

Sunday 22nd June 2025 - Living Prayer: Praying Together

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Preacher: Helen Emery

[0 : 00] So I'm going to start by showing my age now and play you something and see if you remember this. And here is the host of Blockbusters, Bob Holmes.

Thank you very much. So yes, it is the TV game show Blockbusters.

You might remember it. Do you recognise those like hexagons with the letter on? Bob Holness, the presenter. Can I have a P please, Bob? He used to say that, didn't he? Yeah, I was obviously very, very young when this was on in the 80s.

So if you are much younger than me or you don't remember this at all, the difference with this game show was that they put two people against one person. So there's a team of two against one person on their own.

And I guess the idea behind that was that they would see if two brains were better than one. And there are some things in life, aren't there, where it's easier to do with someone else rather than doing it on your own.

[1 : 37] So I know for me, when it comes to physical exercise, for example, if I go for a walk, I probably go further when I'm with somebody else than if I went on my own, even when I get really tired.

I'll keep going. Or take Slimming World that meets here on a Monday. The people there find it easier to stick to healthy eating when they do it together with other people compared to if they're trying to do it on their own.

So I'm sure there's lots of things you can think of where you benefit from having other people around you for an activity rather than trying to do it on your own. So this morning, I thought we could unpack the idea of praying with each other as we continue the series that we've been looking at on living prayer.

I think we might be halfway there on this. I couldn't resist it. Sorry, I love Bon Jovi. So Matt opened the exploration of this topic a few weeks ago by saying how prayer can be as intimate and individual as our very breath, a highly personal process, which literally goes to our very hearts.

And I, for one, really resonated with that. So what does prayer look like then when we pray with other people, not on our own? I'm thinking here, not corporate or collective prayer altogether, but more in smaller groups of, say, two or three or four or five.

[3 : 14] So let's have a look at what the Bible says about praying with other people. There are plenty of examples in the Old Testament where people pray with and for each other. So you can see a few on the screen.

So two chronicles, the people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord. We see Ezra praying and weeping in chapter 10. A group of others then join with him to do that.

Job prays for his friends in chapter 42 and was very blessed as a result. And in Genesis 25, Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife.

So that's Old Testament. If we move to the New Testament examples, there are lots of instances where the early church gathered together to pray. So, for example, just after Jesus ascends to heaven in Acts 1, the apostles meet up in an upstairs room and all join together constantly in prayer.

In Acts 5, we hear how Peter and John are sent to Samaria. And when they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

[4 : 28] In Acts 12, Peter goes to the house of Mary, the mother of John, where many people had gathered and were praying. And then James suggests we confess sins to one another and pray for

one another in chapter 5.

We can then, of course, look to what Jesus himself says about praying together. Now, my first thought on this one was that reference in Matthew, where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.

But I did a little bit of research and the context of this has less to do with group prayer and more to do with church discipline.

And I'm not going to go there this morning. I found the more relevant advice from Jesus on prayer is what he says earlier in Matthew in chapter 6, where he suggests a way of praying in what we now know as the Lord's Prayer.

So let's just have a quick listen to that. This, then, is how you should pray. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

[5 : 40] 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. So there is obviously lots that we could unpack about the Lord's Prayer.

But in the context of today and our focus on group prayer, the thing which stood out to me was the way Jesus uses the pronoun us.

So it suggests that Jesus has in mind that we pray this together. So our Father, give us, forgive us, lead us, deliver us and so on.

I like that these ways of praying are supportive and encouraging to one another. And that saying this prayer in this way might stop us feeling isolated in each of these areas of faith and life that are covered in the Lord's Prayer.

[6 : 51] For example, our Father is a statement which speaks of brother or sisterhood and all that comes with that. We're in this together in a familial relationship.

Give us today our daily bread suggests that we look out for each other's needs. Asking for the essentials for those that we're praying with. The collective nature of this prayer is designed, I think, to prompt a shared sense of worship, reverence, humility, honesty.

It requires us to share in these responsibilities and the vulnerability together as a group. So that is a bit on praying together as featured in the Bible.

So what does it look like then for us here now? I'm sure that plenty of us can give examples of when we pray together with others.

You might be part of a host group and pray together there. Maybe in prayer time in church, in a service, or maybe you've taken part in the prayer offering that the team in the foyer offer each week.

[8 : 06] However, however, let's name the elephant in the room here. Praying together like that with other people can feel utterly terrifying.

