

WEEK 1: TUESDAY

At the very heart of Jesus' vision of the kingdom — of heaven's kingdom coming on earth — we have a picture of one person, secretly in their own room, praying.

Prayer is a mystery. I've often heard people saying, with a sneer, 'It doesn't go beyond the ceiling, you know.' But the point of prayer, at least the way Jesus saw it, is that it doesn't have to. Your father, he says, is there in the secret place with you. He sees and knows your deepest thoughts and hopes and fears. He hears the words you say. He hears, too, the things you can't put into words but want to lay before him anyway. Prayer, in fact, isn't a mystery in the sense of 'a puzzle we can't understand'. Prayer is a symptom, a sign, of the mystery: the fact that heaven and earth actually mingle together. There are times when they interlock; there are places where they overlap. To pray, in this sense, is to claim a time and place — it can be anywhere, any time — as one of those times, one of those places.

If prayer is about heaven and earth overlapping in time and space, it's also about them coming together in matter, in the stuff of this world, the clay from which we are made. To pray, in this sense, is to claim — think about it and realize just how daring this is! — that the living God, enthroned in heaven, can make his home with you, within you. To make this point vividly, go into your room in secret and pray there. Take God seriously.

But, when you do so, realize one more thing. If prayer is about heaven and earth coming together at one time, in one place, within the lump of clay we call 'me', then it's going to change this person called 'me'. In particular, it's going to make me a forgiver. Jesus was quite clear about this. All of us have been hurt, wounded, slighted, annoyed by other people. How much more have we ourselves done that to God! Yet we want him to be with us, to hear us, and — yes! — to forgive us. How can we not be forgivers too?

So the great prayer comes together. Utterly simple, utterly profound. A child can learn it; an old, wise saint will still be going deeper into it. Heaven is not far away, and it's where we meet the God who, with breathtaking confidence, we can call 'Father'. Familiarity must not imply contempt. His very name is holy, and we must honour it as such. And what we most want — the strange phenomenon of which prayer itself is a supreme example! — is that his kingdom should come and his will be done on earth as in heaven. When we pray, we pray for that goal but we also pray within that promise.

We then place our needs, whether simple or complex, within that framework. Bread for the day ahead. Forgiveness of debt — the debts we owe to God, the debts too (this may surprise some) we owe one another. And then, importantly, rescue: rescue from the time of testing, of trial, whether that be personal temptation, frequently repeated, or the 'tribulation' which Jesus, like many others of his day, believed would come upon the world before God's deliverance finally dawned.

And rescue, too, from the evil one. Much of Jesus' public career was a battle with the powers of darkness. That isn't surprising, since he was announcing that God was taking back control of the world from those powers. When we pray this prayer, we are caught up in that battle, too. But we don't face the danger alone. We claim his victory, his rescue, rather than face danger alone,

his deliverance. The mystery of prayer. This prayer lies at the very centre of the 'sermon on the mount'. It should be at the centre of our life, our own kingdom-obedience.

TODAY

Lord, teach us to pray; teach us to forgive; make us your people. Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory.