

Knock, knock – Luke 11:1-13

At the beginning of Luke chapter 11, one of Jesus' disciples asks him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

It's a good request, isn't it; an understandable request.... Can you think back to times in your life when you were taught to pray?

I think of Sunday School when I was 3 and 4; my wonderful teacher, Mrs Robson, the smell of Perkins Paste, the feel of cotton wool glued to my fingers, and the songs, "*Be careful little eyes what you see?*" or the now questionable, "*Washing, ironing, mending too; These are things that girls can do.*" And, finally, "*Now Sunday School is over and we are going home.*" But before we did we would put our hands together and close our eyes and pray.

I remember another, far more visceral lesson, too, when I was 8 and had run from our house at the Danime mission station in West Papua to the building near the airstrip where Dad was working with the news that a mission plane had crashed. My father stood still and was quiet for a long time, until I asked what he was doing. "Praying," he said. Prayer I realised wasn't always formal or planned, but could respond to what was happening in the moment.

And I think of the elaborate prayer acrostic I started using in high school – PPROAPTS I think it went – I have no idea now what it stood for – every night recording in a journal five prayer requests, until at some point in university I abandoned the whole thing feeling it had become far too legalistic.

A lesson about prayer that stands out for me – in recent years – is my mother describing how Mr Norgate (the husband of Jean Norgate who was a member here before her death) prayed "like God was right there in the room with him. "It made the hair stand up on the back of your neck," my mother said. And I love that story because I share the sentiments Kelli shared a few weeks ago. I, too, don't find praying easy and can get distracted and I appreciate the gift of being able to pray with and to be inspired by the faith of others.

Because I want to have a deep and abiding prayer life that connects me with God and makes my life richer and fuller. I want to pray with and for others more effectively. I, like this anonymous disciple, want to know how to pray.

But when I think about learning to pray better, I immediately think about the mechanics of prayer – of mastering some new technique. *Perhaps if I pray at certain times – or for longer? Or perhaps if I say the right words – or speak more eloquently?* But in today's gospel reading Jesus' teaching is not focused on the mechanics of prayer – the 'how' – but on the relational nature of prayer – the 'who'. Prayer is about our relationship with God.

In another video from the series that we watched last week, the Christian pastor and activist Jarod McKenna, speaks of our prayer lives being far more powerful when they grow past inviting Jesus into our heart and grow into Jesus' invitation into God's heart. When this is how we pray – as God's beloved children – as children who share God's heart for the world – the door between us and God stands wide open.

This passage in Luke is a mixture of teaching, a model for prayer (Luke's version is shorter and probably earlier than Matthew's), a parable on prayer, and some sayings about prayer. Over the next few weeks – in amongst our guest speakers - I want to go through The Lord's Prayer line by line (just as we looked at 'forgive us our sins' last week) so today I am turning our attention to the parable and the sayings.

The parable begins in verse 5: "*And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread...'"*

It's a strange story isn't it. It's referred to as the *parable of the friend in need*, or the *parable of the friend at night* or the *parable of the importunate neighbour* (in case you're wondering importunate means so persistent you're annoying), but I think of it as the *parable of the bad neighbour*.

But who exactly is the bad neighbour? To our Western way of thinking – which glorifies the concept of individual privacy – the bad neighbour is the man who knocks on his neighbour's door in the middle of the night and wakes him up and disturbs his children.

But in many other cultures, certainly in the Middle East, hospitality comes before individual privacy. Far more scandalous than the man wakes his neighbour to ask for bread is the neighbour who is reluctant to help him! The picture is of a simple Middle Eastern home with the family sleeping on a raised platform at one end. "*Don't bother me,*" the neighbour says, "*The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything!*" But even then, Jesus says, even if the neighbour fails his cultural obligation to hospitality and friendship, because of the first man's persistence (though the word is better translated shamelessness or boldness) he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

But this story is even stranger because the bad neighbour in the parable represents God! It is similar to Luke 18 where God is represented by an unjust judge! Just like Rudyard Kipling wrote 'just so stories' this kind of story is a 'how much more' story, where Jesus' makes an *a fortiori* argument, moving from a lesser example to demonstrate a stronger, greater truth. The argument goes, if a bad neighbour will help you how much more – how much more readily – will your good Father in heaven respond? Or if we are concerned about providing care and hospitality in this world, how much more does God, whose world this is, share and surpass our concerns?