Really quite awkward, really embarrassing, uncomfortable, and quite frankly, a little bit weird. So the idea of speaking out your deepest personal longings to Jesus in front of other people that you might not know very well can feel super vulnerable.

And I think this can impact our confidence in praying with others in different ways. So I'm going to share for me in the church that I grew up in.

My abiding memory is of it being a really authentic and honest down-to-earth place. And yet, because for many of us there then, life in terms of money, opportunities was quite tough.

The prayer life of that church reflected that reality. So the group prayer was often and understandably focusing on people's immediate needs, their everyday struggles, and they were mostly really short and to the point.

[9 : 28] And in some ways, that was great. It felt very real. And that gave space to go and get the kettle on and get on with looking after each other in practical ways. However, I probably didn't realise it at the time, but I knew that I wanted more depth from that group prayer.

Maybe more opportunity to explore verbalising my experiences with God. To have space to reflect and meditate and to allow the Holy Spirit's prompting in a group setting.

And to let that shape my engagement in the rest of church. Just that little bit more. Then, on the other end of the scale, I remember being part of a church in a pretty well-off area.

The people were, again, really lovely and their prayers were heartfelt. Now, because many of them were naturally quite confident and articulate and well-educated and often worked in high-powered jobs, then group prayer felt very different.

Spoken prayers were often said with real eloquence and they were informed by high levels of biblical knowledge and theology. The leadership had a slight alpha male vibe at the time. [10:51] So, add all that to the fact that I was someone who struggled with finding my place in that context and tended to be quite easily intimidated.

When prayer time like that started, I would literally sit rehearsing what I was going to say for fear of coming across as really inadequate. And that meant I couldn't engage properly in what everybody else was praying until then somebody else would invariably say exactly what I was thinking in, by my mind, a much better way.

So, again, I felt I couldn't quite be myself and grow into the person God had made me to be. So, it's certainly been quite a journey for me with this group prayer thing to become more confident in praying in ways that are right for me without comparing myself to others.

But over many years, I've moved to fully accept, and I mean fully, in my heart as well as my head, that I am loved unconditionally by God just as I am.

And I put a big part of that journey down to realising that developing relationship with Jesus is helped massively by praying with other people. And I'm now inclined to focus less on the words that I'm saying, but more on the Holy Spirit I want to connect with alongside, not compared to those around me.

[12:20] I believe once we fully understand and experience God's love for us absolutely profoundly, we can find a place of security from which to engage with others in prayer.

So, building on that sense of security that God is hopefully growing in us, and coming from a place where our identity is people loved by God just as we are.

May I suggest three key ways in which praying with others could really benefit our faith, and it's an ABC. So, accountability, building community, and contemplation.

Now, the third one is actually listening, but that starts with the wrong letter of the alphabet for things. So, we'll go with contemplation, shall we? So, accountability.

One advantage of meeting with others to pray is that it makes us accountable. Not in a judgmental way, but a bit like the walking thing that I mentioned earlier.

[13:24] I go further together than I do on my own. Praying with others helps me concentrate. It makes me put my phone down.

It makes my mind not wander off onto what I need to buy for tea. It makes me focus on connecting with God because the others in the room deserve attention too.

Now, you've probably picked up. I'm an external processor. So, by that, I mean that I find verbalising my thoughts really helps me.

There's probably proven psychological reasons behind this, which I didn't research. But all I know is that when I talk my thoughts out loud, they become clearer, much less unreasonable, and more like I can handle stuff.

So, the accountability to others of being present at a set time with no other distractions or agenda, intentionally focusing on prayer, really helps my relationship with God.

[14:40] I think a bit like when you set specific time aside to spend with someone you love or with your pet, or in my husband's case, time with his motorbike.

You end up fitting in that time because you enjoy it. So, you want to spend time in that way. So, the B of our ABC, building community.

Meeting with others to pray builds that community. Connection, support, increasing the depth of relationship with others, I think creates a unity, even within our differences.

It helps me anyway to understand others, to learn from others, to forgive each other, to work together, to show people Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is working anyway, but meeting together to pray recognises and celebrates that the Holy Spirit is real and active.

[15:46] Jesus told us to love God and love each other. So, prayer can be a great way of developing and demonstrating both of those things in the everyday of life.

Jesus wants to be part of it all. He is part of it all. So, perhaps we experience him and become more like him when we intentionally include him.

In a small group context, he's in your thinking and your words anyway. You're simply being mindful, I think, of bringing Jesus into the conversation, including him in the interactions with those other people.

