

# **Sermon on Sunday 27 July 2025**

## **by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader**

### **Luke 11 v 1: 'Lord, teach us to pray'.**

How should we pray? What should we pray for?

There are some things we probably shouldn't pray for. You might know Janice Joplin's delightful song, '*Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?*', recorded in 1970, just a few days before she died.

As you can probably guess, the song ironically mocks the blend of materialism, hedonism and conservative Christianity she and her fellow hippies often criticised but somehow couldn't quite escape from. Janice, by the way, drove a Porsche.

What should we pray for?

An old sermon anecdote tells of the young child of a devout Christian family who asked his parents for a birthday present quite out of line with the family's modest budget. When I first heard it, it was a an electric train set; last time I heard it it was a sophisticated gaming console. The parents gently sought to manage expectations, but the boy simply announced it was not a problem, he would ask God to get it for him, for as he had learned in Junior Church, God always answered us when we prayed in faith.

Fearing the first major family crisis of faith, the parents prayed themselves for inspiration and geared up for some serious expectation management on the day of the birthday. The son cheerfully and gratefully unwrapped his various gifts and, when all was done, looked quizzically at his parent. 'So Billy, God didn't answer your prayer this time, did he?' And Billy said, 'Yes, of course he did, He said no'.

What should we pray for?

This morning we can look at two prayers that might give us some challenging answers. One is almost certainly the best known prayer in the Christian heritage. The other one is arguably the oldest preserved prayer in our tradition – Abraham's pleading with God about the threatened destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The archaeologists tell us that the historical sites of Sodom and Gomorrah probably lie beneath the Dead Sea, and speculate that they were destroyed by earthquakes about 4,000 years ago, when the Jordan valley was an active tectonic fault line. The presence of large bitumen deposits in the region may have contributed to the tradition that the cities were destroyed by fire.

In Hebrew heritage they became a byword for immoral, godless living. Unhelpfully, in later Jewish and Christian

tradition the fate of the cities was seen as evidence of God's dislike of homosexuality. The story in Genesis, and other references to the cities by the Prophets, do not justify this tradition. The terrible sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are injustice, cruelty and especially hostility to strangers and foreigners.

But Abraham pleads for their preservation. Will God not hold back his punishment for the sake of the good people living among the wicked? How can a God of justice destroy the innocent alongside the guilty? Abraham is very persistent. What if there are but 50 good people? Or 45, or 30, or 20 and finally down to just 10. And each time God hears and accepts Abraham's request.

The negotiation stops at 10. I'm willing Abraham to keep talking and whittle the number all the way down to 1, but that's not in the story.

But the principle still stands. Right at the beginning of the story of God's dealings with mankind, it is the prayer of a human soul that puts compassion and justice at the heart of the agenda. God's compassion is a response to Abraham's prayer.

We move on to Luke's Gospel.

One of Jesus' disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

As response, Jesus gives him a ruthlessly stripped down version of what we now know as the Lord's Prayer, far shorter than the more familiar version we know from St Matthew's Gospel, and which we will be saying together later in the service.

What does Jesus tell us to pray for?

One: He wants us to pray for God's Kingdom to come. The time and place where God's just and compassionate rules are acknowledged and obeyed by all peoples.

Two: We can ask for our daily needs, our daily bread. Though some theologians believe that Luke's version carries a further meaning – give us today the bread of that day; the coming Feast Day of the Kingdom. Let the Kingdom start now, with us, as we choose to live by God's law of love, regardless of what others do around us.

Three: He wants us to pray for forgiveness; to recognise that we need to change, to make amends, to restore damaged relationships. And he explains why. Because those who follow Jesus release others from the burden of debt they owe to us. Here, Jesus speaks of debts, not of sins. The Judean world judged harshly those who did not pay their debts on time. I'm a banker, I get that! Forgiving can have a real cost to it, not just a spiritual one.

And it's not an option for us. Those who follow Jesus accept the giving and receiving of forgiveness as a keystone of their life, a hallmark of the Kingdom of God.

Four: Finally, we should ask to be shielded from times of trial. And that's all! The Lord's Prayer according to Luke.

Jesus does also tell a little parable about a man who knocks up his neighbour in the middle of the night. Why? Because he has an unexpected visitor and he has no food to offer him. So yes, we can ask God for the resources to meet the needs of our neighbours, remembering that Jesus gives that word 'neighbour' a very broad definition. God won't feel put upon, and he's open to our requests any time. He doesn't keep office hours, he doesn't need us to make an appointment.

I think it's usually us who would prefer to talk to God by appointment, isn't it? When we've got all our thoughts in order and planned what we want to say. It can be a bit unnerving when he turns up unannounced and hears us saying the things we'd rather he didn't hear.

And even if we're not always asking for the best things, Jesus reminds us that God does like to give us good things. Most of all, he loves to give the gift of the Holy Spirit to us. He likes to give us the strength and

support that makes us active and effective citizens if the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is founded on our prayers. Pray for its coming, and pray for the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus says, 'Ask, and it shall be given to you.'

Amen