**24th July 2022**

Call to worship

Come, let us worship the Lord,
the God of Abraham,
the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Let us seek God’s justice,
let us wonder at God’s mercy and grace.
Let us worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit

A prayer of approach

Our Father in heaven,
we come to worship you.
We gather as your people.
We seek your kingdom and its outworking among us,
yearning for the world’s sufficiency,
searching for peace and harmony, justice and fairness.
To you, our God, we come.
Amen.



A prayer of adoration

You, God, are the centre of our being,
the plumb line by which we measure our lives.
For you are God of all,
and all are your children.
You are the promise of what is right
and the measure of what is wrong.
You are the teacher of love, respect and understanding.
In you we find sufficiency and more.
It is you, O God, we worship.
It is you and your ways we adore.
It is you and your giving that shows us how to live our lives.
Amen.



A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness

A prayer of confession

Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
our prayers we have offered –
words spoken, erudite or muddled,
thoughts turned, feelings felt.
But all of this is nought
if we do not live out the yearnings of our praying.
All of this is nought,
if we do not turn our prayers to action.
In penitence and sorrow,
we offer now our lives to you,
seeking to know your forgiveness
and desiring to live by your ways.
Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Our words, dear God, are so often hollow and empty,
your word is full and forever,
your word promises to forgive us,
it assures us of our freedom from past sins,
failings and falterings.
Let us hear now your word
and be set free to live our lives for you.
Amen.

We join our prayers together as we say the prayer Jesus taught us:

Our Father…..

ALL AGE

**Images for prayer**

**Widening our appreciation of different attitudes to prayer.**

* Display or give out copies of George Herbert’s ‘Prayer (1)’. See [George Herbert website](https://www.georgeherbert.org.uk/archives/selected_work_27.html) or [Interesting literature](https://interestingliterature.com/2017/12/a-short-analysis-of-george-herberts-prayer-i/). Read it together.
* After a string of images for prayer, it concludes with ‘something understood’. Ask each person to choose a line that appeals to them, to work out what it means. The commentary and notes given on the linked web pages may be helpful.
* Once the line is ‘decoded’, think about it/that subject or theme – and indeed about prayer in general – as ‘something understood’.

Other suggestions at <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/120-july-august-2022-c/proper-12/explore-and-respond>

**Prayer (I)**

BY [GEORGE HERBERT](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/george-herbert)

**Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,**

**God's breath in man returning to his birth,**

**The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,**

**The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth**

**Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,**

**Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,**

**The six-days world transposing in an hour,**

**A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;**

**Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,**

**Exalted manna, gladness of the best,**

**Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,**

**The milky way, the bird of Paradise,**

**Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,**

**The land of spices; something understood.**

Prayer (I)’ is so named because Herbert wrote several poems which were given the title ‘Prayer’. But this, the first, is the most famous and best-loved. What is ‘Prayer’ about?[[1]](#endnote-1)

In summary, George Herbert offers in ‘Prayer’ a series of synonyms or definitions for the act of prayer, and what it means to the worshipper: the ‘church’s banquet’ suggests Holy Communion, an intimate connection with God; since angels live forever, an ‘angels’ age’ is another way of saying ‘eternity’; ‘God’s breath in man returning to his birth’ refers to the moment in Genesis when God breathed life into Adam, the first man, thus returning modern man to ‘his birth’ as a species, when Adam was created. Prayer is the ‘soul in paraphrase’ because when we pray we put into words the often deep and complex emotions surging through our soul; and prayer is the ‘heart in pilgrimage’ because it is part of man’s journey towards God, an ongoing process of living as a good Christian.

The rest of the poem continues to offer such comparisons, things which are likened to the experience of prayer: prayer is like a ‘plummet’ which reaches not only the whole world but heaven too; prayer is like a siege engine which can be used to reach God, ‘th’ Almighty’, or a siege tower which can be used by man to climb up to God; prayer is also like a thunderbolt that man is capable of firing up towards heaven, reversing the usual direction of thunder. ‘Christ-side-piercing spear’ is a reference to the spear that pierced Christ’s side at the Crucifixion, and suggests that a prayer is a direct way of reaching the heart of God.

According to Genesis, the Earth and the heavens were created in just six days, but Herbert states that prayer can transform the world in just one hour. Prayer is ‘a kind of tune’ that is heard but also feared – because prayer has the power to change the world.

