

Begin an adventure ... Let us Pray?

Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild, Look upon a little child ... God bless Mummy and Daddy and Jonathan and David and make Catherine a good girl tomorrow. Amen

The prayer at the head of this page is an ancient bedtime prayer taught to me by my Dad. Dad was taught it as a child by his father. Each evening without fail, Dad would see me into bed with the two important questions: 'have you cleaned your teeth?' and 'have you said your prayers?' I would get out of bed and clean my teeth and then after bedtime story, repeat the sentence above. I said it because my dad asked me to. I said it because it mattered to him. I said it because to not say it was unthinkable. Dad said Jesus wanted me to pray, so I prayed.

It's not a bad prayer! It opens well, giving a particular emphasis on the divine nature of our Saviour. Jesus is approachable and thoroughly non-scary to the small child. He fit well with the children's Bible picture-books of the 1970s; where an insubstantial, unreal and often footless Jesus floated, in vivid colour, across the pages of the New Testament with a benign grace and beneficent smile, radiating peace and love as he went. This was the Gentle Jesus of my childhood who has received such scorn in recent years for his sexless, emasculated floatiness and for being 'meek and mild'. It took years of mainly ignoring the limp-sounding mildness of Jesus to discover that there is strength in meekness and that gentleness has a power where great strength is used to nurture rather than to crush or destroy. (Galatians 5:22-24)

When Charles Wesley wrote *Gentle Jesus* as part of his series of 'Hymns for the youngest', it was the eighteenth century and children had a different status in society. Some might suggest that this passive image of Jesus for children was created in order to stop them from being disobedient and rude, a heavy emphasis being laid upon being more like Jesus. When Wesley was writing, faith in Jesus was the norm in respectable families of all social classes. The printed word was still gaining widespread use. Rhyme and pattern, a sound social understanding of the child's place and some correct theology were woven together into this prayer-song that has lasted for centuries. Passed down without the need for being written through many generations, 'Gentle Jesus' has been taught to children with a variety of alterations as deemed necessary.

In Wesley's time, children had been encouraged to see Jesus as deity who was removed and far above them. Today, children are considered capable of forming their own living relationship with Jesus and so to know that they are truly loved and noticed by the Living God.

I want my sons to see the strength, compassion and courage of Jesus and the limitless love of His Father. I want prayer to strengthen their lives in every way as they grow to understand themselves as God's children, co-heirs with Christ and for them to develop a dialogue with God which will shape and guide their lives.

The next phrase in the prayer is very much of the 'God sitting in a cloud' variety.
Look upon a little child ...

Here, we pray to Jesus who is far away, asking him to notice us in his divine busy-ness. There is a sense of awe and reverential deference as we ask for his notice, but this is at the expense of companionship, closeness and all things pertaining to relationship. Contrast this remote figure with the verse from Newton's *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds* (1764-1779)

“Jesus, my shepherd, brother, friend, my prophet, priest and King; My Lord, my life my way my end accept the praise I bring.”

Here, we see multiple aspects of the relationship with Jesus which build up a bigger picture of the nature of our saviour. I accept that the prayer is asking for Jesus’ blessing upon me as the pray-er, but my childish understanding was never that sophisticated. For although it is true that Jesus’ gaze or notice to light on me would be life-transforming, in reality, the prayer of my intentions or understanding was never more than “Dear Jesus ...” So, duly revered and blessed, I turned the blessing outward to my family and sometimes the dogs too. It was a nice thing to do. It was an early attempt at intercession, but I suspect the, ‘make Catherine a good girl tomorrow’ was an addition made by Dad to remind me to behave myself, as Mum would have been beleaguered by the two small boys who needed extra attention.

Gentle Jesus is not a ‘bad prayer’, but neither has it been useful in shaping prayers of the future. This was a prayer to a God who was remote and I never felt worthy to call on him. I am grateful to my parents who brought me up to know Jesus’ love and so, because of their commitment to my faith, prayer was never an alien concept nor Jesus a fable or fairytale.

Bedtime prayers with small children offer the parent a special opportunity to bond with their child on a spiritual level and to discover what is going on in the mind of their small person. Friends who have asked their toddler what they wish to pray for have had returned answers such as ‘ham’ and ‘juice’. At church, intercessions have been made for ‘healing of a rabbit’ and ‘a new cat’. Alongside this, I have watched as the whole gathered congregation, including the smallest children, has raised its collective hands in prayer for healing of a much loved member of the congregation, and later that day, the man’s foot was miraculously healed.

Prayers with children can restore some of the wide-eyed innocence of faith ... why not pray for ham? Jesus recounts, ‘*which of you fathers, if your son asks you for an egg would give him a scorpion instead ... how much more will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask him...*’ (Luke 11:12-13 NIV)

Ham is good, especially with eggs!

