

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, 2013
(Col 2.6-15 & Luke 11.1-13)

Jesus was praying . . . , and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”

No one could be with Jesus for any length of time without realising that prayer was central to his life. Not just a quick prayer, now and then, but whole nights spent in prayer, often in remote or mountainous places – we have only to think of Jesus praying on the Mount of the Transfiguration, or in the Garden of Gethsemane. Prayer was what Jesus did, and there must have been something about the way he prayed that evoked a longing in his friends – enough for this unknown follower to have asked Jesus to teach them to pray, just as John the Baptist had instructed his disciples.

It is sometimes said that ‘Prayer is caught, not taught.’ I remember a Russian Orthodox icon painter being asked how she had learned to pray. She explained that in an Orthodox Christian home there is always an icon corner, where family members pray. From earliest childhood, she said, she could remember sitting there very quietly while her father prayed, and being enfolded in her father’s simple, rapt attention. “No one taught me to pray”, she said, “I learned to pray through being with my Father.”

In a rather similar way, the disciples seem to have caught the spirit of prayer from being with Jesus while he prayed; enough, at least, to make them curious about the way he prayed. And in response to their request, Jesus gave them the Lord’s Prayer; surely, one of our most precious Christian possessions. He said, “When you pray, say,

‘Father’

Jesus is using the language of analogy: there is something about the essence of fatherhood that points us towards the character of God. ‘Father’ suggests a relationship that is intimate and personal while, at the same time, having a slight feeling of ‘otherness’ about it: fathers stand beyond the almost enclosed intimacy of the mother-baby dyad, though the Bible also uses such imagery for God. And the fact that the Bible uses both masculine and feminine imagery for God – as well as more impersonal imagery, like ‘rock’, or ‘springing water’ - reminds us that God is not only beyond gender, but also beyond personality, at least as we humanly understand it. When Jesus calls God ‘Father’, here, he is not saying that God is like a man with sexual organs, but simply – in terms of the biological understanding of Jesus’ day – that God is the source, the fount, the origin of all that is; yet a source, a fount, an origin that can be addressed. Ultimate reality is ‘personal’, if not a ‘person’ in a human sense.

‘Hallowed be your name’

In the Bible, as in many other cultures, names have meaning. In the Bible, in some profound sense, to know the name is to know the person. ‘Jesus’, ‘Yeshua’ in Arabic, simply means ‘God saves’ (Matthew 1.21). YHWH – the name of God communicated to Moses – means: “I will be who I will be”, or, “I will be there as I choose to be there”. In the Bible, the sense of God’s presence generally evokes feelings of awe and fear. When Jacob awoke from his dream of the ladder that stretched from earth to heaven, he was afraid and exclaimed, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of

heaven!” (Genesis 28.17). When Isaiah had his vision of God in the Temple, he cried, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. (Isa 6.5). When the disciples netted the miraculous catch of fish, Peter’s instinctive reaction was to fall at Jesus’ feet, saying, “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5.8). When we pray that God’s name may be hallowed we are praying that this deep awareness of God’s awesome, holy presence may penetrate our hearts and lives.

‘Your Kingdom come’

According to the Bible, God is the creative force and inspiration that finds expression in the evolution of the universe. Isaiah has a wonderful poem that imagines God ‘stretching out the heavens like a curtain, and spreading them like a tent to live in’ (40.22). Yet, when Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, he is not referring to a place, but to a state of affairs: the way life will be when everything and everyone is brought into right relationship with everything and everyone else, because all will be in right relationship with God. The state of affairs in which we finally know who or what we are because we will have found the place where we belong: ‘Your Kingdom come’, indeed.

‘Give us each day our daily bread’

There is something wonderful about this petition. *Epiousios*, the Greek word here translated ‘daily’, only features in the Bible in this place and in Matthew 6.11 – the other version of the Lord’s Prayer. No one really knows what *eiousios* means. Does it mean ‘daily’, in the sense of ‘today’s’ provision? Or, does it mean our bread ‘for tomorrow’? Perhaps it seems curious to pray for something when we don’t understand exactly what we are asking for. But maybe this is just the point. We cannot know what resources we will need to live the coming day in faith and love – but God knows. So when we pray ‘give us this day our daily bread’, we are praying, not for what we know, but for what God knows we will need to get us through the day ahead.

‘Forgive us our sins, as we forgive everyone indebted to us’

From time to time one meets Christians who lay great store on God’s judgement. Perhaps predictably, these tend to be Christians who are in no doubt that they have booked their places in God’s Kingdom while, at the same time, being convinced that God will condemn many other people to hell. They make me shudder. If we look at Jesus’ teaching carefully, though, we discover a principle of reciprocity: God will judge us with the same spirit that we judge other people. So Jesus says,

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; . . . for the measure you give will be the measure you get back (Luke 6.37f).

Jesus illustrated this principle in his story of Dives and Lazarus, about a rich man who dressed sumptuously and ate the best food every day, while a poor beggar lay starving at his gate. Come the afterlife, though, and their positions were reversed: the measure they gave was the measure they got. We cannot pray for forgiveness unless we are also desirous to forgive.

And finally,

'Do not bring us to the time of trial'

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus had no compunction about praying that the cup might pass him by. There is much comfort here, for us. Which of us, faced with some appalling possibility – maybe a terminal diagnosis inflicted by some horrible disease – would not pray that the cup might pass us by too. There is no shame in praying from the heart. Only God knows what we can stand. The prayers of the Bible are crowded with the voices of suffering people arguing with God. Whatever the outcome, Jesus encourages us to be real in our prayers.

As given in the Bible, the Lord's Prayer is a very simple, short, series of petitions. We can easily rattle them off without a second thought. Yet each petition – if only we make time to linger on it – opens onto a whole world of meaning that is ever fresh, and ever new.

Father, . . .
Hallowed be your name. . . .
Your kingdom come. . . .
Give us each day our daily bread. . . .
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. . . .
And do not bring us to the time of trial. . . .

We learn these petitions as children, but they only come to fruition as we begin to inhabit them and allow them to transform our hearts and lives.

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