The ninth line signals a change of tone, as Herbert’s use of words like ‘Softness’ and ‘peace’ denotes a less earth-shatteringly fearsome idea of prayer. Prayer is like manna from heaven – but unlike manna, prayer travels the other way, back up to God. The phrase ‘man well dressed’ conjures up an image of a person in their Sunday best, the smart clothes they wear to church, reminding us that, whilst prayer may take place somewhere more private and personal, it is a holy connection such as we experience when we go to church. From this image we’re back to the grandness of the cosmos (the ‘milky way’) and to the exalted heights of heaven (the Bird of Paradise, the legend says, remains in flight and never comes down to earth), although the exotic habitat of the Bird of Paradise is also echoed in the reference to the ‘land of spices’. And then the poem ends with the very simple words: ‘something understood’.

The whole of the poem, it’s worth noting, constitutes just one extended sentence (although it’s not really a proper sentence even, since it lacks a main verb – suggesting that prayer is never finished and cannot be pinned down to the temporal world), building towards that final clause comprising just two simple words: ‘something understood’. These words, we might say, also neatly encapsulate the meaning of the poem: although a prayer is understood, precisely *what*is understood remains uncertain – just ‘something’, a decidedly vague word. Similarly, the poem’s images and references move between the grand and awesome (comparing prayer to the Creation or the Crucifixion) and the simple and small (‘Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss’). Something remains intangible and inexplicable, something resists straightforward analysis, about the power of prayer.

Is ‘Prayer’ a sonnet? It appears to conform to [**the English sonnet form**](https://interestingliterature.com/2015/05/25/interesting-facts-about-the-sonnet/), which rhymes *ababcdcdefefgg*; but that third quatrain gives us pause for thought: since *bliss*and *Paradise* form a more natural pair than *bliss*and *drest*, and *best*and *drest* fit together more than *best*and *Paradise*, Herbert has clearly deviated from the expected *efef* rhyme here and offered, instead, *effe*. If we wanted to go into more technical detail here, we might say this makes the poem a curious mixture between the English sonnet and the Italian sonnet, with the poem comprising two quatrains and a final sestet rhymed *effegg*, but let’s not complicate things unnecessarily. Occam’s razor, if you’re too sharp for your own good, can only help you to cut yourself. The basic analytical point worth making (perhaps) is that this is more or less an English sonnet but with a surprising deviation from the expected rhyme scheme in the third quatrain.

A prayer for all ages together

Look at your hands *(look at hands)*;
our hands are God’s hands.

Stamp your feet *(stamp feet)*;
our feet are God’s feet.

Close your eyes *(hands over eyes)*;
our eyes are God’s eyes.

Let us use our hands *(wave hands)*,
our feet *(stamp feet)*
and our eyes *(look round at everyone)*
to do God’s work on earth.
Amen.

**Bible readings: Psalm 85 Luke 11.1-13;**

**Sermon**

The wedding season is in full swing. I offer a marriage course to couples wanting to get married which deals not so much with the big day, the ceremony, but with the marriage relationship. Primarily it deals with the quality of their communication. How well they talk, listen, express their deepest beliefs hopes and expectations and how they deal with frustrations anger and conflict. Communication is so important in any relationship.

There was a couple from the north of England who were having marriage problems and went to see a counsellor. The wife said ‘I need some affirmation. he never tells me he loves me’

The husband replied’ I told you I love you on our wedding day. If anything changes, I’ll let you know’

You may have had a big ceremony, you may have a marriage certificate and therefore you may point to the fact that you are married. But the marriage is about more than the official certificate and turning up for big events.

Similarly as a Christian, we may have been baptised, we may attend church but the essence of our relationship with God is about communication – how we pray.

That’s why the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. They obviously saw how prayer changed his life. They saw the results of his conversations with his heavenly Father and thought we could do with some of that. Help us have the faith you have.

As a church we are the best adverts for the Christian faith. People are watching us and looking at our lives. There may be times when they ask us the reason for the hope we have in Christ, can we be prepared to help them at that point and say something about life, faith, prayer?

Some people take God for granted. Some people don’t even consider God unless something bad happens. Others want to tell us faith is infantile –only for the kids – certainly not for thinking people.

I think it’s a good thing when people have such views. I’d rather have impassioned debate than apathy. I’d rather had someone who is not afraid to cause offence in search of the truth than someone who is not going to rock the boat because they want to be polite. Jesus was provocative. He asked the awkward questions. He put people on the spot – ‘what do you think?’ ‘Who do you say I am?’ In our passage from Luke’s gospel he encourages people to ask, and to seek and to knock – only when you have this attitude will you have a chance of receiving, of finding and having the door opened.

