

It's Only Words And Words Are All I Have

May 24, 2020

By Rev Paul Graham

Read [Acts 1:12-14](#)



Some years ago, I spent my working hours endeavouring to teach computer skills to the healthcare workers of Swindon's hospital. A thankless task, as many of them resented the time spent away from clinics and wards in order to be shown how to manipulate x-rays and scans on screens. It was all in the name of progress; the move to a new hospital gave the opportunity to do away with the old lightboxes. There was the chance to embrace new technology to manipulate the images to show fractures, tumours and all sorts of clinical nastiness in increased clarity.

To me, having been brought up in the infancy of the computer boom, these tasks seemed relatively straightforward; a quick click of the mouse here, the press of a few keys there and magic happened on screen before our very eyes. What became a salve to those troubled by the time wasted in the IT Training Room was a compromise: I would show them how to work the system, they would explain what body part we were looking at and why. All this made for a more enjoyable experience than it could have been, particularly on frantic days when the hospital was bursting at the seams with patients, all with higher priority needs than my course could compete with. And quite right too.

However, what struck me was that for some, computer skills are second-nature, whereas for others I might have had more success teaching them hamster cloning in Sanskrit (not something I'm adept at, but

I'm a quick learner). There were those who were keen, able and willing. For them, the time flew by and I learned so much from them about CTs and MRIs. Then there were those who were reluctant, unable and unwilling. Some were incapable through impatience, others just didn't get to grips with the concept, let alone the practical. There were others who almost took a sadistic delight in their ignorance; almost pathologically opposed to understanding as if IT illiteracy were a badge of honour to be worn on the wards. Most of this was down to misunderstanding the purpose of what I was trying to teach; a tool to enable them to make accurate diagnoses and to better support patient care.

Which leads me nicely, if slightly obliquely, to this morning's passage and its relevance to today. We join those good men and women as they settle into a new post-Jesus existence. They can be found in the Upper Room, a place of safety and sanctuary, as they await the uncertainty of the future together.

While they are waiting, they pray. What form their prayers take, we don't know; Luke isn't interested in the mechanics or the words, we just want us to note the pattern. They were "constantly in prayer" and no-one was excluded. Luke even gives special mention to the inclusion of members of Jesus' family and the women who had accompanied Jesus through his ministry. The disciples are listed and Jesus' mother Mary is specifically named. This was the family at prayer; the fledgling Christian community starting out life on its knees, not in weakness, but as a sign of the strength that comes from communicating in the manner that Jesus set down.

And, as the saying goes, 'twas ever thus.

It is when the church gets down to the business of prayer that the world shifts on its axis. Revivals, like the one in the Welsh valleys of the early twentieth century, was ignited and sustained through fervent prayer. More recent examples include the Day of Prayer called by King George VI during what turned out to be the final days of the Second World War and the continuing and current engagement with prayer through the "Thy Kingdom Come" initiative (lighting beacons of hope not just in this country, but across the world).

But this can present a problem for many; what does prayer look like on these occasions (or maybe at any time)? How do we pray if, following the disciples' example, we are to do it constantly? Are we supposed to take this literally, in which case how do we conduct mealtimes? What happens when family life comes crashing in, there's shopping to do, the phone rings, or there's something important on the telly?

This is the mystery of defining prayer in terms like the passage uses. Trying to find a one-size-fits-all practical way of sustaining prayer is difficult. Jesus gave us a form of prayer that is a useful springboard, a "starter for 10" as it were. We call it The Lord's Prayer and it has sustained people through thick and thin for the last 2000 years. It's a wide-ranging prayer that covers many bases, but it's also quite short. Earlier in the COVID-19 crisis, it was discovered that instead of singing "Happy Birthday" twice, saying the Lord's Prayer once was sufficiently long enough to give hands a thorough wash. So, I think we can assume that those in the Upper Room didn't just say that and have done with it over the days between Ascension and Pentecost.

Prayer can take many forms. There is intercessory prayer, when people, places and situations are named before God; not because he's forgotten them, but that we remind ourselves that they are out there and in need of our compassion while God ministers there. There is confessional prayer, when we are reminded of God's grace being sufficient for all sin, if only we'd be willing to admit we've committed any. There is thankful prayer, sometimes the most difficult kind of prayer depending on our situations, but also when we realise how ungrateful we can be. The list goes on...

Prayer techniques are also varied; silent prayer, spoken prayer, even sung prayer are all valid for certain times and certain places. Prayer posture, whether kneeling or standing, with eyes closed or open, are all dependent more on circumstance than on their effectiveness. Though God is no more accessible if you

pray with your eyes closed, it is definitely not the best method of praying while driving. However, it may help to focus if you follow Jesus' command to separate yourself away when praying (Matthew 6:6).

Some people seem to be able to pray as if it were just an extension of their very being; they always have the right words to say just at the right time. There are others for whom prayer is more of a struggle; each phrase seems to come with a question mark at the end as if checking that it will pass some theological test for accuracy. And then there are others for whom prayer is too much like hard work; there is too much baggage, too much at stake and there is a fear that saying the wrong thing or doing it the wrong way makes attempting it not worth the risk.

Whatever method you choose, whatever attitude you take, whatever pose you strike, the key message of the passage is to pray. I'm convinced that one of the reasons that Luke doesn't go into detail about the prayers of those in the Upper Room is that they probably stumbled over their words, went through all kinds of false starts and more than likely felt that their words weren't worthy of reaching their intended destination. Let's face it, they had the advantage of being with Jesus, who certainly knew how to pray, but had showed in other instances that they weren't able to follow the teacher as intended.

So be reassured. What words you use are mostly up to you, besides starting with some recognition of who you're praying to and finishing with an "amen" ("so be it" or, Star Trek fashion, "make it so") as is the common convention. You may find assistance in the prayers written by others, or you may just want to busk it. God is listening and, judging by the results of the prayers in the Upper Room, is prepared to respond.

But that's a story for another day...

Amen.

(Image by [StockSnap](#) from [Pixabay](#))