

SERMON – 6 August 2017: Rev Dr Brenda Robson

“To Whom do we Pray?”

Psalm 116:1–9

John 15:12 –17

We all have friends who are Christians and friends who are not Christians and that is how it should be.

Some of my non-Christian friends and acquaintances will say from time to time that they do not believe what I believe but we can still be friends. With others, we just never discuss faith and religion and we can still be friends.

One friend Tom used to tell me quite often that he didn't believe in God but it wasn't a topic for deep discussion. One day he was discussing some problem he had – I can't remember what it was – and he said “I'll just pray that....whatever...doesn't happen.” Without really thinking, I said to him “And who are you going to pray to?” This stopped him in his tracks and he couldn't answer. He thought about it and said that no-one had ever said such a thing to him before. I saw him occasionally for several years and several times he reminded me that I had asked him that question and he was still struggling with the answer!

Human beings throughout history and all round the world have cried out for divine help, have prayed often into a vacuum, into space.

Tim Keller, a pastor and evangelist passionate about prayer has researched the phenomenon of global prayer. He said recently –

Prayer is one of the most common phenomena of human life. Even deliberately non religious people pray at times. Studies have shown that in secularised countries, prayer continues to be practiced not only by those who have no religious preference but even by many of those who say they do not believe in God.

One study found that nearly 30% of atheists admitted that they prayed “sometimes” and 17% of non-believers in God prayed “regularly.”

But Christians pray in a totally different, unique way because we pray, not into a vacuum or groping in the dark, we pray to God by name.

Throughout the Old Testament, the people would often call upon the name of the Lord. Calling on the name of the Lord was a euphemism for praying. The first time that men called on the name of the Lord was as early as Genesis 4 when the sons of Adam and Eve were establishing their families.

God's people call out to him by name. They know him because God has revealed himself to them and made promises to them. There is a covenant relationship between God and his people.

Psalm 116 is full of the joy and confidence gained from being able to pray to the Lord God who is known and real. The psalmist begins –

I love the Lord for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me I will call on him as long as I live.

The psalmist has obviously prayed to God many times and found God to be faithful. God has heard his prayers many times and answered him.

In this psalm of only 19 verses, the psalmist addresses the Lord or Yahweh by name 16 times. And three times he explicitly mentions “calling on the name of the Lord” (verses 4, 13, 17).

The prayer is model for one who knows and loves the Lord. He is so full of thankfulness for all that God has done –

The Lord is gracious and righteous and full of compassion – can you pray and thank God for times in your life when he has shown you grace, when he has shown compassion to you or someone you love?

The Lord protected me and saved me – as I said a couple of weeks ago, we have no idea how many times God protects us from danger, keeps us from making the wrong choices, heals us and restores us

He has been good, he has delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.

And then he asks “How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?”

So often people think they can be assured of future gifts from God by offering him something, paying him back, as if God needed anything from us! You know that prayer - If you do **x** for me Lord then I will do **y** for you.

We cannot repay the debt we owe to God and to Jesus Christ. And God knows that. That is grace. He will continue to pour out his grace on us even when we do nothing and cannot earn it, when we do not deserve it, especially when we do not deserve it. And he just wants us to know this and to receive his grace. “Unending love, amazing grace” as Chris Tomlin sings.

The psalmist knew that he could not repay the Lord's goodness and so he answers his own question by saying “I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the

Lord.” In other words, I won’t actually do anything to repay the Lord other than present my cup to God to be filled again and again with his grace.

Prayer is the lifting of an empty cup to the Lord. When my granddaughter finishes her drink and holds up her empty cup and says “More juice, Grannie, I’m thirsty” then I immediately fill her cup. Would God do any less? ***“More please, I’m thirsty.”***

Jesus said to the woman at the well ***“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again but whoever drinks the water that I will give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*** (John 4:13,14)

Jesus also said ***“If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow within him. By this he meant the Holy Spirit....”*** (John 7:37–39)

Call on God by name, lift up your cup and call on the name of the Lord. Be filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit.

I had an interesting coffee this past week with a woman I hadn’t spoken to in about five years. I knew her through work and she contacted me to ask if I would meet her for a chat. It was interesting because she is interesting. She studied theology, has a BD, is a trained Bhuddist counsellor, taught Sunday School and youth groups, leads groups in mindfulness, has a close friend who is a Church of Scotland minister, practices eastern meditation. She is a spirit-filled person but calls that spirit the “power of the universe.” She has high moral standards, is passionate about giving of herself for the benefit of others, she is intelligent and articulate, she volunteers more than she does paid employment. Her minister friend tells her she would be a great minister if only she had faith in God!

