



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> January 2009  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Daniel 9

For God's Sake!

'I often say my prayers, but do I ever pray?  
And do my thoughts go with the words I say?  
I might as well kneel down and pray to gods of  
stone,  
As offer to the living God a prayer of words  
alone.'

I don't know what your personal experience of prayer is, but most of us would say we struggle with prayer. Before I was converted, I said many prayers; but I sensed they were all just bouncing off the ceiling, deflected back down to me. I was not getting through to anyone. Is that your experience, if you're honest with yourself?

But in the last 41 years since my conversion, when I have had the privilege of real communication with the living God, it has still often been a struggle. So I may have been at it for over 40 years now, but still I feel a complete beginner. What about you? What's your own personal experience of prayer?

Tonight we are looking at one of the great prayers of the Bible in Daniel chapter 9; and we can learn about prayer by example, by listening to others pray—Jesus taught His disciples to pray by giving them an example, a model: The Lord's Prayer.

Do you remember A.A. Milne?—'Hush, hush, whisper who dares—Christopher Robin is saying his prayers.' Well, one sermon on Daniel 9 I've listened to had that as a subtitle—'Hush, hush, whisper who dares—The prophet Daniel is saying his prayers.' And we are privileged to listen in. So let's check out our own understanding and experience of prayer against Daniel's. We may have much to learn.

I am sure you remember a bit about Daniel. He was the bright young Jew taken off into exile into Babylon by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century Before Christ. He was recruited for the king's service along with his three friends: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (or Shake-a-bed, Make-a-bed, and Into-bed-you-go, as my uncle used to say). And Daniel stayed there in Babylon a great many years serving the king, interpreting royal dreams and strange visions, refusing to compromise, surviving lion's dens and regime changes; until we get into the second half of the book, chapters seven onwards, which concerns Daniel's own dreams and visions, and which is a lot harder to understand than those great stories about fiery furnaces, disembodied hands writing on Palace walls, and hungry lions which we are so familiar with.

But you know it is actually the second half, the last six chapters of the book of Daniel, that get quoted in the New Testament. The New Testament writers focus all their attention there, in that bit of the book of Daniel that you and I never look at if we can help it. So we need to grapple with these difficult chapters.

Indeed chapter nine exemplifies the difficulty, that we experience in the second half of the book, in miniature: The first two verses place the chapter in history we can understand. *<sup>1</sup>In the first year of Darius son of Ahasuerus (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom—<sup>2</sup>in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.* It is about 539BC, approximately 70 years after Daniel had

been taken into exile. Then verses 3-19 contain Daniel's great prayer. But in verses 20-27 the angel Gabriel turns up to help Daniel understand, and it all seems to go completely pear-shaped, because Gabriel's 'explanation' is extremely hard to understand. In fact he appears to achieve the opposite of what he intended to achieve—He came to bring understanding and he completely confuses. The last four verses of the chapter are the most difficult text in the whole book of Daniel to understand; and—discretion being the better part of valour—I am going to leave them for now; and we are going to concentrate first on Daniel's prayer.

### **1. It is a prayer rooted in the Bible**

<sup>2</sup>*In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.* <sup>3</sup>*So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.* That's interesting because Jeremiah had died only a few decades earlier than Daniel was writing, but Daniel already regarded his words as Scripture. And he realised the exile now had just about lasted 70 years (one normal human lifetime). So it was a good time to be praying about Jeremiah's prophecy. And the rest of Daniel's prayer is a mosaic of phrases taken from all over the Old Testament. <sup>4</sup>*I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands,* <sup>5</sup>*we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws."* You can hear the echoes of other bits of the Old Testament if you are familiar with it. Daniel's faith and his praying were rooted in what God had already said.

God is a speaking God, and so real prayer is always a conversation, a dialogue: He speaks to us, and we can speak to Him. If we try to pray without listening to God's voice, it is like only one side of a conversation—like overhearing one of those travellers who shouts into his mobile phone on the train journey to London, and the whole carriage gets to hear, but benefits not at all. There can be no real prayer without the Bible, without God's Word to us. God speaks to us—we speak back to Him. Perhaps the problem with our praying is that it is

just a monologue—there is no dialogue there if we are honest. We aren't listening first to the speaking God and then responding from our hearts to what he is saying to us—no wonder we struggle, no wonder we find prayer a real difficulty, if that is the case. But the most striking thing about Daniel's prayer in this chapter is the way:

### **2. It engages with God's character**

Look how it starts: <sup>4</sup>*"O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands."* It starts right in there with the character of God, look on at verse 7: <sup>7</sup>*"Lord, you are righteous."* Look at the beginning of verse 9: <sup>9</sup>*"The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving."* Look on to verse 14: <sup>14</sup>*"The LORD did not hesitate to bring the disaster upon us, for the LORD our God is righteous in everything he does."* And verse 15 following: <sup>15</sup>*"Now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong."* <sup>16</sup>*O Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill."* The first truth with which Daniel engages with his praying is the great awesome, righteous, faithful, merciful character of God. Daniel faces up to it squarely, and it drives him to his knees.

Because if God is righteous, you and I are not. <sup>5</sup>*"We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws."* <sup>6</sup>*We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land."* <sup>7</sup>*Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame—the men of Judah and people of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you."* <sup>8</sup>*O LORD, we and our kings, our princes and our fathers are covered with shame because we have sinned against you. . . .* <sup>10</sup>*we have not obeyed the LORD our God or kept the laws he gave us through his servants the prophets."* <sup>11</sup>*All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you."* <sup>12</sup>*You have*

*fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing upon us great disaster. Under the whole heaven nothing has ever been done like what has been done to Jerusalem.* <sup>13</sup>*Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favour of the LORD our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth.* <sup>14</sup>*The LORD did not hesitate to bring the disaster upon us, for the LORD our God is righteous in everything he does; yet we have not obeyed him.*” The contrast could not be sharper.

