

# Learning to pray

by Cherry Bwalya

**Every Christian knows how to pray. Right? It's something that comes naturally when you become a Christian. Yes? Well, maybe not.**

Every Christian knows how to pray. Right? It's something that comes naturally when you become a Christian. Yes? Well, maybe not. No Christian wants to admit to having difficulty in this area, but I suspect that many, like me, struggle with this staple of Christian life. How exactly are we to pray? What should we say? Is there a right or wrong way? When should we pray?

I struggle to find the words to express my thoughts and feelings. Some people seem to have it figured out, and have developed particular rituals to accompany prayer. For example, my mother believes that you should follow a particular pattern when giving thanks at mealtimes. All the food dishes must be uncovered, and then you must thank God not only for the food you are about to eat but also for protecting those who have prepared it from harm. And that's just for starters. The prayer lasts for at least five minutes ending with a very loud 'AMEN!' No quiet, dignified, whispered 'Amen' is acceptable. It works for her.

Being a more hesitant supplicant I find myself falling back on memorised scripts learned in childhood. There is something to be said about instilling good habits in children early in life. I prefer one of these set prayers to my own hesitant attempts, which I worry, are inadequate and not good enough for God. I also find it easier to sing my prayers. Those talented songwriters seem to have somehow translated into words thoughts and emotions I wish I could have expressed myself!

Then there is the practice of praying aloud. I find it hard enough praying when it's just God and me. With an audience it is well nigh impossible. The words, such as come to mind, cling to the back of the throat, reluctant to see the light of day. Does the lack of natural ability in the area of public prayer mean you are an immature Christian or a lesser one? I think not. Just as not everyone is given the talent for public speaking, not everyone is given the talent for public praying. It's a gift to be celebrated if you possess it, but not to feel guilt-ridden about if you do not.

I also wonder how I should address God. My natural inclination is to talk to him informally, like chatting to a close friend. But surely the Creator of all things is a powerful being that deserves to be approached more formally with reverence? The uncomfortable truth is that prayer comes more easily to me in times of difficulty. And at such times it is the powerful persona that I address. Help me Lord! Where are you? How could you? Why didn't you?

Conversely, I consciously have to remember – and often forget – to pray and give thanks at times when things are going well. Times that I would naturally

share with a close friend. When I got the job I wanted; when I bought my first house; when I celebrated my 40th birthday.

I find it somewhat comforting to know that I am in very good company with my prayer dilemma. It is a problem that the first men and women to follow Jesus also struggled with. Fortunately, they could go straight to the man who has the answers<sup>1</sup>. Jesus, when asked, told them exactly how they, and we, should pray; what we should say.<sup>2</sup> His model prayer is quite clear. It's simple and covers every angle. So why do I still have these dilemmas? Perhaps I just need to stop a while, get back to basics and learn from the Master.<sup>3</sup>

1 Luke 11:1

2 Matthew 6:5-13

3 Luke 11:9-10

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