

Sermon – 24/07/16 – How to pray.

Prayer: Lord, as we dwell on your word this morning, and listen to the familiar words that you taught your disciples, may they take root in our hearts and bear fruit in our lives. Amen

Here in St Michael's we are working our way through our sermon series on "Showing God's love in the world", part of our threefold purpose of Knowing God, Growing in his love, and Showing this in our lives. Over the past few weeks we have heard about Jesus sending out the 72, the mission of the church, and who our neighbour is – practical down to earth messages about what we need to do in our everyday lives to show God's love in action.

Today our theme is "How to pray!" But surely prayer is about getting to know God, or growing in faith – what is it doing in a series on Showing God's love in action?? At the heart of my sermon, sits the Lord's Prayer – words so familiar that almost all of us here can recite them by rote with no effort at all –perhaps therein lies the heart of the challenge for today! Getting behind the familiar words to uncover some pretty challenging thoughts and attitudes!

So let's start with the core of our Gospel reading and unpack what's going on. In Luke's gospel the section we read this morning follows immediately on after two other very familiar passages, the parable of the Good Samaritan which were heard about just two weeks ago, and then the story of Martha and Mary. In the Good Samaritan Jesus' message is one of radical inclusiveness – a call to value and care for not just those we like or respect, [but to reach out to those who we despise, to those who despise us, and to work with love and compassion in a very costly way]. In the little vignette of Martha and Mary we find Jesus once again radically challenging the current norms. [Women were expected to cook and serve, and yet when Martha asks Jesus to scold Mary for simply sitting at Jesus feet and listening he doesn't! He commends Mary, and in so doing not only clearly shows that women as well as men are called to listen to the Lord, but also clearly shows that in God's kingdom waiting on the Lord is just as important as rushing round "doing" things, how ever necessary and socially desirable they may be!]

So, given that we are it seems in the middle of a sequence of stories where the radical nature of Jesus call on our lives is centre stage, I wonder if the next part will be a call to memorise a few verses so we can say them in our sleep! Let's take a look!

The request from the disciples which opens this passage is itself interesting: "Teach us to pray as John taught his disciples". This was a request for a community prayer – a sort of communal anthem that would be a sign and encouragement to them. Different communities of disciples

had their own prayers, at least 18 “Jewish Benedictions” have been identified. [I guess the nearest modern day equivalent would be football anthems – “You’ll never walk alone” roared by the Liverpool Kop, or “I’m forever blowing bubbles” that comes as a prelude to every West Ham match! They reinforce the shared bond of identity and become a symbol of who we are, and what we support.]

Clearly John the Baptist had such a prayer and, reflecting their growing sense of identity as Jesus’ supporters, Jesus’ disciples now ask for such a prayer. When we recite the Lord’s Prayer do we realise that we are in effect singing the team song, the national anthem for the Kingdom of God? Do we say it with the same conviction and passion as we might render “God save the queen” at some great national event?

So, let’s start unpacking the words themselves. We’ll find the prayer’s structure is simple: one address, two statements, and three requests. How does it start?.....

“Our father”, or in our commonly used version, “Our Father which art in heaven”. If God is *our* father, not *my* father or *your* father or *a* father, but *our* father, then we must be brothers and sisters – we are a family coming before our father. This is not a children’s call of “Daddy” (though the words Jesus use are the same root as “Abba” which is sometimes translated that way), this is a greeting of respect, recognising not only God’s passionate love and concern for his children, but also his authority as “head of the family”. In our highly individualised society we need to constantly be reminded that our prayer, our anthem, starts with rooting ourselves in a family or community, standing or kneeling before the father of us all.

Next comes the two statements, the first is: “Hallowed (or holy) be your name”. In Jewish thinking your name and your identity are intrinsically linked – your name displays intrinsically who you are. God tells Moses “I am who I am”; God changes Abram’s name to Abraham signifying the changes as he is set apart to found the nation of Israel; Jesus renames Simon as Peter, his rock on which he will build his church; Saul becomes Paul as he is transformed from persecutor to apostle. So in acknowledging God’s name as holy we are acknowledging that he is holy, set apart, he is greater than everything, he is unique! And in acknowledging his name and character in the prayer, in declaring it out loud, we are also starting to make a commitment to make his name, and hence his character, his person, known in the world.

The second statement builds on the first “Your kingdom come”, to which we add “your will be done, in earth as it is in heaven”. Jesus has been touring Galilee and Judea declaring “the kingdom of God is at hand”. He has been teaching the nature and power of the kingdom through

the parables and the miracles – demonstrating that his statement that ‘the kingdom is at hand’ was entirely credible and reasonable. The people, and indeed the disciples, have at various times misinterpreted this as meaning that he is about to oust the Romans and establish His rule over the nation of Israel – but Jesus knows that the fulfilment of establishing his kingdom will look very different – it will involve him laying down his life for the members of that Kingdom, and granting them the Holy Spirit which will enable them to live as full members of the Kingdom in an alien world until he comes a second time to establish it over all the earth.

