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8th October 2023, 19th Sunday after Pentecost,

Don't heap up empty phrases by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

Jeremiah 1:4-9 *Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a child" But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

Matthew 6:5-8 *And Jesus taught them, saying "...whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

As most of you will know, the church year doesn't begin on 1 January. It begins with the season of Advent, the four weeks of preparing the way for Christ's coming at Christmas.

That means we have seven weeks left in the church year. Yes, Christmas is really that close! There's time for one more series in the year of Matthew's Gospel. Rather than work through a chapter though, I would like to focus on one small part of Matthew's Gospel, which is undoubtedly I think his most well-known passage. I wonder if you can guess what it is...

...it's the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer is known off by heart by many Christians and even non-Christians all over the world. And we recite the Lord's Prayer almost every week in church. But did you know it comes from Matthew's Gospel? It forms part of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, which includes a section on prayer. (There's a slightly different version in Luke's Gospel as well – but we'll be focussing on Matthew's version.)

Why preach on the Lord's Prayer? Well, I think it's good to talk about prayer as a, if not the, central practice for the Christian life. It's good to spend time thinking about what prayer is. Why we do it. And what better place to start than with the prayer Jesus taught us to pray!

As I said, we recite it almost every week. But for that very reason it can easily become an empty ritual. So, by stopping to reflect on it for a few weeks, my hope is that it becomes a lifegiving practice, deepening our understanding of prayer and shaping our life together.

You may have noticed though, that our reading today wasn't the Lord's Prayer. What we got today was the introductory comments. As I mentioned, the Prayer forms part of a larger passage of teaching from Jesus called the Sermon on the Mount. And he begins his section on prayer with the words that Sandy read for us this morning.

But I think it's important to begin here... as Jesus does. Because his introductory words set the tone, teaching us not only what to pray, but also how to pray.

As we heard, he kind of has a go at two different types of praying that were prevalent in his day, which he saw to be problematic. First, he has a go at ultra-zealous Jews, who had turned prayer into a show of personal piety and moral superiority.

And second, he has a go at certain pagan cultic practices, where the length and fervour and wordiness of your prayers was believed to have a persuasive power that would endear the gods towards you and make it more likely your prayers would be answered.

In both cases, these forms of prayer were displays of personal piety; and their effectiveness was believed to be dependent on the person praying getting the formula right...

I reckon that perception persists today. A fear that, when we're praying with others, we'll get the words wrong. Say something embarrassing. Accidentally utter a heresy. Or be shown up for our biblical ignorance.

Or worse, a deep-seated fear that, if we don't pray hard enough, passionate enough, long enough, or with the right words or sentiment – that God won't answer our prayer. That an unanswered prayer reveals a failure in us.

Ironically, I wonder whether our passage today has actually contributed to the problem. "Don't heap up empty phrases," Jesus tells us. And so we think, well, I'd better keep quiet then and leave it to the professionals.

There's a persistent view I think that ministers are the professionals and that a prayer from a minister or clergy person carries more weight. I'm going to let you in on a secret though... half the time we "professionals" don't know what we're doing either.

And in my experience, ministers can be the worst at heaping up empty and pious phrases! That's why I'll spend hours scripting prayers for Sunday worship – lest I heap up empty phrases.

...but here's the thing. I don't think Jesus is saying that if I pray a waffly and longwinded prayer that it will affect God's reception of it in any way. For as Jesus tells us and as we heard in Psalm 139 and Jeremiah, God already knows our need before we ask – regardless of our ability to express those needs. Our inarticulateness won't affect God... it certainly affects all of you, who have to listen to my longwinded and meandering prayers!

And I'm sure you can agree that when prayers are full of empty phrases and lots and lots of words, they can be, well, irritating to listen to. Even if they're well-meaning and sincere. And if you have to sit through them week by week, it's enough to turn you off communal worship altogether. So there is something to be said for well-scripted prayers. There is an art to communal prayer.

...Sandy joked to me that it's an intimidating week to be worship assistant for that reason! However, knowing Sandy, she's hardly one to heap up empty phrases. And even if she was, the point I'm making is that, it wouldn't affect God's reception of our prayers at all!

Because the words aren't actually for God. The words are for us. Words help us to focus and frame our thoughts – both in personal and corporate prayer – as we orient our heart towards God.

Each of our readings today are an echo of that sentiment, expressed in the well-known phrase from Psalm 139: "Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely."

God hems us in. Above, below, around, within. To pray is not to ask for an audience with God and hope that we're granted it. No, God's loving and wholehearted attention is already on us. Prayer is about us attending to God.

Really that's the sermon. I want to draw two things out of that point. The first I've already mentioned: that words do matter. Whether in private prayer, small group settings, or Sunday worship, words help us to direct our thoughts and brings others along with us.

But really, when it comes down to it, you can't get the words wrong. So don't worry if you're not the most articulate person. God already knows what's on your heart. And if you can't articulate it (like the prophet Jeremiah in our OT reading today), then we've been given words to pray. The Lord's Prayer. The Psalms. The ancient hymns of the church. Use them!

Every Sunday, I cheat and base my prayers on the weekly Psalm and the hymns. I'm not starting from scratch.

So that's the first thing. But I want to go a bit further than that today. I wonder if Jesus tells us not to heap up empty phrases because our words so often get in the way of our ability to hear. Yes, they can be a tool to direct our thoughts. But they can also be a barrier to hearing God's voice.

One of the things that is noticeable about the Lord's Prayer is that it's a very God-centred rather than us-centred prayer. It begins, Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The prayer in other words begins by honouring and giving praise to God and secondly listening for God's will. It's not about expressing our will to God at all. (We're going to talk about this more in a couple of weeks when we get to it.)

But today, I want to suggest that prayer is first and foremost about listening rather than speaking. Typically, we think of prayer the other way around. We think of prayer as us talking to God. And if we're lucky, God might respond, engaging us in a kind of conversation in the spiritual cloud.

But you know, there's a whole mystic tradition in Christianity that explores prayer as contemplative silence and meditation. The Presbyterians in our very functional and word-centred expression of Christianity have tended to be wary of such contemplative practices.

Still today, contemplation and meditation can be treated with suspicion – an invasion of eastern religious practices into Christianity. But what we have forgotten is that these practices actually come from a rich vein within Christianity itself.

And there's a good argument for recovering them today. Why? We live in an age where we are more connected than we have ever been. We're constantly surrounded by words, noises, images, sensations. Our moments of stillness and quiet have been eaten up by the constant demand of email, social media, streaming services, audiobooks, podcasts and so and so forth.

There is a constant stream of group consciousness that we are tapping into all the time, filling our minds with content, endless content. Much of it not healthy. Much of it encouraging us to indulge our desires. Because there's money in that in a consumerist economy. And all of it demanding our attention.

Prayer can easily become an extension of that consumer mentality. Voicing our desires before God, a stream of consciousness. But never pausing, never giving space for God to speak.

I wonder if Jesus' instruction to not heap up empty phrases is an invitation to silence. To learn once more to still our minds before God. To simply dwell in the presence of the God who is nearer to us than our very breath; the God who searches and knows intimately the most secret thoughts in the depths of our heart. The God who has lovingly, fearfully, wonderfully formed and crafted each one of us. The God in whom we belong. The God who, no matter where we wander, is holding us and leading us through the darkest of valleys. ...if we pause long enough to notice.

When we pause to listen to God, we discover who we are and whose we are. We are loved, we are held, we belong. In all our uniqueness and individuality and frailty, we are enough. So may the empty phrases fall away. And in the silence may we hear that truth once more, learning to recognise anew the voice of the all-loving and inescapable God.

Amen