

Relational Prayer - 14th March 2021

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Date: 14 March 2021

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] Hey everyone, how are we doing? A warm welcome to today's Sunday session. My name's Matt, the Vicar of St John's, and this is our chance to check in for a bit of refreshment, maybe a bit of refinement as we peruse the past, ponder the present, and perhaps plan a path to pursue all, hopefully under the guidance of God. It's a significant day, indeed, happy Mothering Sunday to all you mothers out there. If that's you, I hope you're feeling the love today. But I'm well aware it's a day which can bring with it a range of other emotions too, so however we're feeling, whatever our circumstances, may that love be a reality in each of our lives, wherever we find ourselves today. It's also a significant note for us here as this Sunday marks the first anniversary of these sessions. A whole year of yakking from me, alongside some top quality music from the band, a fine fill of Lottie's sessions too. Indeed, she's back with another one this week, looking at Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, so do check that one out for your younger ones. But we're a year in, and it's quite a chunk of life that we've been through together. A mix of both grief and gratitude which has come with it. But I guess overall, pat yourself on the back because you've done well, you know, you've made it through a tough year, and that's something to certainly be proud of. Most of all, it's a year to thank God for the way in which we've known the love, the strength, the stamina which comes to us through the Spirit. Life itself comes from

God. So the bottom line is, none of us could do this existence stuff without God. But more than that, I know I, maybe you feel this too, I don't know where I'd be without God's help.

And the fact we're here and moving forward is a testimony to God's ongoing presence with us. And so thank you God that on this day when we celebrate mothers and motherhood, you are the one from whom our life comes. You are the one who nurtures and nourishes us. You are the one who guides and provides for us. We're also marking a year of this online way of gathering together and we want to thank you for the year we've had with you. Yes, these last 12 months, well, we wouldn't have chosen them in advance maybe, but we're grateful that we're still here, still with you, God. Indeed, you have been faithful in your care and companionship and we want to say thank you for that today. Speak to us now though as we get stuck into this session together. But as we said at the top, this might be a time of refreshment and refinement for us. Thank you God. Amen.

Now, it'll be good this week to continue a theme we started last time and look at another area of prayer, this massive and mysterious topic of how we can relate to and communicate with God. Indeed, this word relate is going to be a key one for us this week as we're going to try to unpack what we might call relational prayer. In order to kick us off on our quest though, here's a passage from Luke's Gospel, chapter 11.

One day, Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples. He said to them, when you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread.

[4 : 2 2] For we also forgive everyone who sins against us and lead us not into temptation.

Now, it's the passage on prayer in the Gospel stories of Jesus' life, where he teaches his followers how they should pray, giving them a model of prayer, which became known as the Lord's Prayer.

There are slightly different versions of it in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, some of them quite like really, because either you can imagine these first followers of Jesus desperately trying to remember the exact wording he gave them, you know, almost blessed are the cheesemakers kind of territory. Or, as is just as likely, Jesus no doubt taught about prayer on numerous occasions and maybe used slightly different versions of this prayer to make his point each time. Either way, it's a cracker of a prayer which we could unpack the significance of for weeks on end. But for today, like us just to notice how relational this model of prayer is which Jesus gives.

I mean, I know it's Mother's Day, but if we just take the first two words, our Father, it's an indication that prayer is designed to keep relationality as a top priority.

Relationality between whom? Well, for a start, it's a way to relate to God, here addressed as Father, a very intimate, family, familiar way to speak with God.

[6 : 16] What else? Well, it's addressed to our Father, which could mean that prayer is best done in the company of others, maybe. But equally, even when praying on our own, saying our Father is perhaps a way of intentionally acknowledging that God's not simply my God, but your God too. And therefore, it stops us from being excessively self-absorbed, perhaps, in our thinking.

What's more, though, in teaching his disciples to pray our Father, Jesus is also underlining the way in which Jesus relates to us. Since although he calls God his Father, he also encourages us to do the same.

And that makes us Jesus' sisters and brothers, indicating another level of relationality, you know, both for us with Jesus, but also for us with each other. And so when Jesus teaches us how to pray, it would seem we're being encouraged to see prayer as a way of relating to God, as a way of us relating with Jesus, but also a way of helping us to relate to one another, as brothers and sisters who share the same Heavenly Father. And it's this aspect of how we relate to one another through prayer, which would be good to unpack a bit more today.