But she can’t bring herself to accept God and Jesus Christ. She recognises that her own belief system is very similar to Christianity in many ways but she hasn’t been able to take that final step of surrender and acceptance.

She told me that in January she was about to start a part-time job that she really felt was not right for her but she had been persuaded to accept by others. She was shopping in Glasgow with her daughter and standing at a junction waiting to cross when a vehicle passed too close and they stepped back to get out of the way. She joked to her daughter that maybe if the vehicle had broken her foot she might not have had to start the new job at the end of the week. The next evening she was coming of a night class, slipped on ice and broke her foot and lower leg! She never did start that job which was given to someone else and she is now on a different path. She attributed this coincidence to the power in the universe and when I smiled she said “Or maybe God!”

I believe that there are people crying into a dark void for peace and help and deliverance, people not knowing and not acknowledging the name of the Lord, people groping in the darkness. God does hear these voices, the spoken words and the silent grief because he knows and sees all things. Perhaps he knows that one day my friend will bow before him and say “My Lord and my God!”

When people come to the Lord at some later stage in life they often look back and see God’s hand at work over and over again although they did not see it at the time.

But we know his name! What a privilege, what a blessing! And as Christians we have new names for Him, not just Yahweh. Yahweh has come to earth and revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. And so the new names are even more important and let us have an even greater intimacy with God.

One of these names is Father. Paul said to the Romans that we are led by the Spirit of God and we are his sons and daughters –

“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear but you received the Spirit of sonship and by him we cry “Abba,Father.” (Romans 8:15)

And to the Galatians Paul said a similar thing –

Because you are sons and daughters, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6)

Jesus does, of course, begin the prayer he taught his disciples with the words “Our Father.” Jesus refers to God as Father 170 times in scripture.

The second name that replaces Yahweh in our prayers is the name of Jesus Christ himself. When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he addresses ***“those sanctified in Christ Jesus, and called to be holy together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus – their Lord and ours.” (1 Cor 1:2)***

Since the coming of Christ we know God in a new and more intimate way and have come to know him by a new name, Jesus. We can be quite blasé about this, we know it, we recite it often enough – in the name of Jesus - but we do not often really think about it. We know the one to whom we pray. We know him in a way that other faiths and religions do not know to whom they pray. We know him as real and alive and close by with a confidence that praying atheists cannot know.

We know the one to whom we pray not because we are super intelligent or well educated or have carried out lots of research but because God has come to us, lived with us, become part of human history and made himself known. And so we can address him as Father and in the name of Jesus.

People often ask the question, “Is God the same god in all religions, but in different forms? I’ve heard this said, but what does the Bible say?”

There are two ways of rephrasing this question ***“If we sincerely worship the god of any religion, are we worshipping and praying to the one true God?”***

Or we could ask it like this: ***“Does the Bible teach that the gods of other religions besides Christianity are real supernatural beings, distinct from and in opposition to, the one true God and Father of our Lord Jesus?”***

Regarding the second question, the bible teaches throughout that, yes, there are other supernatural beings, gods, idols whom people worship and they are in opposition to the one true God. And so the answer to the first question is no, praying to God within other religions is not praying to the one true God.

The test, the litmus paper, is whether people pray in the name of Jesus, acknowledging him as God made flesh.

For example, 1 John 4:1 states, ***“Beloved, do not believe every spirit”*** — If a spirit says, ***“This is the true religion, or this is the true God over here,” don’t believe them*** — ***“But test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”*** How are we going to do that? John continues, ***“for many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognise the spirit of God; every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist which you have heard is coming and is already in the world.”*** (1 John 4:2).

In other words, the real Jesus of history revealed in Scripture is the litmus test of every claim to be worshipping the true God. Any religion that does not embrace and worship and obey Jesus for who he is — revealed in the Bible — is a false religion. It is not the true God in another guise, with another name.

But that is probably another sermon!

I was going to go on to look at another name for the Jesus to whom we pray and that is the name friend. No other religion claims that God is friend but scripture tells us that Jesus said “Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.....” John 15:13

But that will be another sermon, probably later this month.

I will close by saying a prayer of Benedict written around 500 AD which begins with Father and ends with Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

Father

Give us wisdom to perceive you

Intellect to understand you

Diligence to seek you

Patience to wait for you

Eyes to behold you

A heart to meditate on you

And a life to proclaim you

Through the power of the Spirit

Or our Lord Jesus Christ

Amen