

Why Pray?

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[0 : 00] When I was at university, and that's something that feels like an embarrassingly long time ago now, I used to meet quite regularly with our college chaplain, who was also a theology lecturer.

We would drink unbelievably strong coffee. He would smoke his pipe and we'd talk about faith.

There's one particular conversation that's always stuck in my memory.

I asked him, why do we pray? Now, that conversation was a long time ago now, and I don't recall exactly what was said.

But I think we probably got on to talking about what prayer actually means. And we established that a reasonable working definition is talking and listening to God.

It was at that point that the chaplain returned the question back to me in a way that was disarmingly simple. He said, so why do you talk and listen to anyone?

[1 : 09] Let's just unpack that a bit. Jesus was all about relationship. He didn't seem to have a lot of time for religion or ritual or rules, but his message was about relationship with God through and through.

Now, for relationship to happen, then talking and listening is, well, it's essential. So why do we pray? Well, we talk and we listen to God because Christian faith is all about relationship with God.

And like any relationship, it can only be a reality if there's communication going on. You know, I carried that understanding of prayer with me for most of my adult life.

And while I still think it's true, it's only been in more recent years that I've come to realise that, well, perhaps there's a bit more to it than that. And the reason why I think there's probably more to it than that is simply because, well, there's more to human relationships than simply talking and listening to each other.

Now, of course, communication is vital. But it's not enough to say that a relationship comprises only of communications plus nothing else.

[2 : 29] Well, not if that relationship really matters anyway. And think about it. Think about what it's like when you feel really genuinely connected with another person.

Where you sense that you both understand them and are understood by them. The talking and listening with that person feeds and nurtures that sense of connection.

Of course it does. But in it all, there's something far deeper going on whereby you just feel present with them independently of any words that are exchanged between you.

Or think about how you feel relaxed simply being with someone without the need to make conversation with them. That's what I'm trying to describe here.

And I think this might be the sort of thing that Jesus is getting at when he says that the father already knows what we need even before we ask him.

[3 : 37] And that therefore the actual words we use are not really such a big deal. To commune with the father means something deeper than an act of communication.

Rather, it's about God's presence. It's about seeking God's presence. Being open to God's presence. Connecting to God's presence.

Being in God's presence. Knowing God's presence. John Wesley described prayer as the breathing of the soul.

So why pray? Well, because we're spiritual beings. We're wired to relate to God. To pray is to breathe spiritually.

Now you might well be saying to yourself right now, well, that's all very well. But what about when I don't sense God's presence at all? Why pray when there's nothing apparent to me to suggest that God is in fact present?

[4 : 44] You know, that's a really good question. And it's a question that any person and every person who's honest with themselves asks at some point.

And I'm not going to try and suggest any pat or easy answers. But I wonder if it's perhaps when we're struggling to sense the presence of God, it's then that words in fact do become more important.

Not important for God, but important for us. Because words give us the means of expressing what we need to express. In my own experience, there have been plenty of times when I haven't felt particularly close to God.

But I've found it helpful just to talk and to blurt out to him everything that's going on in my head. For better or for worse.

And then in his own time and in his own mysterious way, he reminds me that he isn't actually quite as distant as my feelings had led me to think.

[5 : 55] So why pray? Why pray when we don't feel aware of God's presence? Or when we find it hard to understand or make sense of how God could be real?

Well, let me leave you with this thought. Recently, I heard on the radio a leading pharmacist talking about the intense research efforts that are currently being invested to accelerate the development of a vaccine for COVID-19.

Within the opening seconds of that interview, pharmaceutical terms were being used, which totally left me behind. The interviewer tried to put the brakes on the scientist and asked her to unpack the meaning of what she was trying to explain, but unsuccessfully.

Now, maybe it was just me, but I couldn't help thinking that I might not have been the only one, the only listener, who frankly didn't understand a word of what she was saying.

But, you know, then it occurred to me. Suppose someone came to you and offered you a vaccine or a cure for COVID-19 or indeed for any kind of medical condition for that matter.

[7 : 22] And suppose that they offered you alongside it an explanation that you didn't quite understand. Would the limits of your understanding prevent you from accepting what was being offered to you?

Now, faith in God is not about just mindlessly and thoughtlessly accepting anything we're told. But it is about being challenged to accept possibilities that we perhaps don't quite understand.

To pray is the most natural thing in the world. It's simply allowing your spirit to breathe as it was created to breathe.

If we're not careful, we can resist that instinct simply because we're so caught up with what we don't understand and our frustration that we don't understand.

And when we do that, we're in danger of denying ourselves that special relationship that God wants us to have with him.

[8 : 35] So then, why pray? Well, why not? Why not? Why not?