Juice is a necessary part of a small child’s life: Jesus says, ‘*come to me all you who are thirsty ...*’ (John 7:37) Learning to ask for what we need and correctly understanding the power of ‘I want’, is an important part of discovering how to pray.

We prayed at school. Nothing as ‘Enid Blyton’ as actually having a School Prayer as such, but equally remote and impersonal. The headmaster’s usual prayer in our assembly was short and mystifying:

Dear God be good to me: the sea is so wide and my boat is so small. Amen.

It has taken thirty years to unravel the code behind this prayer. We lived on the coast and we didn’t even own a boat, let alone a small one... and actually, at school, they said it wasn’t far to Norway, our nearest European coastline. I expect that this was simply a prayer that he knew and maybe he liked the boat imagery, but was it helpful? Again, the petition to the Divine God to take notice of the plight of us in our insignificance is not desperately useful in developing a growing relationship with Our Father in Heaven who loves us. The whole boat metaphor euphemises the human condition and indeed, struck parallels with the film *Jason and the Argonauts* (Columbia Pictures 1963) which was regularly aired on TV around that time. God would surely intervene in the unlikely event of my boat being attacked by clashing rocks, giant sea-serpents or similar catastrophe.

Learning to pray at school was of limited success. Earnest teachers, not necessarily of faith fulfilled their obligations to lead prayers which were well constructed but had no heart. Being a Church of England primary school we had the odd outing to the mother church, but being from the 'Methodist Chapel', I found it strange and cold. The prayer-book referred to Lambs at length and we wondered whether the huge eagle-shaped lectern was actually the golden cockerel¹ from the children's school song. Of course, we knew the Lord's Prayer and could faultlessly recite it with our 'hands together and our eyes closed' de rigueur, but of the nature and substance of prayer, we learned precious little.

Our earliest experiences of prayer can colour our view of what prayer is and shape our personal practises as we grow in faith and maturity. Learning to pray is one of the most life-giving activities we can engage in. Can prayer be successfully taught? Do the child-like prayers of bedtime and Sunday School offer a sound base from which the fledgling Christian can earn their wings of prayer?

Learning to pray is such a crucial part of the faith relationship we have with God through Jesus that it is frightening to analyse some of the methods by which prayer is taught. In the liberal 1970s, prayers were learnt and with them came a subtext that robbed them of any power: We prayed because it was the right thing to do, and as children who had not yet lost the inheritance of faith left by our grandparents, ditching Church and any remnant of faith for a gym membership or 'well-earned' [sic] lie in on a Sunday morning. We prayed at bedtime, said grace at meal-times (*For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful, Amen*), we learned the Lord's prayer at school and attended Church Parade with Guides and Scouts, the Girls' Brigade and Boys' Brigade, making up amusing 'graces' at camp for meals. (*Rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub* etc) Yes, we learned prayers, but did we ever learn to pray?

*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child -
Pity my simplicity and suffer me to come to thee. Amen* Charles Wesley 1741

I'm thankful to my Dad, and to the many other parents who prayed at night with their children, for altering the second line of this prayer and giving it a vernacular that was recognised could be adapted to suit the situation. I'm grateful to my primary school for the boat prayer which has made me think so hard about what it means to pray. I fondly remember the primary school dinner ladies who made prayer ordinary, fitting the school dinner between a sandwich of grace, the starting pistol for eating being; "*Hands together, eyes closed, elbows from the table. For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful, Amen.*" Whilst proceedings were concluded and the school dismissed to the playground with; "*Hands together, eyes closed, elbows from the table. For what we have received may the Lord make us truly thankful, Amen.*" To pray like this required no qualification, no real expertise; mainly the requirement to being able to pray was simply the will to do it.

In praying to God, we discover who he is and through looking at the world through His lens of love, we find our own attitudes and issues challenged, shaped and changed. Learning to pray can often mean laying down long-used forms and rituals in order to find the relationship at the heart of our faith. Prayer without the real presence of Jesus is no more than a thought, a nod in the right direction. Without Jesus, prayer lacks heart and

¹ The Golden Cockerel by Margaret Rose, sung often at primary school from *Someone's Singing*, A&C Black Ltd, 1973

the desire to know what is in his will for us. Jesus' real presence gives prayer the honesty of conversation: questions asked and answered, challenges offered and wrestled with, hope expressed and entered into.

Prayer as a pillar of our faith can be one of the most difficult disciplines to master. Should it be full of rhyme and rhythm, a pattern of language which is familiar and easy to wield? Should it be packed with liturgical form and the rigour of centuries of pious use? Should it be formulaic, tracing the same lines day by day, delivering them with a twist as mood or need dictate? If we are to mean our prayers, should each one be unique, freshly constructed for each prayer-time, laced with the intricacy and intimacy that express a real and active relationship with the Father?

We need to learn to properly learn to pray in order to answer some of these questions for ourselves.