The implications for us are clear – if we are declaring “Your Kingdom come” then it is up to us to live our lives in a way that makes the statement true – to live as members of that Kingdom. We are not called to assimilate the values and ideas of the world, or country, or community in which we are born or happen to reside whether that be the UK or the EU or somewhere else – we are called to live by the rules and values of God’s kingdom.

So, what are we going to need to live this way? Cue three requests in the prayer:

First of all “Give us each day our daily bread”. God knows our every need, and these things are symbolised in the request for “bread”. The word actually used in the written text, “artos”, can also be translated more broadly as “food”. The request acknowledges that we are entirely dependent on God to sustain us. Interestingly two of the 18 Jewish benedictions I mentioned earlier actually call on God to provide a year’s supply of food, so implicit in Jesus teaching here is that God provides for us *every* day, not just annually – it is indicative of wanting to be completely dependent on God in every detail of our lives.

Next comes the call to forgive as we have been forgiven. Forgiveness from God is an act of grace – something underserved but freely given because our father loves us so much. We live in an imperfect fallen world – the world is full of victims because it is full of sin. Our calling as citizens of God’s kingdom however is to follow his example and to act with grace and forgive others. This is costly, it hurts, we may well feel that it’s unjust and want to extract a price for our forgiveness – but we serve a God who paid the price in full for us in the death of Jesus. This part of the Lord’s Prayer isn’t a request that we be forgiven as much as we forgive others – it’s the reverse! It’s a challenge to us to forgive others as much as we have been forgiven – to live as full citizens of a kingdom where the King has sacrificed his own son so that we can be free. A challenge to live with the radical generosity of God!

And finally the call to God for spiritual protection. Again we can easily be confused by the wording – “lead us not into temptation”. Surely God doesn’t tempt us? Indeed not, as James so

aply puts it “No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil and He himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.”

The request here is for God’s power to protect us from succumbing to temptation – to keep it from getting hold of us. The first step is to recognise the danger and to rely on God to help – keeping a check of our lives, being alert to the temptations that are around us, putting on the full armour of God as Paul exhorts us to do in Ephesians, are all part of being aware that we need God’s help to resist the lure of the world.

So, let’s take stock of where we have got to: We have seen that the request to Jesus was for a prayer, a sort of anthem, that would characterise their identity as followers of Christ. Jesus’ response, what we now call the Lord’s Prayer, has three parts. First is the address – the recognition that our identity as Jesus followers rests entirely in God our father. Then comes two statements: First is an acknowledgement of the nature our unique, holy God, set apart and above everything; and then the statement that we are the ambassadors, the representatives, of His kingdom living in a foreign land. And finally three requests: For God’s provision every day in every detail, second acknowledging his grace in forgiving us and challenging us to exhibit that grace with others, and thirdly for God’s spiritual protection as we live in this foreign land.

Now, if that is how Jesus taught his immediate disciples, and through them taught us, to pray, then what are the implications? Here we can turn to our New Testament lesson, Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

Jesus disciples asked him for a prayer to underpin their identity as his disciples – he gave them the Lord’s Prayer. Paul tells us unequivocally that we have to live “rooted and built up” in Jesus – we have to really take to heart our identity as disciples, individually and corporately. The prayer Jesus gave us illustrates that as disciples we are to live radical lives absolutely rooted in God – rooted in him for his provision of everything we need in life, our daily bread, which leads us to live radically generous lives, freely giving to others as our father has provide for us. We are to be rooted in his grace, which leads us to exhibit the same grace and forgiveness to others as we have received – a life overflowing with love to those least like us, those who have caused us greatest offence. And a life in which we take risks constantly, aware that it is God who protects and upholds us, who delivers us from temptation.

The title I was given for this sermon was “How to pray” – I would like to suggest to you that the answer is not “kneeling quietly, head bowed, mumbling familiar patterns of words”. It is to put into practice in our daily lives the fullness of the prayer Jesus taught us – our identity rooted and grounded in Him, and sure of all that God gives us - daily bread, the grace of total forgiveness, and protection for our spirit!

So, when we come to the point in the service later where we shall say together the all too familiar words of the Lord’s prayer, are you going to repeat them by rote noticing their comforting familiarity, or are you going to hear them like the disciples to whom he spoke them, as an anthem that captures our collective identity as the people of Jesus kingdom here on earth, with a radical call to a life that embodies radical generosity, the grace of forgiveness, and spiritual protection? As we leave at the end of the service the music that will be played will be very familiar – both the tune and the words – I hope it will stick in your heads through the day. And still more important, will you carry the anthem in your heart as you go out from here and live it to the full in the week ahead?

Because that is what Jesus taught us - let your life be the embodiment of the prayer he taught us – for that is: ‘How to pray’!