

Sermon on Wednesday 15 July 2020

by Rev. Wendy Sellers

Readings: Matthew 11. 25-27; Romans 8 26-27

When I first started to go to church, I really didn't see the purpose of the prayer known as the Collect. The words were in a language which made no sense to me, and no one ever paused to explain. It was basically liturgical noise.

My problem isn't surprising. The weekly Collects were largely written by Cramner for the Book of Common Prayer. They have been modernised since, but retain the highly formal style which was considered appropriate for prayer at that time. Today, I used an alternative collect, as we often do. These were written fairly recently to convey the same message as the original collects, but in a more accessible style. But it's not surprising that some people say they 'never pray' if they think that this is all prayer is.

The Collects, however, are a million miles away from the prayer described by Paul in his letter to the Romans. He talks about how we don't know how to pray and so the Spirit intercedes on our behalf, with sighs too deep for words.

I think we are all familiar with this type of prayer – it's how we pray when we are deeply affected by something and just cannot find the right words.

In my road lives a family. There are four children – a girl, a boy and two girls, just as Dale and I have. As our children are similar ages, our paths often crossed throughout their education. Nowadays we chat when we pass in the street.

A few years ago, the son went to university to study to be a pilot – his lifelong dream. One evening he was out with friends and was knocked over by a speeding car. He was badly hurt: especially worrying was the injury to his head. He was in a coma for many weeks and several times his family were told to say their goodbyes. My daughter was at the same university so I heard the terrible news very quickly. And I prayed as I never had before. There were no words I could say. It was not for me to pray for the outcome, but I desperately wanted God to make things better.

Eventually the young man opened his eyes and his long recovery began. The family had the house altered to make it wheelchair accessible, but then, amazingly, he learned to walk. He went back to university locally and now has a job. I cannot thank God enough for all that. Again, there are no words.

We have all had times which seemed beyond prayer. When the pain was too great. When the grief was too

heavy. When the problem was too complex. And then we have to let the Spirit do the praying for us.

And I hope that we have also had times when we have experienced the other end of the emotional spectrum. When we have met someone special and realise that they like us too. When we look out over the view from a high place and our heart sings with joy. When we get to hug our loved ones after months of missing them. Again, there are no words.

Sometimes people ask me to pray for them. They seem to think that because I'm a Christian I have some special words to say, that God only likes prayers that have a formal style and contain multi-syllabic words. I hope God does like those sorts of prayers, given we use them often. They certainly give us a huge amount of comfort, especially if they are familiar. But, actually, anyone can pray. No special words are required.

In everyday life, there is, of course, a place for formal scripted prayer. Often other people put things into words so much more beautifully than we can manage ourselves. Think of the prayer of St Benedict I used at Compline on Sunday or the prayer of St Teresa that Pat is using in this week's Thought for the Day. Think of the Lord's Prayer. Those prayers are available to all.

Some of us will pray conversationally – sharing our secrets, hopes and dreams with God, our companion. That doesn't require any special skill, although the

ability to listen is helpful.

Some of us especially value communal prayer – saying words to God in harmony with other Christians. It is the form of prayer that I feel soaks into the very fabric of our church buildings. And all you need to do is join in.

There are many ways to pray. But none is better than any other. Different prayer styles suit different times and people. What is important is that we pray at all, not how we do it.

If you are struggling to pray then I have two suggestions:

Firstly, oblige yourself to do it daily – using a book or an app.

Secondly, mix things up a bit and pray in a different way. Spice up your prayer life, to paraphrase the Spice Girls.

For either of these, there are ideas and links on the [church website](#) - or you could talk to someone you suspect has a good pattern of prayer.

But be reassured that if you are struggling to pray, if you don't know how to pray, then the Spirit is already busy doing that on your behalf. No words required.
Amen