Now, by nature, you'll know as well as me, we are social, relational creatures. There's an inbuilt need for us to make connections with those around us in all sorts of ways.

And of course, one of the lessons of lockdown has been to highlight to us just how important physical connection is, because most of us would have so missed having a hug, a handshake, even missed looking someone in the eye or seeing their smiling face. And this physical relationality matters a great deal to us. And yet, for me, while I'm increasingly convinced that our ability to connect in person with each other goes far beyond the boundaries of our physical bodies.

[8 : 44] I mean, you'll know as well as me, the principle of personal space and how uncomfortable we can feel when that space is invaded. You know, people may not be physically touching us, but sometimes the closeness of their presence makes us feel as if they are. Or again, you'll be aware of ways in which even with our eyes closed or our backs turned, we can somehow sense the presence of someone else in the room.

You know, on the whole, that can be pretty comforting, as even to sit watching telly in silence with someone else has a totally different feel than watching it on our own. Likewise, there are certain people who we might say have a real presence in that when they walk into a room, the energy level somehow lifts and even without saying or doing anything, they can cause the atmosphere of the whole room to change.

And then, even more mysteriously perhaps, there are well-attested tales of twins physically feeling each other's pain or joy, even when they're separated by hundreds of miles.

Now, in all of these scenarios and more, what might we put this connection down to? Well, you may well have your own theories, but for me, I think my hunch is that it's probably because our spirits are bigger than our physical bodies. I mean, just as on a cold day you can see your breath going beyond you, so too it seems reasonable to me that our presence, our spirit, our life force, if you like, goes beyond the boundaries of our physical, bodily shell.

Indeed, I'll share with you what is probably the closest thing I think I've ever had to a vision. Now, don't let that word put you off. I'm not going to go all Twilight Zone on you or anything, but I was about 25 at the time and I was on my lunch break from work. I was working as a furniture restorer in London at the time and I was walking down the street just by the Angel Tube in Islington.

[11 : 02] You know, the light blue set in Monopoly. Anyway, I was just having a potter at lunchtime and I was having a bit of a pray at the same time. You know, I can't remember about what, probably chuntering to God about my boss or some poncy customer's demands or something like that, but that aside, as I was walking along, all of a sudden, as I looked across the street, it was as if everyone else started glowing and I saw each individual person surrounded by a kind of fuzzy orange light as they walked along. It didn't feel like freaky to me. It's just, whoa, what's going on there? I mean, the closest thing I can compare it to was those old ready-breck adverts, you know, when the kids start eating a bowl and gets the ready-breck orange glow. It was a bit like that.

Now, at the time, I felt it was God probably using this vision, I guess is the word I'd use, to say to me, look, each and every one of these people, they're glowing like this because they're special to me.

And when I see them, I see people who glow with potential, so treat them as such. And that may well be a lesson we do well with here this week, perhaps, in light of all the coverage of Harry and Meghan and the royal family, in that for all their fraught relationships and at times institutionalised dysfunction, it's probably worth remembering they're just people, and as such will deserve our empathy and our prayers. And yet, thinking about this vision thing years later, I also now wonder if it was God's way of showing me the kind of aura that each of us has, the presence each of us has, maybe, to live in ways which affect our surroundings beyond our physical bodies. I mean, I guess we could liken it to the way Jesus was said to have glowed or shone after what's known as his transfiguration, and the disciples got a glimpse of his glory. Or even the way Moses' face was said to have shone having met with God up on Mount Sinai, so much so that he had to wear a veil to stop dazzling people when he came down. Now, I share this vision, but what's he got to do with prayer and how we relate to one another? Well, it seems to me that when I pray for you or you pray for me, it may well be that our intentional focus on someone else's situation brings a connection between our spirits that transcends the physical boundaries of our bodies. Something of your solidarity, your compassion, your care for me will flow out from you and in a way kind of almost be absorbed by me. And if all that sounds a bit, you know, hippy-dippy, then yeah, maybe it does. But my hunch is that that's often how praying for one another works. In this kind of relational prayer, my spirit connects with your spirit, ultimately through the presence of the Holy Spirit, the ever-presence of God in the world.

And I guess if we think about it, this kind of idea is really just an extension of what's reckoned to happen when we pray for each other in person. So you may well have heard of the practice of the laying on of hands. This idea that when we pray for someone, there's sometimes something important, it seems, about physically resting our hands on their head or their shoulder, almost as if that physical connection enables the work of God's spirit to flow more easily between us.