There are three types of people in the world. Those in camp A: of people who have found God; those in camp B who are seeking God; those in camp C who aren’t interested. There’s no advantage in being in Camp C. Unless God does something dramatic (and I know the testimony of a few people where this is the case) Camp C is a dead end. It’s populated by close minded people who refuse to be open to seek after the truth. So de-camp. Seek. Ask people of faith why they have faith (they are supposed to be ready to give an answer for the hope they have in them), pick up a Bible, pray the seeker’s prayer ‘God if you’re there reveal yourself to me. Put people in my life, books, signs, messages to help me discover who you are. Seek –and you’ll find.

There can however be something too smug about being in Camp A – I have Jesus in my life and I know all the answers to life’s questions. There is a sense in which we are all seekers. Those who have found Jesus discover he says don’t stand still – come follow me, carry your cross, hang on to my light in the darkness. This is grown up spirituality. Not a religion of the quick fix.

Rabbi Heschel said ‘Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living’.

When those disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray he of course gave them the Lord’s prayer.

The words of the Lord's Prayer are perhaps the most familiar in the Bible. We can often take them for granted and actually miss what they are saying. How many of us will really hear the words from St Luke in this Sunday's gospel passage (Luke 11.1-13)? Or will we translate them in our heads into the words with which we are familiar from a lifetime of saying them? In Luke's gospel, the Lord's Prayer is starker, briefer. There is no 'your will be done' or 'on earth as it is in heaven'. Luke's version cuts to the quick: your name be hallowed, your kingdom come, give us what we need for today, forgive us as we forgive others and don't lead us into testing. There is no praise, confession, thanksgiving or intercession in the prayer. It has five petitions. The first two relate to God; the final three have to do with the human need for nourishment, forgiveness and protection from oppressive condemnation.

However, the whole section is more than the prayer. It focuses on the God of the prayer. The disciples want to know the secret of Jesus’ intimacy in prayer with God.

 There is no easy answer. Praying to God as Father offers an informal intimacy which is reinforced by the parable about a late-night request and promises of ready response. Both are open to misunderstanding.

The use of the translation ‘persistence' (NRSV) or 'shameless audacity’ (NIV) (v. 8) suggests a less than willing response to need. Some commentators suggest that this turns the parable into an example of what God is not: a grumpy neighbour.

However, the persistence is to do with the demands of cultural hospitality. Both they and friendship would rouse the neighbour. He would have no choice. Inaction was not an option.

But neither is indulgence. The direct language of verses 9 and 10 would suggest that God is hostage to his own generosity. The corrective is in verses 11 and 12. A caring parent knows when to draw the line, and a heavenly father would know whether or not our petitions serve the kingdom and act accordingly. So, our relationship with God is simple, intimate and at the same time complex and mysterious.

My wife works for the Diocese of Gloucester helping Church of England Primary Schools have a Christian distinctiveness and supporting RE. She talks about prayer being about the Wows, Nows and Ows of life. The things that make us wonder and adore (the wows). The needs and concerns of the present (the Nows) and the pain of life and the unanswered questions (the Ows). It is a vital conversation with the cosmos, with God.

Pete Greig in his book ‘How to Pray’ tells a story of an advertising executive who became a Christian but said that he was too busy to carve out a daily time of prayer. ‘It’s easy for you’, he told his pastor. ‘You have all the time in the world, but I can’t fit anything else into my life’.

But the pastor pushed back with a gentle challenge. ‘You know’, he said, ‘I’ve always managed to make time for the things I really value.’ That new believer went away and bought himself a really nice rocking chair, set it down in front of the window in his house, and began to get up just twenty minutes earlier each day to sit in the rocking chair, read the bible and pray.

As he maintained this simple, daily rhythm, his wife and colleagues began to notice that he was becoming less scattered, more peaceful and kind. That rocking chair was becoming his thin place, to use an ancient Celtic expression for those places were the gap between heaven and earth seems thinner, where we feel closer to God.

Months turned into years, a daily discipline became a holy habit, and then one morning, as he sat there rocking, the Lord invited him to quit his job, sell the family home and relocate from Chicago to Colorado where a church needed his help. It was a life changing event that launched his entire family into a new and remarkably fruitful season of life.

Several years later, that successful executive was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of incurable cancer, but he continued to keep his appointments with God each morning in that chair. During his last remaining days he found strength there in prayer for the hardest transition of them all.

The day of his funeral dawned and a friend found his grieving wife still gazing at that rocking chair. ‘What are you going to do with now?’ he enquired. ‘Oh we ‘re going to pass it down to our children and grandchildren,’ she replied without hesitation. ‘I love to think of them sitting in it the way my husband did, unburdening their hearts, listening to the Lord, letting him shape and direct their lives.’

