

DISCIPLES' PRAYER

God's way of becoming king

Luke 11.1-13

Introduction

Friendship and family intimacy are the two poles of human experience around which Jesus organises his teaching on prayer in this passage. We understand friendship; it requires of us some commitments, it provides us with a sense of fellowship, acceptance, and equality and in a good friendship a place to be ourselves and to find criticism.

Familial intimacy is about growth, nurturing, change, flexibility as children grow and as we change. We could explore friendship and familial ideas in more detail but we know enough to get the drift of what Jesus is doing here. In the most intimate of settings and perhaps the most vulnerable he talks about prayer.

We open ourselves up to God

Just those two poles give us a basic clue about prayer around which everything else revolves. In prayer we open ourselves up to

God and God opens up to us and this process is one of liberation and awakening.

Prayer is the movement from shadow to reality, from darkness to light. To know God is to learn to know one's true Self, the ground of one's being. Prayer is the opening of the eyes to self and the world.

Prayer is the process of self giving and being set free from isolation. To pray is to enter into God and be transformed. We enter into union, we in God and the incarnation becomes part of me. I am both family and friend.

We need to become apprentices in prayer

The disciples watch Jesus pray. Jesus prays a good deal of the time, sometimes on special occasions but as Luke says earlier (5.16) "But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray." It was habitual; it was there in the desert he confronted the enemies of the kingdom. Was this the secret of his authority and thus his power? Was this the secret of his character and his wisdom?

The request to learn to pray arises from a need; they do not know how to pray. That is the first step. They must appeal to a master

who can teach them so they can learn. They have to become apprentices.

“Lord, teach us to pray” is one of the times the disciples get it right. They struggle with Jesus and his priorities. But they intuitively grasp that in prayer they might find insight, and the discernment that they lack.

This ought to be our first prayer. We need to begin at the beginning. Lord, teach us to pray.

So Jesus gives a pattern of prayer

The Lord’s Prayer as we call it. It is shorter in Luke, terser, clearer in its basic thrust, less liturgical and sonorous than the version in Matthew and the one we use in the liturgy.

“Father” Jesus begins. We are open ourselves up to God, placing ourselves in the circle of the friendship and familial intimacy of God. This is the trademark of Jesus’ prayers.

Prayer is the ongoing eternal conversation within the Godhead. A conversation is already taking place; the liturgy is already ongoing. We are dropping in, like friends or family, to be part of the conversation.

Now we have to learn to converse. The first two petitions of the Lord's Prayer give us the clues. In The first, "...hallowed be your name..." he longs, like all faithful Jews, for God's name to be held in highest honour – the goal of his mission and ours.

Prayer is not about us. In all things it is God's honour and glory that is that is the source and end of all things. The disciple reaffirms the absolute difference between God and the created order and, in the context of worship, takes on the obligation to be holy as God is holy.

To do that God should be king in God's world; "Your kingdom come..." That is plainly not the case. So the story of Jesus is the story of how God becomes king. What that rule means is seen in the ministry, words and life of Jesus.

The consequence of that kingly rule is the liberation of humankind from all that binds and is destructive. The way that kingdom works is through mercy and compassion, the establishment of justice and right relations, the triumph of truth over lies. All that reaches to its fruition in the cross and resurrection.

We are called to become kingdom people. We pray that God's rule be made effective in the world of humans including among ourselves.

The first two petitions then put us in the conversation between friends and family; God's honour and God's rule. The next three help us put our needs on the table so that we can become agents of the kingdom of Christ.

We need bread for the journey, but there is never any promise of luxury here. We are still in the mission context of Luke 10. We are simply told to get on with the job of the kingdom of peace, which is no easy task, and then put our needs on the table.

We need daily sustenance on the way. 'Give us everyday the bread we need.' No luxuries, just every day sustenance.

We need forgiveness ourselves and between ourselves (see the notes on Psalm 85). The character of God lies behind this prayer. Forgiveness is essential for personal renewal and social revitalisation. We need to receive forgiveness and then to give it freely. It is the place to start again.

We need to be able to forgive so we do not derail the relationships of mercy and compassion. We need a new start every day. We need

to break the inherited and entrenched spirals of hatred and violence that dominate human life.

Testing (not temptation) is what the fifth element of the prayer is about and protection from our enemies both spiritual and temporal. The disciples will face human and cosmic opposition just as Jesus does and they must face it as he does, in prayer and the power of the Spirit.

We need to find a protective cover from every evil that will threaten our lives and our relationship with God if we take the kingdom seriously. Some Christians face the abyss of persecution and hatred. We are more likely to face the abyss of consumerism and introverted, individualistic self love. Either has the possibility to destroy us.

Well this is all very nice but... Yes it is a big but... Dare we trust God to pray this prayer that exposes us? That really is the big question. That is the underlying issue of prayer.

What kind of family are we getting ourselves into?

The brief parables and sayings that Luke gives here are wonderfully domestic. We can relate to them all. Who likes to get up at 2am to answer someone's request for a loaf or two? Families are full of

asking, seeking, and demanding. Giving children good things delights us. Adult cruelty and capriciousness are reprehensible.

The parable (5-8) tells us we need to pray persistently; if a grumpy, irascible neighbour will answer his door how much more the God of the kingdom?

What a minimum of words are used to graphically portray the circumstances of real life and social relationships. It gives lively expression to what follows; now we know what knocking means and what asking means.

God is not capricious or cruel, not malicious nor a divine trickster. God is not like the householder, safely tucked up in bed and completely withdrawn for the night. Jesus has already given us the picture of God who is actively establishing God's love and justice, mercy and righteousness in the world of women and men. God is quite single minded about that. The picture is of a God who invites us to join in and prayer is the table talk about all that is going on in our little patch, whether it is about ourselves or for others. You have to imagine a kitchen table rather than a remote throne room as the scene; imagine friends sitting around a dinner table. These are the images of prayer that Jesus uses here to introduce the disciples to a life of prayer.

The sayings of 9-13 reinforce the parable. They are about the petitions of the Lord's Prayer and the journeying discipleship of the kingdom. They are about our needs for forgiveness, about our needs for necessary bread and our need for protection both spiritual and temporal evil while we go about the business of living and proclaiming the kingdom. These saying have been used for but are not carte blanche for our deep desires of greed, power and selfishness.

Now we can understand what persistence means. It is not twisting the arms of a mean spirited God. It is getting to the dinner table as often as we can simply because it is good to be there. It is great place to be. Why would I want to be anywhere else? At this table, in the conversation, I encounter the great gift of God, the Holy Spirit. Luke says no more about that here.

You see, authority in discipleship is not about degrees and learning, about ordination or position, but about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was Jesus' authority, his legitimation to overthrow evil, to declare God's kingdom, to call God "father", to call a group of disciples, to challenge the interpretations of his day, to bring a new thing, to declare God's love for all without restriction.

The Holy Spirit is the gift to us to do the same, to be disciples, to declare and live the universal kingdom.

Conclusion

We have come a long way this morning. Prayer is part of the whole Christian life. Loving the neighbour and sitting at Jesus' feet are two aspects we have learnt about in the last two weeks in the Gospel stories we have read. Today, we touch the core of the matter. We will never recognise the neighbour unless we are at God's kitchen table where the neighbour is recognised. We shall not even discern Jesus and his significance so we can follow Mary.

Only at the dinner table of God do such become painfully and wonderfully real.