

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Trinity 9 – 24th July 2016

‘LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY!’

When I was a child my father gave me a wonderful gift.

Every night, he sat at the end of my bed, and said the Lord’s Prayer.

He did this from the day I was born, even before I knew what words were. Until I learnt it by myself, and until the day I was too old to be put to bed anymore. But by then, it was part of me, and every night I continued to say the Lord’s Prayer, as I still do every day.

It was the best gift he could have given me.

OUR FATHER

Last week I reflected on the primacy of prayer expressed in the story of Jesus’ visit to the home of Martha and Mary.

Today, that theme of prayer continues as the disciples say to Jesus, *‘Lord, teach us to pray!’*

And Jesus gives them, he gives us, the most wonderful gift: THE prayer to end all prayers – what we now call ‘The Lord’s Prayer.’

This is the first prayer we should teach our children, and it is the last prayer we should be on our lips as we die.

If you are thinking the one we heard sounded a bit different from the one you know, you are right. The version we normally use is the slightly longer one from Matthew’s Gospel, but all the same elements are here in Luke.

It is a prayer that is humble in asking,
but confident in receiving.

Familiar in tone,
but awesome in scope.

In fact, it's such an extraordinary prayer, that we have to remind ourselves that we have permission to use it when we say in the liturgy:

'As our Saviour has taught us, so we pray'.

And do you know what is the most amazing part of it?

The word **'Father'**.

As Christians, we use this word so much, that we are likely to forget that by using that term Jesus ushers in a spiritual revolution.

The Aramaic word, Jesus uses, *Abba*, is a child's address to their loving parent, and this almost absolutely unknown until Jesus used it in his prayers. In this single word, Jesus turns the fatherhood of God from a cold theological concept, in the warmth of familial intimacy.

But here is the second most amazing thing about this prayer, he is **OUR** Father.

Jesus opens the deepest reality of his relationship with God, his 'sonship', and shares it with us.

What this prayer says is not only that God is our loving Father, but by extension that we are Christ's brothers and sisters. We are one family.

The Lord's Prayer is the prayer given to the disciples, given to the Church as a whole. And whenever, we say it, we are joined with Christians around the world. It tells us that our identity is not based on nationality, race or ideology, but on our kinship in Christ, our sharing in God's family. To say 'Our Father' is to say that we belong to each other, he is truly 'our' father.

PERSEVERENCE IN PRAYER

We could spend a year analysing the Lord's Prayer and still not come to the end of its richness. But Jesus has some other important things to say about prayer, that I do not want us to ignore or pass over.

The Parable of the Householder is about keeping going in prayer even when it doesn't seem to be getting you anywhere:

'I tell you, because of his persistence, he will get up and give him whatever he needs.'

The word 'persistence' here is more literally translated as '**shameless**'.

I find that fascinating.

Our Lord, is telling us to be *shameless* in asking God for what we most want. To lay before God in prayer our most desperate and our most genuine desires.

This is actually a lot harder than it sounds, because it requires a lot of honesty on our part. If we do not want to pray perhaps it is because we do not really want what we are asking for. We do not care enough about what we are praying about. But if we are truly honest, and we come before God with our very deepest and heartfelt desires, then prayer is never boring and we are not reluctant.

When Jesus says that our prayers should be shameless, it is not that we should be 'God-botherers', but that our praying should be earnest and real. Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer as a way in to this deeper prayer of the heart.

It is of course good and right to use beautiful and poetic prayers, but Jesus tells us that at least some of our private prayers should have a level of straightforward intimacy that ensures we are not hiding under fancy language.

Do you remember the television comedy 'Rev' from a few years ago?

A show about an inner-city priest called Father Adam Smallbone.

What most impressed me in that programme, was the depiction of his prayers. They are often humorous, and in some senses trivial, but what makes them profound is their absolute personal honesty and intense intimacy. Here's a selection:

'Dear Lord, I'm finding things a bit difficult at the moment. How ever did I get into this situation?'

(A prayer known to many parish priests!)

'Lord why do you want me to be a fundraiser? It's not even a very nice window?'

(One for the PCC perhaps!)

God, if you've got any ideas about how to fill this place, then I'd love to hear them'
(One for us all!)

He is using the same intimacy and honesty of the Lord's Prayer.

Praying as the person he is to someone with whom he has a close personal relationship.

When we pray in this way, we are acknowledging a very deep truth – that God wants to meet ME. That he wants to meet YOU – not some pious or idealised version of the person you are.

ASK AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU

The last thing that Jesus says about prayer in today's Gospel is found in that famous set of sayings:

'Ask and it will be given to you, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you.'

Jesus is telling us that persevering in prayer really works.

Not only does God listen, but he also responds.

This is the dangerous thing about prayer – it might actually work.

Cardinal Basil Hume recalls seeing a piece of paper pinned to a prayer board which said:

'Thank you God, for NOT answering my prayer'.

The absolutely key thing to notice in the parable is that after his friend perseveres in prayer, his friend gets up and gives him *'whatever he needs'*.

NOT, whatever he **wants**.

But, whatever he **NEEDS**.

Sometimes, what we want, and what we need are the same thing, and sometimes they are not.

But this begs, the question, what about the times when we pray and nothing at all seems to happen? When the sick person doesn't get better, or the job doesn't materialise? What are we make of that? Have our prayers been wasted?

Jesus tell us in this parable that our prayers are never wasted.

They might be answered in unexpected ways, and in God's time rather than our own, but even when we can't see any effect, he assures that something **HAS** happened – in the asking we have drawn close to God, and Our Father has opened his loving heart to us.

Prayer always make a difference in our relationship with God.

Our prayers nourish our relationship with Him.

We hold before Him our hopes and dreams, our desires and fears, and they are held up to the light of God's love.

God involves us in a relationship through the conversation of prayer.
It is through that searching that we will find,
In that asking we will receive,
and by knocking that the door of divine love will be opened.

ENDING

Today, as we say the Lord's Prayer together before Communion, I want us to say it more slowly than normal, and to really concentrate on the words.

As you say it at home, do really take time over the words and think about the importance of what you are saying, and the greatness of what you are asking through it.

For it is the gift that Jesus has given us for all time, it is the prayer that defines us, and makes us one family; we are the beloved children, and God is our loving Father.

For thine is the kingdom the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Fr Stephen Stavrou