

When it comes to talking about prayer, we often assume that everyone knows how to pray, what it is to pray and so all we end up saying is that we should pray, or we're told pray more. Both of these things are true, we should pray, and we should pray more – the Christian life is a life rooted in prayer. But that's all well and good as long as we understand prayer and there's no reason that we should, especially when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, just as John had taught his disciples how to pray.

It seems there was a culture of teaching prayer, something I think we've lost and maybe part of the reason people can be intimidated by prayer meetings or being asked to pray in public is that we just assume everyone knows how to pray, when in fact we don't.

This is why we use the Lord's prayer each Sunday as a church family, we want our children to learn something about prayer and what better way to do this than using the template Jesus used.

Over these next two weeks we'll be trying to understand how we can know God, or encounter God through our prayers and because we all know that not every prayer is answered in the way we would like – next Sunday we will be thinking about the Apostle Paul and how the prayer for his thorn to be removed went unanswered.

This morning, we're thinking about two people, Jarius, who came to Jesus because his daughter was dying and the woman who bled for 12 years. What was it about these prayers that produced such a powerful encounter with Jesus?

Our story begins with Jesus crossing the sea of Galilee, he was returning to the Galilee side of the lake after what can only be described as an eventful number of days. On the journey to the far side of the lake Jesus calmed the storm and then when the boat landed, Jesus was met with the man who lived among the tombs, tormented by legion, a collection of evil spirits.

Jesus cast these spirits into a herd of pigs, which then charged off the cliff into the water, and although this untameable and once wild man was now in his right mind, the people were terrified and asked Jesus to leave. Which is why he returned to the Galilean side of the Sea of Galilee.

We can only image that news of these incredible displays of power followed Jesus which explains why a large crowd had gathered to meet him. Among the crowd a Jewish synagogue leader, and most likely a pharisee who may well have opposed Jesus at some point, was there to plead for his daughter's life.

This young girl of about 12 was dying – Jesus setting aside any historical antagonism towards the Jewish leaders, who were already plotting against him, agreed to go with Jairus to see his daughter.

So far so good. Jesus was putting aside any hard feelings, Jarius was humbling himself before Jesus in the way he fell before him and the story moves on as we would expect it to, with Jesus treating the situation with the urgency we would expect. Who wouldn't drop everything to go and help a dying 12-year-old girl.

Until this woman who we are told had suffered for 12 years, who was in desperation because the doctors couldn't do anything for her, in fact they'd only made things worse, reached out and touched Jesus' cloak.

We shouldn't lose sight of what was happening here – aside from the medical problems, the pain, discomfort and whatever else went with this woman's condition – she was ceremonially unclean. This meant for 12 years she was excluded from public worship; she was forbidden to even touch another Jewish person. She was well and truly isolated.

Her presence in that crowd was an incredible risk, if she were discovered she may well be stoned because she was bound to have touched, bumped into, brushed against countless numbers of people, all of whom would have been made unclean and had to undergo purification rituals. Touching Jesus cloak would have made him unclean.

Yet, in reaching out to Jesus, instantly she knew something happened, she had been healed, she knew she had been freed from her suffering. (5:29)

The problem she then faced was that Jesus also knew something had happened and was demanding to know who touched him. She was going to have to reveal herself and confess that her being there had implications for everyone else, including Jesus.

In both these stories we see a desperation in how both people reached out to Jesus, how they prayed to him. In both cases they are beyond human help. Doctors only made the woman worse, the little girl would in fact die before Jesus reached her – humanly speaking there was no-one else to turn to.

We encounter God through prayer when our prayers have that same cry of desperation, when our prayers are rooted in the deep-set belief that it is only God, only Jesus who can reach into our situation because we are beyond the help of humanity.

Now, please don't interpret this as someone has to be dying or have some untreatable illness before our prayers become meaningful. That is not what I am saying. While we are commanded to pray for the sick – James tells us to call the elders, Jesus himself says each of us should heal the sick, prayer is much more than some spiritual or divine A&E department.

Each one of us is beyond human help. In terms of being able to have our relationship with God restored and even maintained, this is beyond what any of us can do for ourselves or for one another. Forgiveness, finding meaning in life, purpose, true acceptance and wholeness, security and peace – these are the things that we only find through in our relationship with God, which is only possible through Jesus.

That relationship is nurtured in prayer. We know God in our prayers when we realise that it is only through Christ, we can have those deep-set longings of assurance and forgiveness met. This is the same desperation that Jairus and the unnamed woman had in coming to Jesus.

We often hear people talking about arrow prayers, those quick instant, one-line prayers that are incredibly specific to a particular moment. Those prayers are good and certainly they display a life rooted in prayer. Yet in these two people we something much more, we see a cry of desperation because Jesus is their only hope.

As we pray, we need to remind ourselves that Jesus is the only one who can meet our deepest needs and then cry out to him, believing that, in desperation because we believe it and that

means setting aside those other things that we think might help. (I'm not talking about medicine here; I want to make that very clear!)

I am talking about the things we turn to in order to find meaning and comfort. In appropriate relationships, old sinful habits, a reliance on idols or gods, maybe money or career, status or popularity, instead of Jesus alone.

There's something else important for us to note here. While Jesus was spending time with this woman who touched him, Jairus received word that his daughter had died – it was time to give up, there's no point in bothering Jesus any more... the moment has passed.

Jesus' response was to say, don't be afraid, just believe.

It seems this isn't a great translation of what Jesus actually said which was more along the lines of, you believed, keep on believing. In other words, don't give up, don't lose heart, be persistent in your belief in me, keep on believing even when it's against the odds.

It's as though Jesus is saying, the more desperate you are, the more you understand that I am the only one you can turn to, the more you will be amazed through the encounter you will have with me.

Does it seem as though our children will never come to faith in Jesus Christ – it is in the desperate prayer that only Christ can intervene where we will know God, understand his power. It is in persisting in our belief despite all the odds that God meets us and so often astounds us.

A final thought – in both cases there was a public display of faith. The woman had to make herself known, she had to essentially confess Jesus was her only hope. Jairus had to continue on the journey home with Jesus, publicly saying, I still have hope in this man.

We are to voice our prayers, we are to voice our hope in Christ – this is not a light to be hidden under a bushel, but a light that is to shine brightly. I know things look bad, but I will continue to hope in Jesus, I will continue to pray to Jesus, I will continue to believe that through these prayers I will know God and see his power.

This isn't about being brash, it isn't about being unrealistic – it is about voicing our confidence in God, in Jesus Christ. Jairus had to say, I know my daughter is dead, but my hope is still in Jesus. I know my children are far from salvation, but my confidence is still in Jesus. I know there is still illness, war, discontent, but my confidence is still in Jesus and so I will not stop praying, I will keep on believing. I will know God through my prayers.