In terms of building community here at St. John's, for example, you might not realise that the same fabulous prayer team who offer prayer in the foyer here each Sunday also meet before the service to pray to.

It's a way of ensuring that this Sunday gathering is offered to God and that anyone who comes into this building has been prayed for before they even arrive.

[16:58] The wonderful Karen, I don't know whether she's here today, heads up that team. And if you're part of that team, then I, for one, really, really appreciate what you do.

And I've had some great support from that myself. So, if for you that's something that makes you feel quite excited and sparks your interest, then you might want to consider joining that team and going on that rota.

I'm sure Karen would love to hear from you. Wherever or whenever you pray together in a small group, it can be a great opportunity to come alongside each other and pray for specific needs in confidence, with sensitivity, a non-judgmental safe space where our jumbled thinking can be given a bit of clarity, of thought.

And by verbalising to each other and to God, putting our thinking into words is sometimes really hard, isn't it?

But maybe these times allow for someone else to say God's words for you and to you instead. So, on to the C that was L.

[18:12] Contemplation or listening. As I've said, it is often really difficult to put into words our jumbled thoughts and our mixture of feelings. And words are always going to be inadequate, aren't they?

To express something as huge as our experience of God. So, group prayer can be about more than the words.

I think joining together, knowing that we're bringing our whole selves to him. And maybe sitting in silence, being aware of his presence with us together, can work really well.

There's a real power in stillness, I think. And silence can be an opening up of ourselves to God. Because prayer is, after all, a two-way process.

It's a relationship with the divine. So, group prayer can, for me anyway, be an effective way of listening and hearing from God.

[19:18] And again, let's name it. That can feel really weird. We rarely, although I know people who have, have an actual audible voice that they hear from God.

But I do, however, believe that we can hear God through the words of other people. Through the Bible. Through experiences. But it can also be through that nudge in those quiet moments.

Those thoughts. Maybe pictures that come to us. And then when we share those with somebody else in that moment, it can create a clarity.

Make them a little more concrete, maybe. A bit more memorable. And affirm our thinking. I quite like the power of a single word.

That helps my listening. So, praying one word over and over again. Or maybe simply speaking the name of Jesus over a situation can be helpful too when we haven't got those words.

[20:26] One of the things I'll mention is that there might also be something powerful in physical gestures when we pray together.

So, just a hand on a shoulder or a hand held passing a tissue. So, in that context, with someone that you know and trust can add a comfort, a solidarity.

So, I guess in all of this group prayer stuff, the overall hope is that we might find ourselves feeling increasingly comfortable in praying with others.

And it being a natural part of our meeting together. Perhaps most of all, the hope is that we find people who we can really go on this journey of prayer with.

So, I found it quite interesting that Pete Greig, in his book, *How to Hear from God*, shares how the ancient Celts had this term. Anamkara, I think that's how you pronounce it, translate as soul friend.

[21:37] It's a spiritual friendship, one which is unwaveringly safe with very clear boundaries. A companion on this journey of faith and someone you can pray together with easily.

And I wonder if perhaps that might be something we could ask God for. To lead us to people who might, in time, become our soul friend.

They might be people that we don't even know yet or haven't even met. But equally, it might be that we need God's nudge to help us see that somebody already here could be just that person for us.

I feel quite privileged that I'm now part of a prayer triplet. There's three of us that meet for just an hour each month. And some of my most tangible, authentic experiences of the Holy Spirit in recent times have been, when I've been sat in my living room with these two other trusted soul friends.

I imagine that for many of us here, there's just not the capacity to do that sort of thing or we don't connect with anyone in that way. But if that's the case, but it's something that you want to explore, then it could be something to pray through, either on your own or with the prayer team today.

[23 : 09] But I'd also thoroughly commend to you the prayer hour, which Karen has started leading on the first Saturday of every month, as a great way to explore what praying with other people in a really safe and bounded way might look like and feel like for you.

There's obviously more that could be said about praying in groups and with others. And what works and feels comfortable will be different for everyone, I think.

I just hope that what I've said this morning has sparked some thoughts for you about what might be appropriate or helpful for you in your prayer life.

So wherever we are on this praying with others journey, my prayer for us is that we develop our discipleship with Jesus through relationships with one another in prayer.

And intentionally including God in whatever way feels right for us in prayer has the power to transform us, to transform our community and the power to co-create with him in the bringing about of his kingdom.

[24 : 32] Amen.