

**24 July 2016**

When my brother Trace came to stay with us a few months ago, he brought a DVD to watch with me. It was the film *Bruce Almighty*. The plot sounded a bit silly, and it did not really appeal to me. But Trace convinced me I would find some of the concepts in it interesting, and I agreed to watch it. And I am glad I did.

*Bruce Almighty* tells the sort of a television journalist called Bruce, from Buffalo, New York, in the USA. Following a series of misfortunes, Bruce does what people who are similarly afflicted are sometimes known to do. He blames God.

But God has a surprise in store. He appears to Bruce in human form, and offers Bruce his powers, to show him that his job is not as easy as he thinks. Except Bruce cannot interfere with free will, or tell anybody he has God's powers.

To begin with, Bruce has a great time. He misuses his new powers for personal gain, and to take revenge on his rivals. But one night while he is out at dinner with his girlfriend, Bruce begins to hear voices. And he has no idea what they are. He encounters God again. After reprimanding him for misusing his powers, God explains that the voices he hears are prayers. And that it is his job to respond to them. (In the film, the prayers Bruce receives only come from the Buffalo area, and nowhere else. But let's not this little anomaly spoil the story.)

At first, Bruce tries to deal with the prayers by using a computer system to receive and process them. But there are simply too many prayers for him to handle. So Bruce sets his system to say 'yes' to every single prayer.

The result is chaos. Especially when seemingly every other person in town picks the correct Lotto numbers, resulting in the top prize being spread amongst a vast number of people, making the pay-outs minimal, and leading to accusations of corruption, and widespread rioting.

I won't spoil the film by saying what happens in the end, other than Bruce eventually realises the world does not revolve around him. And he learns prayer is not all about seeking personal gain.

Today's gospel reading gives us some of Jesus' teachings about prayer. The first half of the reading will sound familiar to all of you. It is the Gospel according to St Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. But it is a bit different to the more familiar version in the Gospel according to St Matthew<sup>1</sup>, which we use today, with the kingdom, the power, and the glory part being added much later.

Bible scholars debate why there are different versions of this prayer in Matthew and Luke. Some scholars have suggested that Luke's version, which we heard this morning, is in fact the earlier one. But that theory runs into some difficulties. In particular, Matthew's version occurs relatively early in Jesus' early in Jesus' earthly ministry, while Luke's appears later on. And I prefer the view that Jesus offered different versions of this prayer format at various

times. If he wanted people to pray a certain way, I don't think he would have only said it once during his travels and been done with it.

Jesus was a travelling preacher. He would have given his key messages in one town, and repeated them again and again. The variation between the different forms of the prayer would show that an overall pattern was more important than a strict insistence on precise words. And I see it as a template that can be adapted to meet our needs.

The structure of the prayer template is relatively straight forward. And note the language is plural, not singular. This is the structure of a corporate prayer, not a private one.

We pray for reverence of God, which is achieved through the coming of the kingdom through the realisation of God's reign of justice and peace. We pray for the sustenance we need, in this life and the life to come. We pray for forgiveness for our wrongdoings, justified by our commitment to forgive others. And we pray for safe deliverance in testing times.

Jesus follows his prayer template with several short parables about persistence, the key message being:

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, this lesson is all too often misrepresented. I have heard it suggested that we will get everything we ask for in prayer. And I have even heard people commanding specific outcomes in prayer, while reminding God we have been promised whatever we ask for. But that is not how prayer works. Today's text makes it perfectly clear that we are granted what we need.<sup>3</sup> Which is not necessarily the same as what we want.

God is not a vending machine. We should not pray for personal gain, but to improve our conscious contact with God. And while we can offer praise, repentance, thanksgiving, intercessions, and personal petitions through prayer, much can be gained through such practices as praying the psalms, as is done in monastic communities, and the use of rosaries.

And silence. Dan Rather, a newsreader with CBS News, once asked Mother Teresa what she said to God when she prayed. She answered, "I listen." He then asked her what God said, and she replied, "He listens." Dan didn't know what to say. "And if you don't understand that," Mother Teresa concluded, "I can't explain it to you."<sup>4</sup>

Those of you who are familiar with Twelve Step programmes will be familiar with Step Eleven, which is typically worded along the lines of, "[We] Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out."<sup>5</sup>

Although I prefer to think of this as the primary objective of prayer. Not its only one. And it is worth noting that the more familiar version

of the Lord's Prayer from the Gospel According to St Matthew includes the verse:

<sup>10</sup>Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.<sup>6</sup>

The final point I would like to make today about prayer is that it works best when it is matched up with action. St James wrote:

<sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.<sup>7</sup>

And I would argue the same applies to prayer. If we are going to pray for the coming of God's kingdom, I would suggest our words are meaningless if they are not backed up by action. Pope Francis summarised this up perfectly, when he said, "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That is how prayer works."<sup>8</sup>

So my message for you today is that prayer without works is dead. And I will leave you with the some anonymous words of wisdom I recently discovered.

"I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release. I was naked and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless and you preached to

me the spiritual shelter of the love of God. I was lonely and you left me alone to go and pray for me. You seem so holy, so close to God. But I'm still very hungry and lonely and cold.”<sup>9</sup>

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<http://theword.tk>

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:9-14

<sup>2</sup> Luke 11:9-10

<sup>3</sup> Luke 11:8

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.servicespace.org/blog/view.php?id=14736>

<sup>5</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc. (1939, 2001). Alcoholics Anonymous. 4th edition, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc, New York, New York, USA. P59

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6:10

<sup>7</sup> James 2:15-17

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/3767-pope-francis>

<sup>9</sup> [https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CZ0dW\\_QWAAAVbWd.jpg](https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CZ0dW_QWAAAVbWd.jpg)