So in the book of Acts, for example, we read that Peter and John placed their hands on people and they received the Holy Spirit. And so might it not be that if our spirits are bigger than our bodies, this kind of outer glow which goes beyond our physical shell, or when we're praying for someone with whom we can't physically be alongside, might it not be that our spirit is somehow still able to connect with theirs. And this connection happens through God's Holy Spirit who maybe acts, if you like, as the conducting agent enabling this connection to happen. I mean that sounds pretty plausible to me.

[15 : 57] And so this idea of being able to pray for other people because our spirits are able to connect, even if we're physically distant from them. That means that even through lockdown, we can meaningfully pray for those we may be distanced from. That's why we can meaningfully pray for the family and community of Sarah Everard.

At the same time, we can pray for all the women we know who are forced to change their everyday behaviour because of the fear of what might happen if they don't. Likewise, we can pray for all the men we know who need to be more proactive in helping to change a culture in which harassment and worse is still all too commonplace.

You know, maybe, with all that we said last week perhaps in mind, maybe the best prayer we can pray of all for anyone, whether near or far, is that their spirit might be increasingly open to receiving the already active love of God in their lives.

Love which nurtures and heals and convicts and transforms. And as we pray for the openness in ourselves and in others, I think we can also pray that other people would know our love for them through the way God enables them to receive it.

And so, do you see, if we consider prayer in this relational way, praying to our Heavenly Father alongside Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, well, prayer suddenly becomes far more interactive, far more meaningful, far more engaged.

[17 : 40] I would say far more exciting, because our prayers, whether near or far from someone, really can make a difference and be received via God in someone else's life.

Now, if this idea of how relational prayer works is onto something, then I guess one of the aims of life is to find ways to enable that spiritual flow between us and those around us, through God's unifying Spirit, to become more and more of a natural reality in our everyday lives.

In other words, as our prayer life becomes more relational, so too the way we relate to each other in the everyday can become more prayerful.

Now, if that all sounds a bit hazy, let me share, just as an example, two little stories from my life this week of how this may well have been the case.

So, story one. This is from Tuesday this week. And it was a day, if I'm honest, when I woke up feeling pretty low. Not so much depressed low, but way down low.

[18 : 56] You know, mainly with the stress of my job, you know, trying to work out how we might do church over the coming months in a way that might best meet the needs of a whole range of people.

And so, knowing I needed to give God some time to help me work things through, I went for a walk around Chasewater, the local reservoir where we live, and for me, a real gift of a place to pray.

Hey, I'm rotten at praying, sat down or indoors, but get me out walking with God, and I'm usually okay. Anyway, I wanted to be on my own for an hour or so, you know, that's about the length around Chasewater, but as is often the way, I bumped into someone from church, someone who I hadn't seen for some time.

And so we stopped, we got talking. She was being pretty honest about some of her struggles over recent months, and we had a good chat. It was good to see her. But then she looked me in the eye and said, And how are you?

And for a moment, I paused, thinking, do I give a generic, you know, up and down like most people, or do I really tell her how I'm doing?

[20 : 11] And so because I knew there was no point bluffing, I said, well, to be honest, I feel pretty shit. And as soon as I said it, I started welling up, you know, not in a kind of blaring kind of way, just a sad kind of way.

And yet, as we talked, I felt listened to, and it felt cathartic, you know, therapeutic even, to share. I didn't necessarily get any answers to what was stressing me, but simply being able to talk to someone at just the right time, you know, not on a Zoom or on a phone or even on the doorstep, but just in a relaxed, unplanned, dare I say it, normal way.

Well, it did me the world of good, and I felt much lighter for having spoken with her. Now, was that conversation prayer?

Maybe not in a traditional sense, but then were we both able to honestly share how we were feeling that day? Yeah. Was there a sense of encouragement for each other?

Yeah. Did we feel better for talking? Yeah. And was God present in our conversation? Absolutely. And so, I'd say it was a conversation through which our spirits connected and God spoke to us.

[21 : 47] And that sounds pretty prayerful to me. That's story number one. Story number two, again from this week, this time on Wednesday, and it happened when I went to pick up a big donation of food from Morrison's in Burnwood.

Brilliantly generous from their management who have been great all through lockdown. Anyway, this time as I went to the store, I was hoping I would see someone, in particular, a guy who works in that store from church, who's a very calm and supportive friend.

