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Hosea 1:2-10

Psalm 85

Colossians 2:6-15

Luke 11:1-13

Praying to God the Father

There are many books on prayer, and many ways of praying. To give a full account of this subject in any one sermon is a project bound to fail. And yet, when the disciples found Jesus at prayer, and asked him to teach them, his response was brief and to the point.

Prayer is traditionally understood as conversation with God. Another way of saying that is: Prayer is the lifting of the heart to God, or the opening of the heart to God. In prayer, individually and in groups, we seek for a more intimate intercourse with God, and we make our needs known. Prayer is primary speech, which reaches deep into words and goes far beyond them to make use of all we know, verbally and emotionally, to honour, and petition the source of our being. In prayer we are called to be one with God and each other as God's people. We listen and respond, or turn away as did Adam.

People of all faiths, and none they will name, are widely reported as having some practice of prayer. It is difficult to imagine a style of Christian life without prayer, corporate or individual and no account of Christian faith can ignore the place it has. And yet even for experienced Christians prayer seems difficult and elusive. If asked us to teach someone to pray, we may have to admit that, although some aspects may be habitual for us, it would be a challenge as to where to begin. We don't live in a world where the presence of God and the holy angels is taken for granted. Science has given us a different view of the universe, and prayers that result in interventions in the natural order don't seem believable or just. Why would God listen to us when it seems some of Jesus' requests were denied?

The people of the New Testament were inheritors of a long tradition of prayer that was spontaneous as well as rich and formal and gave them the material in the Lord's Prayer. Yet, in the context of the journey to Jerusalem, the place of prayer, the disciples ask to be taught to pray.

There are five elements in Luke's prayer, all of them imperatives. The first two are concerned with the holiness of God, and the remaining three are petitions for necessary provisions, forgiveness and freedom from testing. God is one whom we are taught to revere, whose will we seek, and whom we may, with confidence, petition with our needs.

In Old Testament tradition the fact of God was so obvious there was no speculation about God's origin. However God was also holy - entirely different from all created things, beyond the reach of our faculties. There was always more to know, one sign

of which is there are numerous names for God. God was as the Living God, the Ancient of Days, One who was the First and the Last. There are seven combinations, which use *El*, the root meaning of which is power. There was *Jehovah*, the God of the Covenant, whose name is a verb which means *I am* or *I will be*. This was possibly the true name of the God of Israel. It was ineffable and, wherever it occurred it was protected by the use of *The Lord*. And there was *The Lord of Hosts*, often associated with the Ark of the Covenant. There were other names, used in different contexts that were more like titles: Rock, King, Shepherd, Judge and Father belong in this group. In Hebrew religion the idea of divine fatherhood is entirely dissociated from the physical sense. Humans are **created** in the image of God, not begotten or reproduced. Being children of God is not a thing of nature. It is a gift of grace, which is born of historical acts, which suggests that holiness is not inherent in us, but may emerge as a result of God's actions with us and for us. In Hosea 11 it says: "*When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son*". Being shaped into a nation through such events as the Exodus led Israel to be called "*children of the living God*." Apart from the Messianic king no individual had the right to be called a child of God, but the **people** as a whole were given that name.

The New Testament view was that Jesus was the unique Son who had the right to be called a child of God. His knowledge of the one he called Father was not abstract. His life reproduced what he came to understand to be the will and character of God. In his life of reverence, justice and love he stands as a representative person, the embodiment of obedient Israel.

Jesus' address to God: **Father, hallowed be your name** joins two things that seem opposite. Father is not the formal, respectful address but is **Abba**, which is a deeply intimate and affectionate. What Jesus is and does cannot be explained without reference to this relationship he has with his Abba – Father. Immediately following is the imperative that Abba's name be hallowed: treated with the utmost reverence. Even though there is an essential unity between the Father and the Son, the Father is greater than the Son. (John 14:28)

The Father – son relationship is transferred to the relationship between Jesus and the Disciples. He, who has been confirmed as a child of God, brings us into a community that draws its life from the same source. Just as the Exodus event brought a people into being, so does the Jesus event create a new people of God, children of the same Father. In teaching the prayer to the disciples, Jesus invites them, and us to enter into the same relationship as has given him life and enabled him to do what he has done. To learn to pray Father is to open our selves to the grace that was at work in him.

Paul actually says humans are not children of God by right, but by adoption. The Good News is God has claimed us. This is Paul's reason for Christian to boldly name God as Father. Christians are children of God in a *communal* relationship that transcends those based on ties of blood and family. That is why the church adds Our to the beginning of the prayer. And this is a community of *equals* who call no person on earth Father, but only their Father in Heaven, because it is the power of the Holy Spirit that has brought them to reconciliation and unity. In the community of Christ there is no higher or lower for there is nothing higher than being a child of God. And neither brother nor sister can claim the authority of the Father, since *hallowed by your name* means it is reserved for God alone. In this sense, the use of the name Father

does not support, or give preference to, patriarchal or hierarchical structures or relationships. In fact, such things are the enemies of the body of Christ.

In these days of gendered consciousness, and for women and men who have had negative or destructive experiences of their human father, the use of this name in prayer can cause problems. But the Fatherhood of God, as embodied and elaborated by Jesus is closer to the goodness associated with the stereotypical mother than with the father. How to understand the relationship implied by this word without having to buy into the gender of God is one of the struggles we have. Words fail when it comes to trying to find a way to convey this depth of meaning, and yet we still need a language for prayer that is authentic and trustworthy.

When we learn to pray to the Father as Jesus taught his disciples, we enter into a relationship that is reverential and humble, as well as intimate and affectionate, and in this context we may confidently petition God. Through the language of prayer we discover that our selfhood and value lie, not in any moral goodness, but in the gracious, abiding faithful presence of God. Standing authentically in this relationship a person begins to act from an habitual awareness that their centre is God. They realise that they are the object of creative, unchanging love and become ever more deeply aware of their dependence on God. To live life from this centre is to give God freedom in the world, and it is to do the works of God. When that happens the self has attained integrity: inner and outer are no longer in tension... As Teresa of Avila puts it, truthful, active and constructive love is contemporary with patience and silence. This is prayer. Prayer of this kind resists being filled with self-importance, because it knows its own incompleteness before God. And because it turns away from any claim to human completeness, it does not need to be the centre of attention and can leave room for others. This manner of 'conversing' with God preserves and enables conversation between human speakers, and so makes community possible.

The integrity of religious practice is preserved through prayer. In prayer the church, which addresses God in total intimacy and trust, becomes aware of itself as a community of equals which is open to all, and which engages in mission. Such a church becomes ever deeply aware of a fresh and distinctive style of existence that is generated from the story of Jesus. All of this is crucial to our life in Christ, which is why we must always ask, as they did: Lord, teach us to pray.