

Pentecost 7
24/7/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Psalm 85
Luke 11:1-13

Jesus, our prayer

In a sentence:

*Fundamental to the Lord's Prayer is not the word but that it is prayed in and through
Jesus: Jesus himself is our prayer*

Do we not know the Lord's prayer very, very well?

And yet that very familiarity itself can be a problem. Having received so comprehensively this teaching on prayer, we might miss the force of the request the disciples put to Jesus: Lord, *teach* us to pray. For this is a surprising – even startling – request. The disciples are people of a worshipping community. Since they were children, they were taught to pray – how to stand or to sit, what to do with their hands, what words to say, when to say them.

And yet they ask Jesus, “Teach us to pray.” And so Jesus gives them what we now have as “the Lord's Prayer”. Does this mean that we, now having these words, know how to pray? Are the *words* of the Lord's Prayer the answer to any question we might have about prayer? Most likely, all of us have had the experience of saying the Lord's Prayer and yet getting to the end “automatically”, without having done anything other than parroting, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...”. Just saying the right words isn't what it means to know how to pray. If this *were* so, prayer would be nothing different from a magic spell – the right words said with the right intonation in the right place at the right time. (“Open Sesame” gets you into the robbers' cave regardless of how “sincerely” or “meaningfully” you say it!). Whatever prayer is, it is not this!

And so it appears that, even though we have Jesus' response to his disciples' request, we are ourselves not yet able to pray; the words are not enough. Having been taught to put our hands together, bow our heads and close our eyes – and even say the Lord's Prayer – we are not necessarily able to pray. Prayer – at least Christian prayer – is not set patterns, words, or actions, although it does *involve* all these things.

That being said, the temptation is now strong to rush in with the solution that it's not the words that matter but our sincerity, our intention, our earnestness, our focus. This seems necessary because we now imagine that effectiveness in holy things is always about *us* and what we do. “If only I believe hard enough, pray hard enough, empty myself enough, or...” ... whatever. But in response to the disciples' request, Jesus does *not* say – “All that matters is that you really mean it, and then you'll be OK”. What Jesus gives the disciples looks more like a formula or a rule for prayer, as if that were a sufficient response to the request.

It seems, then, that the Lord's Prayer is both just what we need – for Jesus gave it to us in answer to the “how to pray” request – and still not enough, for God is not impressed by our simply knowing the right words and getting our religious practice and prayer right (cf. Psalm 51.16; Isaiah 1.11).

How can this be so? How can the Lord's Prayer be both enough, and yet not enough?

We tell ourselves – or tell our children – that prayer is “simply talking to God”? How we talk, however, depends upon which God (god) we are talking to, and it’s here that the nature of the Lord’s Prayer as *Christian* prayer becomes clear. Approaching prayer as if what matters is getting the words or that attitude right is to operate with just another form of what we know as “justification by works”. St Paul contrasts justification by works of the law with justification by grace through faith. Not the work we do but the work which Jesus has done, which we might receive as our own through faith – this is what sets us right before God.

The gospel presents Jesus as the means by which we stand right before God. If we seek to *pray* “right” before God, it is again through Jesus that this is possible. But this is not because Jesus gives us the words to pray, so that we are now “independent” pray-ers. We’ve already seen that the words don’t do it. To pray “right” before God through Jesus is to let *Jesus himself* be our prayer. Prayer may well be “talking to God”, but it also has to do with God’s talking to us. And the simplest and clearest thing God has said to us is “Jesus of Nazareth” – God’s “word” made flesh. To pray is to speak back to God what he has spoken to us; and when God speaks *Jesus* happens.

(We might note in passing that this has importance for what we do when we come together for worship. We gather not to generate emotion or sincerity or even right doctrine, but to hear and to speak to God of the one God has already sent – Jesus himself – and to be *made* that one in the process: we receive what we are, to become what we receive: the Body of Christ).

The prayer of the church, then, is not the mere words of the Lord’s prayer but Jesus himself. It is in this sense that we can say that God knows what we need before we pray – not because God “knows everything”, but because what we need is what Jesus had and is. We need to know ourselves and to know God as Jesus did. We need to be supported and to have the freedom Jesus had. We need to be loved and to love as he did. Jesus – crucified and risen – is the prayer of the church; if we utter only “Jesus is the Christ”, then we have prayed as we should.

“When you pray”, Jesus said, “say, our Father in heaven...” – and just so we *should* pray. Yet in that prayer we ask, *Father*,

your kingdom – Jesus Christ – come;

your will – lives such as Jesus’ own – be done;

give us this day what Jesus trusted you for;

give us, and make of us, the forgiveness which is Jesus-the-Christ;

rescue us in the end from evil – as you raised the Christ from the death of the crucified.

In all things – not least the decisions we might make today about our future together – we say, Lord, “Let us see, become and testify to Jesus”. To pray is as difficult – and as easy – as it is to believe ourselves to be made whole in him. If we can rest in the grace of God which is Jesus Christ, if Jesus is Lord, then we have prayer “covered”, and the only “angle” on life we need.

And so we may trust that whoever asks will be given what they ask, whoever seeks will find, whoever knocks will have the door opened, for our Father in heaven is faithful, and gives the Spirit to all who ask, that God’s people may know themselves in and as the Body of Christ. When this happens, the work of prayer, and life, has been done.
