

Lent 3  
20/3/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 55:1-9  
Psalm 63  
Matthew 6:7-18

### Revisiting the Lord's Prayer

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

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I don't need to convince such a congregation of the importance of the Lord's Prayer. It is the only prayer Jesus gave us – whether he meant it as a text (which it became) or as a general guide, does not matter much, for the embrace of its concerns is wide.<sup>1</sup> We could pray it more deliberately in church, but that applies to hymns too – we may pass by some familiar words, but suddenly one word will claim our attention afresh. So, the best thing is to take the prayer down from time to time and look at it, as today.

Most of us have also passed through a period when the **wording** has changed. I was a member of the international panel which worked on those ecumenical texts<sup>2</sup> and took part in a discussion of the Lord's Prayer.

#### **Our Father in heaven**

The Greek opening simply says, '*Our Father, the One in the heavens*', so not any earthly father, nor modelled on one. This has been one of the great debates of our time. But it is not *our* experience of a father (or mother) that defines God; it is the other way around. A God who loves us, but – as we shall see – also tests us, covenants with us, recalls us to our path.

It sits alongside St Paul's great affirmation, '*I know ... nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus*' (Rom. 8:38f). Because of that mutual love, we have the nerve to address God. Martin Luther used to challenge God: '*You taught us to pray, to ask for what we truly need. So: listen up! I'm praying!*' Not arrogantly, not insolently, but with the boldness of an intelligent child. To pray 'Our Father' and to hallow his name, is to be given a share in Jesus' relationship with God.

#### **Your kingdom come/ your will be done on earth as in heaven.**

It ought to be no surprise that a prayer for the coming of God's kingdom and the fulfilment of God's will was part of Jesus' prayer as it was of his ministry from its first word (Mk 1:15). It is to ask '*let the world be transparent to God, let God's will and purpose for us all, and God's own nature show through in every state of affairs.*'

I cannot think of a more important prayer for our times. We who have heard Jesus of Nazareth speak about, and embody in himself, a world which exhibits the character of the love of God will want to work for, to live in that spirit, by that ethic. And we can see signs of it, but the hard fact is that, it is also yet to come. This prayer is aligned to the *future*. These days, I find myself praying these two lines with passion, urgency and hope.

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<sup>1</sup> It was rightly pointed out to me that in John 17 there is Jesus' 'High Priestly Prayer'; but this is clearly a theological composition by the evangelist. The Lord's Prayer is full of Jewish references.

<sup>2</sup> The English Language Liturgical Consultation consisted of representatives of national ecumenical bodies, in my case the Australian Consultation on Liturgy. The texts and commentary are in *Praying Together*, Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1988.

The prayer of Jesus now suggests some petitions to follow.

### **Give us today our daily bread**

But what kind of bread? The version used by the Narinyeri people of the mouth of the Murray River translates back into English as ‘*Give us tucker till this sun goes down*’, and I think that’s very clever. When will this sun go down? Well, none of can be in any doubt about the importance – to God – that the human race have what they need to sustain life. Think of the thousands whose meals are in doubt or not there in Ukraine, in Afghanistan, in Yemen – and in the flooded or burned north-eastern states of our own land. *Daily bread is essential. But there is a tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, beyond today’s sunset. Perhaps, in our times, it means ‘give to us the ability to continue to feed the world’, or even, open up our markets in such a way that the marginalised are fed. Climate change factored in.* And of course, it carries the meaning of ‘the bread for God’s tomorrow’, for the great feast when people come from every corner of the earth to sit at a banquet in that kingdom.

### **Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.**

My Scottish mother never quite understood why in her new country they did not pray ‘Forgive us our debts’ – but she did not know the Greek word was the same in both Mathew’s and Luke’s version.<sup>3</sup> Certainly ‘trespasses’ will no longer do.

But some have thought that the straightforward naming of **sin** is a problem. It has become a favourite put-down of the churches that ‘they are always on about sin’. And the churches have made their own sin plain to see, to our shame. We have said ‘Sorry’ in a world which finds that hard to believe.

But the prayer’s accent is not on the ‘sins’ or the many debts we owe – but on the ‘*forgive*’. That is what we boldly ask. Someone has offered, ‘*You, God, have forgiven me, and my thankfulness makes it possible to forgive someone else who has hurt me!*’ I believe that is how it works, and why the petition is mutual: God is always ready to forgive, but we have, as mature people in Christ, a responsibility for what we ask.

### **Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.**

What to do about ‘temptation?’! We had an argument in the panel. The English suggested ‘Bring us not to the test’, which the Americans thought sounded like cricket – or exams. The Americans proposed ‘trial’ and the English said that sounded like a courtroom. The American ace was that that the courtroom is a common metaphor in which the New Testament speaks of our salvation.<sup>4</sup> There was argument about ‘do not bring’ and ‘save us in’, and so we finished agreeing on ‘Save us from the time of trial’.<sup>5</sup>

The *trial* of faith for early Christians was quite graphic: they could die for it. They could deny Christ and save their skin<sup>6</sup>. That’s not our trial. Given the changed standing of religion in western culture, the acceptability of atheism whether you know what it means or not, the journalistic glee for the faults of the institutional church (which we have acknowledged) have made it much more difficult to claim Christian faith publicly. And given the direct attack by Covid restrictions on how Christians celebrate our faith – in communal worship – there are many who will be tempted to give it all up. We need to pray it will not be so, and that we will be delivered from darker, evil times.

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<sup>3</sup> The churches of Scotland pray, ‘Forgive us our debts’ following the Luke translation.

<sup>4</sup> e.g., the word ‘redemption’ is a juridical term.

<sup>5</sup> I spoke to my notes rather than read them, and I left this paragraph out. But it’s a good story.

<sup>6</sup> I mentioned other examples of persecution of Christians to our own day.

The late great Russian Orthodox archbishop in London, Anthony Bloom, wrote much on prayer, and in his exposition to the Lord's Prayer, for he said that we need to remind ourselves of to Whom all this prayer is offered: God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and for the coming of that kingdom. But even the first compilers of prayer books felt it needed a note of affirmation to end on, so added the doxology, '**For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever**'. Amen!

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