

29<sup>th</sup> January 2021

## Repetitions

**“Use not vain repetitions as the heathens do:  
for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.”**

*Bible, Matthew 6:7*

I'm learning new songs, and to do that I sing them over and over again. My wife will be sick of hearing the same things all the time, but maybe she'll learn the songs quicker than I do. But this is the only way I can do it.

The son of one of my friends is an actor. I'm in awe of people like him who can learn screeds of dialogue. I wonder what method he uses to learn his lines – saying his words aloud, over and over again, perhaps? In Primary School, that's the way we learned poetry and chunks of the bible – reading the words out loud, together, again and again, till we got them right. And, yes, I can still recite some of the thing I learned then.

It's the same with my guitar playing and other musical instruments. “Muscle memory” it's called. When fast fingering is required, the more often your practice – over and over – the easier it becomes, as if the fingers know what to do without you having to think about it. Repetition works.

Why then are we told by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel that repetition in our prayers isn't a good thing? Dismissed as a “heathen” practice, Jesus suggests that “vain repetitions” make our prayers empty. The more words we use, the more worthless they become. But I want to make a plea today that repetitions in our prayers still have a place.

Jesus isn't denying us the use of the same prayers over and over again. After all, it's what he was familiar with in his own Synagogue worship. But what he is challenging is *vain* repetitions. Our prayers *can* become insincere, empty words said for show. “Empty barrels make the most noise,” my granny would say. But repetitions can also be beautiful. Don't the Lord's Prayer, The Rosary, the words of Psalm 23, for example, serve to bring us into a closer communion with God?

“Pray without ceasing”, Paul writes in a letter to the Thessalonians. It's the *attitude* of praying that's important, not the how, or the why, or the what. And if that includes repetitions, then that's good enough for me.

### **A prayer for today**

*Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! That's worth repeating, isn't it? Amen*

*An original reflection by © Tom Gordon*

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