

Bishop of Bath and Wells Presidential Address

Diocesan Synod 22 November 2025

In Luke's Gospel Jesus says this: '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.'

If you stop and think about it, I'm not sure that these words of Jesus match with most people's everyday experience of reality.

Life is not an all you can eat buffet paid for at someone else's expense. The only creatures I know who get that are the tourist-gorged swans that live outside our house.

One of the eternal questions that I have is 'Where are my glasses?' Anyone who's seen me frantically running round the house trying to locate these before leaving for a meeting will know that on searching, I don't always immediately find.

As bishop, I try to be a maker of possibilities, to help people dream dreams, to generate opportunities that haven't existed before. Often, this involves knocking on doors, a remarkable number of which either don't open or get slammed in my face.

Ask, seek, knock. Our experience is not universally positive.

Maybe we need to reframe our expectations. I remember a comedian who spoke of how when he was seven he'd prayed every night that God would give him a new bicycle. When his prayers were left unanswered he'd decided he'd be better off stealing a bicycle and asking for forgiveness.

Just to be clear that's not an approach I'm recommending!

But it does suggest that when we ask, seek, knock, a certain reframing of expectation may be a good thing.

When we ask, how can we request what's in our best interests? When we seek are we looking for the right thing? When we knock are we banging on the right doors?

There's no immediate way to work out the answers to any of these quandaries. The only approach we can take is the one we used when we were children. Which was by trial and error to keep on until we hit on the right way to go about things. The right way to ask, seek, knock. The right ways to pursue the good for which we look.

The ideal for children is to undertake such learning in the presence of a loving parent who guides, help, shapes, encourages us towards the things that will enable us to flourish. Through their help, we learn to ask for the things we really need, to seek for that which brings our good, to knock on the right doors.

This is what prayer is all about. It's about growing a relationship with God our heavenly Father. By approaching God, just as a child does with their parent, about the needs we have. Through God's Word and the Holy Spirit knowing God's presence as we do so. Of learning through relationship what is God's good and perfect will for us.

Because the purpose of prayer is not to change God's mind. It's to change us. Enabling us, to become the people God has made us to be. People who ask rightly and faithfully, who seek diligently and effectively, who knock confidently and joyfully for the things which bring to us and those around us life in all its fullness.

We don't get all this right first time. It takes practice, persistence, time – just as it takes practice, persistence and time to learn anything worthwhile. Sometimes we can learn things by ourselves. But mostly we need people to be with us on the way. From fellow learners to trusted guides, skilled teachers to helpful mentors.

A challenge that most of us face about prayer is that we think we ought to be good at it. Yet we find it hard, get frustrated that we're not complete naturals and can be tempted to give up.

Think back to your experience of learning to ride a bike. Careering down the lawn. Someone who cared for you holding onto the saddle behind you. Wobbling in every direction. Thinking you'd never get the hang of it. Yet with practice, persistence and time – and one or two bumps along the way – you did. What would happen if we saw our journey to prayer as being a bit like that?

It's for all these reasons that I'm proposing that across our Diocese of Bath and Wells we should make next year, 2026, a year of especial focus on prayer. This is not because I think we're not praying. We are. But could we learn to pray better and pray more?

Might we do better if we sought to learn from each other? Might focusing more on prayer shape us to become the people God has created us to be? Could we become the answer to our prayers? In God's good grace I hope and believe so.

Across our people and communities, churches, schools and chaplaincies we've plenty to give thanks for and lots to ask, seek, knock in prayer to God about. Let me give you some examples. In 2024, our diocese saw the biggest rise in children's participation in worship of almost any of the dioceses of the Church of England. How can we give thanks to God about that and pray for the Gospel to touch the lives of more young people? Here in Bath and Wells after several years when the volume of people offering for ordained ministry fell significantly, the number of people coming forward with vocations for the priesthood has risen dramatically. How can we give thanks for that and pray for God to touch even more people's hearts? Our new Bishop of Taunton will be consecrated on the 6th February and will

be welcomed to our diocese in the cathedral on Sunday 8th February at 3pm. That's a great source of thanksgiving.

All this is before we get on to praying about all the challenges that we know we face. How best to work with God and the people around us to transform our communities for good? How best to fill vacancies in our multi parish benefices and elsewhere that go on too long.

How to enable our churches to be places that genuinely include people of every ethnicity, age and background. We're talking about the budget this morning. How should we pray about our financial situation and the sustainability of our diocese?

Later on today we're going to thinking through the detail of how a year of especial focus on prayer might work. We've already been discussing this with Bishop's Council and with Area and Lay Deans and now it's time to think this through with Synod. I don't want to pre-empt our discussion later. But what I'd like to get you thinking about right now is that we don't want next year to be a grand diocesan led 'have to' initiative. We'd love to have a year of focus that will bubble up all over – in parishes, in schools, in deaneries, in our cathedral – everywhere. I invite you to start thinking about where you could ask, seek, knock where you are. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Amen.