which understanding and meaning is unlikely to emerge fully but need and longing and hope and desire are everywhere.
- And petition teaches you one other thing: to make a list. Petition means not just responding to the crisis, but methodically anticipating the rhythms of God and the world, of laying out lists of colleagues, old friends, family members, godchildren, congregational members, neighborhood residents, missionary partners, and other congregations so that all are not a teeming mass of responsibility and earnest memory but become a careful web of systematic offering to God. The simplest way is to pray for godchildren on Mondays, neighbors on Tuesdays, colleagues on Wednesdays, and so on. That way when you come to December, your Christmas card list is not a rushed panic but a carefully memorized circle of grace.

(2) Moving to the second kind of prayer, wonder, you need and develop a different set of skills.

- You need to keep the company of those for whom exultation in the sheer joy of life is a simple habit. I'm thinking of a golden retriever who launches herself into a river in pursuit of a stick or a two-year-old child who gurgles with delight on learning to kick a ball – but you'll have your own sources of inspiration.
- You begin to find purpose in idleness and leisure. Every rain shower may be followed by the glory of a rainbow and every sunny day may conclude with a shimmering sunset. Every television program may show another intricate dimension of the created world of flora and fauna, and every journey to a new land disturbs the complacency of thinking things must always be done the familiar way.
- You discover a new reason for learning. Education is not primarily training in knowledge or skills or even wisdom – your first thought in beginning a new course of study or taking up a new book is to inform and amplify the wonder of your heart, to stretch your imagination with the glory of God and the diversity of his revelation..

(3) As to the third part of prayer, becoming the kind of person that can confess sin means keeping your imagination open to how a story can look from a perspective other than your own.

- That's a big reason why you may want to keep reading fiction, poetry and biography, because they train you to see the patterns of human self-deception reflected in your own life.
- It's also a big reason to keep up friendships with people very different from you – people who remind you that not everybody takes the things for granted that you do.

(4) Moving to thanksgiving,

- becoming the kind of person that can give thanks means, like intercession, spending time in the company of those less fortunate than yourself. And this is not for their benefit, but for yours. Because it's hard to value a gift – even to realize that something is a gift – unless you know what it

means not to have such a thing. And so works of charity, aside from any other benefits that might derive from them, are gifts to the Church in that they make disciples better able to make petition and give thanks.

- And the rhythm of thankfulness peaks appropriately at moments of sharing food: for what we call 'fast food' is but a commodity that seeks to concertina the elaborate process of planting, growing, harvesting, transporting, selling, transporting again, storing, preparing, eating, digesting, and clearing that constitutes a genuine process of being fed; and thankfulness, perhaps in the form of saying grace, is a reassertion of understanding of all the labor and relationships and the gift of life and growth involved in bring food to a table.

I could say something about becoming the kind of person who can be silent and who can read the Bible. But I want to finish with a few words in answer to my third question. How can we become the kind of community that can pray?

The answer to this last question has the same shape as the answer to the first two. It begins with petition, moves to wonder, then to confession, and ends with thanksgiving and silence. So

- (1) to start with petition. What is required is that we learn the habit of making petition to one another – of asking one another 'how can I help?' and of responding with honest acknowledgement of need when the question is addressed to us.
- (2) Moving to wonder, a community that can pray requires us to be prepared to share our joys, humble and great, and treasure and celebrate the joys of others. Birthdays are particularly important in communities because they mark the sheer gift of a created person, uncluttered by the clothing of achievement or complications of character.
- (3) Then as to confession, to be a community that can pray means that we must positively seek to discover the ways in which we have wronged one another, never being surprised that misunderstanding and hurt occur, but seeing each instance as a prelude to reconciliation, grace and deeper relationship. As with petition, if we seek to make confession together must explicitly ask 'have I wronged you in any way?' and expect the answer 'yes', and honestly respond when the question is addressed to *us*.
- (4) In regard to thanksgiving, to be a community that can pray means that we must carefully consider those things for which we want or need to thank one another and how best to express that thanks such that it genuinely lifts the hearer rather than simply discharges an urge or duty from our side. I have to say I find Americans in general much better at this than the English! I'm learning a lot about showing appreciation here. Thank you.
- (5) Finally prayer is about silence. Becoming a community that can pray means making spaces where we are silent and still together, where the corporate practice of the community affirms the priority of the action of God. Fundamentally prayer is something God does in us. Silence is a time when we all come together and share the intimacy and vulnerability of resting for both our urgent present as well as our eternal future in nothing other than the grace of God. There's one kind of person you can really talk to, but there's another kind of person you can really be silent with.

I'd like to finish by describing to you a retreat day for a congregation I was once a part of. We'd been through a traumatic year in which high hopes had been dashed, relationships of trust had been damaged, and a prominent marriage had ended in bewildered separation. We went away together, and with the help of careful facilitation spent the morning articulating need and regret. At one moment one member of the group was overwhelmed with the isolation of her bereavement. The facilitator asked the person sitting beside her to comfort her on behalf of everyone else, ensuring that the grief was kept within the body, not taken elsewhere. What the facilitator didn't know, but everyone else knew, was that the man called upon had been dealing with significant problems of mental health. The group was transfixed by the picture of a schizophrenic man tenderly comforting a bereaved woman. It was a moment of need, thanksgiving, and wonder.

There followed a cathartic period that acknowledged the darkness of the previous few months. But then members began to express a sense of thankfulness for one another's faithfulness and embodied hope. At the end

of the morning they began to talk of highpoints in the last year. One member referred to the annual Passover meal, traditionally held each year on the night before Good Friday. 'We really enjoy that night – having the Last Supper together', she said, in her strong regional accent. 'But I've begun to wonder recently, did *Jesus* enjoy the Last Supper? Did he enjoy it in the way we do?' An astonished silence fell upon the group. Her words turned petition and confession into wonder. She turned a period of grief into an encounter with the God of Jesus Christ. There is a word for what took place that morning. It was more than therapy. It was more even than corporate prayer. We call it, 'Church'.