



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, January 29, 2012
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.

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Sermon Series: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray"
SERMON 1: PRAYER—WHAT IT IS

Today we begin "Lord, Teach Us to Pray," a series of Sunday Evensong sermons that will run weekly through May 20 (save Palm Sunday and Easter Day). We did a similar sermon series last year on the Apostles' Creed, to which there was a very encouraging response, first of all from the congregation present for them, and then also from our visitors on the web. Those sermons on the Apostles' Creed are still on the Saint Thomas website, in both oral and written forms, and they continue to receive (as we now say) "hits" every day.

My task this evening is to set something of the context this new series. I am going to unpack the definition of prayer as we have it in the catechism. Next week, Father Daniels will speak on "Father," that is to say, on what *Christian* prayer is. And then we will go through the Lord's Prayer, phrase by phrase, week by week, with an interlude in Eastertide when we will insert four sermons on the types of prayer (praise, petition, and so forth). The schedule of weekly topics can be found on a poster in the Narthex and also on our website.

There is a lot of interest in prayer. I can't speak for you personally, but from my vantage point on humanity, it seems to me there's something inside us that's reaching out, seeking, searching, longing. Sometimes it hits us as tears, which come out of nowhere but are just there, the dampness in the corner of the eye. What is that about?, we might wonder. So we yearn and we long. And yet, often at the same time, we don't know what to think about prayer. What words should we use? What sorts of things are appropriate to put into a prayer? When should we pray, and for how long? Should we pray in our own words, or in words that have been written down by someone else?

I think that most of us have both these things: we have an inchoate, inarticulate yearning, and we have lots of questions about prayer. My first task today is to separate out those two things. It falls to future preachers in this series to speak to when and how to pray and with what words and all those matters. The disciples of Jesus had been with him for quite awhile before they made the request that forms the title of this series, "Lord, teach us to pray." Before they could learn about prayer, before they could ask Jesus to teach them about prayer, many things had already happened to them: they had seen Jesus heal and teach, they had been with him in private and in public, they knew and loved him, and first of all, he had called them.

What is it, then, about us, before we ask those questions about prayer? It is this state of longing, of yearning. Can you remember the first time you walked into a church? I remember the first time I stepped into Zion Church up in Wappingers Falls. It was a little dark. It was very quiet. It felt slightly dank. But my eyes were lifted up to a barely-perceptible figure of Christ in little pieces of gold glass. I recall, too, the first time I stepped into the Church of the Resurrection, near Zion, in Hopewell Junction. It was a small, light and airy church, sunlight hitting the altar, and in the air the smell of wax and incense. And I remember the first weekday that I stepped into Saint Thomas's. I came in from the hot July pavement to a coolness and awesomeness that swept over my heart.

For some of us, anyway, we become aware of these yearnings of our heart in particular places, often religious places where, as dear Eliot says, "prayer has been valid." But, of course, yearnings are within us, and we can become aware of them anywhere. Why is it that we have these longings?

Saint Augustine ventures an answer at the end of the first paragraph of his *Confessions*. He begins by proclaiming with the Psalmist that the Lord is great and greatly should he be praised. But then he wonders if he is able to praise God rightly: do you have to know who God is before you praise him? Or is God someone that you can get to know *only by* praising him? This is a vicious intellectual circle, and it pertains to the problem about prayer. If we don't know who God is, then how can we know we are really praying to God and not mistaken? But how can we know God unless we pray? A vicious circle, and we would be helplessly trapped except for the fact that *God has taken the initiative!* God, Augustine says, has made us for himself, and, quote, "our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

The very restlessness of our hearts, the inchoate yearnings that we ever bear about with us—these point to the most important thing about prayer, namely, that *God has already acted in us, even before we pray*. Our longings themselves are the evidence that God is already at work in us.

Which brings me to the definition of prayer: "Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words." So says the catechism. And the most important word in that definition, the word I want you to remember, is *responding*. Before it is anything else, prayer is a response to something that God has already done.

And what is it that God has done? He has created you. He has given you life and breath and everything. But even more: as Augustine says, he has made you for himself. Which is to say (the thing that perhaps is said too often, or too lightly, but it's really the most profound thing about us), God loves you. And the sign that he loves you is this terrible longing, this yearning, that even if you run away from it you can never quite shake it off. There's something already in us, and something has already happened to us. Yearning, after all, is a sign of love.

Everything you do or think in response to that, is prayer. Walking into a church. Comforting a friend. Making a sandwich for a stranger. Weeping in your closet. Lighting a candle. Reading the Bible. Anything can be a prayer, and anything is a prayer when it is done in response to God, in response to this yearning that is within us; a movement of our restless hearts who are seeking the one in whom they can rest.