For verse nine urges us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

These verses, like the parable, are said to be encouraging persistence in prayer, but – as I mentioned earlier – the word translated *persistence* is better translated as *shamelessness* or *boldness*. We are to come to God and shamelessly, boldly ask for the things we know are also God's concerns. The sense here is that our prayer life does not consist of endlessly knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door, but that God is just waiting for us to ask, just waiting for us to look, just waiting for us to knock. As one commentator says, "*when we pray...we are pushing against an open door.*"

Here is another image of God's readiness to respond to our needs. The door knocker on the cover of our bulletins comes from the door of Durham Cathedral. (This one on the Cathedral is actually a reproduction and the 12th century original is located in the cathedral's museum/treasury.) The knocker was there for anyone who needed sanctuary. People who had committed crimes, on purpose or accident, or escaping prisoners could run to the Cathedral and knock, and two monks were stationed in small rooms above the door every day and every night to listen for any knocks and respond immediately. Once brought into the monastery, the person was entitled to 37 days of sanctuary during which they could make attempts to explain or settle the offence or find an escape route out of England.

But if God is just waiting for us to ask why is it – why is it – we come back to this question so often – that our prayers are sometimes not answered?

Jesus tells us that a good parent will not "*if a child asks for a fish, give them a snake. Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion*". In Matthew, he speaks of giving a stone instead of

bread... Some would say that there are times in our lives when we ask God for snakes or scorpions or stones and so God does not answer these requests or gives us what we need instead. But this does not answer the question of unanswered prayers that would be completely aligned with God's heart for hospitality.

We know that we struggle to do what is right and avoid the wrong on an individual level, and in our world, there are also events that thwart God's will. Perhaps all we can know for now is what Jesus teaches; that God encourages us to ask, to ask boldly and that God will bless us with good things. For again in verse 13 we have the *a fortiori* argument, "if you then, who are flawed, sinful human beings, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

What does the gift of the Holy Spirit mean for us? Think back to Luke chapter 3, to Jesus' baptism at the Jordan and the Spirit descending on him with the voice from heaven, "You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased." With the gift of the Holy Spirit we know that we are God's beloved children, that we share God's Spirit, and God's heart.

The commentator that I quoted earlier said, "*We are pushing against an open door when we pray.*" And she goes on, "*In a sense, we are already inside, children tucked in for the night, not merely the friend of a friend, not even merely the friend of the Son, but sons and daughters ourselves with the same Spirit, the same love.*"

Can I close by telling you another story. It is not as clever as the parables, but it does have some elements of a 'so much more story'. It is about a little girl – just three and a half – who was being looked after by her father at work one Saturday afternoon. But the father got busy and the little girl got bored and she decided – she knew – that she would have a much much better time at her Sunday School teacher's house. Now she had never walked there from church before (because that is where her father worked; he was a minister) but she thought she could remember, so she crossed the busy road to the shops very carefully and walked down the street, stopping at each intersection to try and remember which way the car would go. And eventually she came to her Sunday School teacher's house! Now her Sunday School teacher was a little surprised to find the little girl knocking on the door. "Where are mum and dad?" she asked. And the little girl decided a lie might be necessary. "They just dropped me off because they had to go somewhere." "All right, then, come inside! And the afternoon passed very delightfully and then the evening – as they included her amongst their teenagers for dinner – until the phone rang and it was the little girl's mother, frantic and grief-stricken begging her friend to pray because her daughter had gone missing that afternoon. "But she's not missing!" said the friend. "She is here!"

I have a confession which some of you have already guessed. That little girl who caused unimaginable distress to her parents was me. And my beautiful first Sunday School teacher, Mrs Robson, died at the end of last week and the thanksgiving service for her life was held on Friday while we were giving thanks for the life of Gladys Churcher.

But if a naughty little girl can think that her Sunday School teacher's door will always be open to her how much more will God invite us in as sons and daughters, embrace us with the Holy Spirit and share with us our concern and compassion for this world?