Where’s your chair? Maybe its on a jog as you listen to a podcast? Maybe it whilst you wash up or are driving your car. I know when I’m driving the car most of the passengers are praying in the back! There is a teacher I know who turns up half an hour early to pray quietly over every single desk. Wherever you find your chair, try to visit it daily. Let I become your thin place, a sacred place that helps you walk and talk with god through the many twists and turns of life.

Christian tradition is about spirituality 'for the long haul', that is about growing into the love of Christ from which neither 'hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword' (Romans 8.35) can separate us.

The prayer that the Lord Jesus offers is exactly the prayer we need in these impatient quick fix times. The Didache, the earliest Christian writing outside the New Testament, which may in fact be earlier than some of the scripture in the canon, tells its readers to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day. Three times a day we are advised to ask for forgiveness, so likely is it that we will have slipped from the new man into the depressing familiarity of the old. Three times a day we need to be reminded that other people will behave towards us in such a way that we shall need to forgive them.

Life, even in the Christian community, is complicated. We shall not always behave in the way to which we aspire. That the Lord tells us to pray like this should encourage us that our complex and messy attempts at Christian living and Christian community are not some horrible fall from grace, but the place where our corners are rubbed off, the context in which we learn patience and gentleness and humility.

Let us not take God for granted. Let us not take our faith for granted. Let us not take our environment for granted. Let us continue to pray ‘God give us our daily bread and forgive us as we forgive those who have done us wrong’. And may God bless us and shine his light on our darkness.

Prayers of intercession

Our prayers for others bring us to our knees in gratitude for what we have and in desiring for the needs of those around us.

Holy Spirit of God,
Hear our prayer.

Having experienced heatwaves which floored and discomforted so many of us, we pray for all those across the world who daily have to deal with such temperature extremes. Those whose houses are flimsy and unstable and uninsulated against cold or heat, those who have no place to find retreat and rest from the heat. Lands become parched more readily and crops wither. Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya are facing extreme hunger if rains don’t come soon. May we and all the world find ways to support each other and reduce our impact on the climate, that all, now and in the future may live more sustainable, healthy lives with food enough for the day.

Holy Spirit of God,
Hear our prayer.

For all those who work in Social Care and the Health Services in our country and around the world, where underfunding, lack of resources, lack of support and misuse and abuse by so many causes stress to staff, deteriorating care at crisis times, delayed diagnosis and insufficient support. We pray for those who work, who plan for, who fund and who need to use such services.

Holy Spirit of God,
Hear our prayer.

For governments and regimes around the globe who find themselves in turmoil. We pray for a wider recognition of the needs of all and seek equality and fairness for all humanity. We pray that we may, in our small way, be part of the solution. For those who seek to flee corrupt and violent regimes and who put themselves in danger to simply find a better way of life. May they find, welcome, care, love, support and guidance as they journey.

Holy Spirit of God,
Hear our prayer.

For those without faith or moral compass, who do not seek the Kingdom of God, the support and love of God, who do not seek or know the burning of the Holy Spirit in their lives. We pray they may see the spark in others and be drawn to faith and find the love and comfort that faith can bring.

Holy Spirit of God,
Hear our prayer.

For those who still work tirelessly on Covid research and prevention. For those who diagnose and nurse, who support and care for those infected. For those who still need to shield to keep safe and virus free. For those who suffer from long Covid and all whose mental health has been impacted by the virus and the change in our way of life, those who struggled with lockdowns and who find it hard to re-join society, who have become reclusive and fearful of being in crowds.

Holy Spirit of God,
Hear our prayer.

For the lost, the lonely, the ill, the dying and the bereaved, that in times of pain, confusion and grief they may find comfort in God, in family, friends or neighbour, in a touch, a word, a smile or companiable silence.

Holy Spirit of God,
Hear our prayer.

This day, these are our prayers for those whose lives touch our lives, our consciousness, our very being, they are the prayers for the people whose needs weigh heavily upon our hearts and lives.

Holy Spirit of God,
Hear our prayer. Amen.

A sending out prayer

Lord, help us to think before praying,
and pray before acting.
May we see our community
and the people who make it up
as precious to you and precious to us,
as we seek to preserve all that is beautiful
and build up all that is holy and Godly.
Amen

1. <https://interestingliterature.com/2017/12/a-short-analysis-of-george-herberts-prayer-i/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)