Have you had that experience of looking into the face of God, and falling on your knees? In my prayer times sometimes I lie face down on the ground to bring home to myself the nature of the person to Whom I am speaking and the contrast with my own nature. Whenever I hear someone say they don't like to hear too much about human sin, I fear they have never really seen God. It is the universal experience of humankind that when we do that, we have an enormous sense of our own depravity.

If there is no real prayer without the Bible (God speaking to us), there is no real engagement with God without a no-holds-barred acknowledgement of human sin.

### **3. Real prayer acknowledges human sin**

Did you notice how Daniel included himself in this? He was a very righteous man, Daniel; he had been outstandingly upright with outstanding integrity for years and years and years in the Babylonian Empire. And yet there is no ‘they’ here—it is all ‘we’, <sup>5</sup>*“we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws.”*

You see, a proper acknowledgement of human sin is the key to unity between human beings. It is the one basis upon which we all have complete unity, complete solidarity: we are all sinners. We have a one-ness in wrongdoing. That is what unites the human race. In fact it is the surest basis for human unity, because an acknowledgement of our common sin is the one thing that will stop us looking down on other members of the human race. When I know where I truly stand before God, I cannot despise anyone else—not the paedophile, not the serial murderer, not the arms dealer, not the

most evil person you can conjure up in your mind now. I cannot look down on him when I know where I stand before the living God.

You may remember the story of the two rabbis in the Temple. One stood in a corner and began to beat his breast and say: “I am nothing, I am nothing, I am nothing”. So the other rabbi stood beside him and began to pray similarly, “I am nothing, I am nothing, I am nothing”. Whereupon the low-caste Temple sweeper caught the idea and he stood beside them, and began to pray, saying: “I am nothing, I am nothing, I am nothing”. At which the first rabbi said to the second, “Who does he think he is, saying he’s nothing, like us?”

But it doesn't actually work like that, does it? When I acknowledge myself to be a sinner, I know that no one stands lower than I. It's the one place of rest—water never rests until it reaches the lowest point. Humanism claims all humans have equal dignity and equal potential. So any scientific research that reveals a difference between races or ethnic groups has to be suppressed immediately by the humanist lobby. And the disadvantaged are victims of current fashion: so physical disability is very well handled by our society—but the foetus before birth is disregarded. But Christianity claims we are equal because we are all created beings who receive our lives as a gift from God, and that all our lives have been marred by sin and we are universally deserving of God's judgement—no hierarchy is possible under that: the most righteous person in this building at the moment and the most sinful person in this building at this moment, we all stand on the same level before God. <sup>8</sup>*“O LORD, we and our kings, our princes and our fathers are covered with shame because we have sinned against you.* <sup>9</sup>*The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him;* <sup>10</sup>*we have not obeyed the LORD our God or kept the laws he gave us through his servants the prophets.* <sup>11</sup>*All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you.”*

If you let it stand, a good French salad dressing will always separate into oil and vinegar, won't it? I want you to think of those two things separating out in the way that they do—because that's where we start in prayer—acknowledging the separation, the difference, between us and God—which is righteousness and unrighteousness, holiness and sin. We need to start by separating them out in our minds: Who God is, and who I am.

But then you shake the dressing before you pour it on the salad. And that is what prayer does. <sup>15</sup>*“Now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong. <sup>16</sup>O Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our fathers have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us. <sup>17</sup>Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favour on your desolate sanctuary. <sup>18</sup>Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. <sup>19</sup>O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.”* It brings the two ingredients together.

Notice that Daniel finds the solution to the problem of God’s holiness and human sin, not outside the holy character of God, but inside it, in His own being, in His nature to have mercy: <sup>17</sup>*“For your sake,”* <sup>18</sup>*“We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy,”* <sup>19</sup>*“For your sake.”* The problem is not like a maze needing a map to solve it, or a lock needing a key to unlock it. No, the answer lies within: within God Himself like a present under the Christmas tree—you have to unwrap it, to dive inside it. So it is with God, we dive into Him:

#### **4. We throw ourselves on His mercy**

<sup>17</sup>*“Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favour on your desolate sanctuary. <sup>18</sup>Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. <sup>19</sup>O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.”* Daniel appeals both to the mercy of God and to the honour of God. What an act of faith for Daniel that was, to throw himself in that way on God’s mercy, to plead for it!

He just had Jeremiah 19 verses 10-14: <sup>10</sup>*This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. <sup>12</sup>Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup>You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup>I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”* That was all Daniel had, just a bare word from Jeremiah—we have the Lord Jesus and all He did for us on the cross. What faith Daniel showed! How fortunate, how blessed we are to have the Lord Jesus as that Word from God into which we are invited to put our faith!

How does our praying compare with Daniel’s? Do we first let God speak to us in Scripture? Is our prayer weak? Maybe your prayer is not weak because you don’t listen to the Bible, but because you are not converted. Then listen to the other things there. Do we engage seriously with the Holiness of God? Have you ever looked into His face and seen what He is really like? And acknowledged in the light of that what you and I are like, and then thrown ourselves on God’s mercy? That’s how you become a Christian, that’s how you go on as a Christian, that’s how you pray. That’s the gospel heart of the Christian life—acknowledging our sin and responding to His greatness and His mercy.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*