And someone in me just felt, you know, actually I could do with seeing him today. I tracked him down, stacking a shelf, and we caught up on the shop floor just generally.

But then we got onto some of the issues we both knew were there about how our church at St. John's might best meet people's needs going forward. And this guy, very matter-of-factly, just shared a couple of ideas that he'd had in the meantime.

But as I was listening, it's like a penny dropped. And what he was saying really helped things click in my mind by way of sort of thinking, yeah, actually I think that could work.

[23 : 00] And then, time was up for a conversation, he had work to do, I went on my way back to my car. And yet as I walked away, I said a little prayer of thanks for him in that just as he was bringing order out of chaos by putting those tins in place on the shelf, so too he'd help bring some order to the chaos of my mind.

Now, that was a prayer from me. But was our conversation a prayer too? Well, I think I'd say it was.

Because not only were both of our spirits seeking a way forward under God together, but God was most definitely speaking to me through him in a way which was answering my prayers from the previous day on my walk around Chasewater.

We didn't start our conversation by saying, dear God, or we didn't finish it by saying, amen, as we left. But the middle bit, well, to me, that was certainly a prayerful conversation.

Now, in these two stories, it just so happens that these two people were both from church. But I don't think that a shared faith is always necessary for a conversation to be a prayerful one.

[24 : 20] In fact, in my experience, if just one person is open to the possibilities of God's spirit being active, then God is more than able to inhabit and speak through every conversation they have with people in a way which brings light and life and hope into people's lives.

And that, surely, is what prayer is all about. Opening up the doors of heaven so that the presence of God becomes more tangible in people's lives.

Yes, prayer includes times of being totally focused on and in a direct, even formal conversation with God. Of course it does. But it also seems to me that if the aim of prayer is to help us to relate to God the Father, to relate with Jesus, and to relate to each other all through the presence of the Holy Spirit with her, then the ebb and flow of everyday relational prayer on each of these levels is surely what the Apostle Paul was on about when he tells us to pray continually.

Relational prayer means that prayer becomes so much a part of our being, so much a part of our everyday rhythm, so much a part of our words, our thoughts, our actions, our actions, that we increasingly become a living prayer.

Prayer which can make a real difference to those we live among, whether near or even far away from us. And so in all this, I guess my encouragement is for us to pray continually in this relational way, connecting with God in a way that simply but profoundly involves and interacts with God in every aspect of our lives, and especially in our conversations with one another, whether outside Angel Tube in London, around Chasewater, or in a local branch of Morrisons.

[26 : 30] God is present with us anyway, so we'd do well to be listening out for the ways that divine voice is speaking to us directly or through each other.

Again, as the Apostle Paul says, pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.

And so may God bless both you and I in our relational prayer this week. All right.

Here's a smasher of a song recorded by the St John's Band this week to help us offer up our praise for God's faithfulness to us. It's a song called Unchanging.

Unchanging. Is of a song Great is your faithfulness Great is your faithfulness You never change No, you never fail Oh God True are your promises True are your promises You never change No, you never fail, oh God So we raise up holy hands To praise the Holy One Who was and is and is to come Here we raise up holy hands

[28 : 34] To praise the Holy One Who was and is and is to come White is your love and grace White is your love and grace You never change No, you never fail, oh God White is your love and grace White is your love and grace You never change No, you never fail, oh God So we raise up holy hands To praise the Holy One Who was and is and is and is to come

Yeah, we raise up holy hands To praise the Holy One Who was and is and is to come You are, you are, you will always be You are, you are, you will always be Jesus, you are, you are, you will always be You are, you are, you will always be So we raise up holy hands To praise the Holy One

Who was and is and is and is to come Yeah, we raise up holy hands To praise the Holy One To praise the Holy One Who was and is and is and is to come Top stuff All right, we'll wind it up there for today But do check out the extra time video To accompany this one A little batch of questions to consider Should you wish

And if you found this session helpful Do feel free to share it around with friends And on social media and so on We'll be back next week with another session But by way of a blessing today Let's finish with these words A prayer from the letter to the Ephesians In the Bible Which says this I pray that out of God's glorious riches He may strengthen you with power Through his spirit in your inner being So that Christ may dwell in your hearts Through faith And I pray that you Being rooted and established in love May have power Together with all the Lord's holy people To grasp how wide and long And high and deep Is the love of Christ And to know this love That surpasses knowledge That you may be filled

To the measure Of all the fullness of God Amen And with hope L■ So that you may find You all have to Few