

Trinity 9
5 August 2007
WW Evensong

Hail Mary x 5. Irish experience
The way we say the LP.

Do we just say it, and that is enough? Is it some magical incantation, the very act of which is itself efficacious? When we say it, are we expressing pious hopes that God will bring it about if we shout loud enough? Or does it demand a response from us, does it demand action?

It's a curious thing that in the best known of all the Christian prayers there is no reference to Jesus, or Christ, or spirit, or Trinity. Although I am no Islamic scholar, I can't see anything in it to offend a Muslim. It is recognizably Jewish: here are extracts from the Kaddish.

May the great Name of God be exalted and sanctified, throughout the world, which he has created according to his will.

May his Kingship be established in your lifetime and in your days.

May his great name be blessed, forever and ever. May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life, upon us and upon all Israel.

He who makes peace in his high holy places, may he bring peace upon us, and upon all Israel.

This is not surprising given that Jesus was a Jew. And because this prayer comes to us in large measure from Jesus' lips, this Jewishness has not been much meddled with, apart from difficulties of translation. When we consider that so much of what we call Christianity is actually Paulinity, or Augustinity, it's refreshing to find something that no-one has 'improved on'.

Let's look at it. Don't over-examine it, but take a big picture view. Imagine that it is being read by someone with no Christian background. What will they see? Perhaps that there are two parts to the prayer:

- part about a father-figure and our relationship with it;
- part about our relationships with each other.

Two parts, two great commandments: Love God, and neighbour as self. Love of neighbour *is* love of God. Rahner, *The self bestowal of God upon man which sustains him in his love of neighbour has its supreme and eschatologically victorious point in history in Jesus Christ, and for this reason in the love of every other man Jesus Christ is loved at least anonymously.* I think this explicit linkage of God and neighbour *is* peculiar to Christianity. The other is calling God *father*, to which I return next week.

Now look at it again.

- The first part, *Our Father to on earth as it is in heaven*, sums up the Kaddish. It's all about God and God's kingdom. The verbs are all *wishes*: let things happen, in hope.
- But in the second part we ask for things of God, in fact we *demand* things: give us, forgive us, lead us, deliver us. And the more I look at it, the more it seems that the second part is the key to the way in which we might attain the first: God's kingdom.

In the first part we talk to Our Father in *heaven*, as opposed to our father on earth. I don't see this as signifying that heaven and God are somewhere else, beyond, unattainable, but rather that God is something other than the fleshly fathers we know, or once knew. Heaven is the place where God's will is done, so earth becomes heaven when God's will is done here, and remains earth when it withdraws from the will of God. Seeking the will of God is a key part of this prayer, **and this is the central point of tonight's address.**

The prayer recognizes our dependence, our need to ask, our powerlessness, the futility of our attempts to control. Look no further than how cross people get when it dawns on them that we can't control cancer cells, or bacteria, or the weather. So in this impotence:

- we demand what we need to get through the day (not just bread).
- we acknowledge that we are in need of forgiveness, or tenderness.
- we recognize, or we should, that we have no hope being forgiven unless we forgive.
- we recognize that that there is in us a gravitational pull towards earth, towards the gutter, away from heaven, and that we are weak, and need strengthening.

All this I'll look at again next week and the week after, but for now just note that we can not, it seems, do all this ourselves.

Now I ask: do we just sit back and wait for God to accede to these demands, like the Thessalonians, or do we act? This prayer calls for action, unquestionably. Action requires courage, and the prayer recognizes this, and that we are in a hard place. It sees us for what we are: humans dependent upon, not in control of, the natural world. We are vulnerable, and we need to know that we are products of God's creativity, which is his love.

Dependence or freedom?

Unfortunately, this parent-child image often leads to a culture of dependence in Christians, a culture of timidity. Often in the gospels Jesus tells us to be like children if we want to attain the kingdom of God. And when you think of *Gentle Jesus meek and mild*, or, *Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as he*, you can see how some have interpreted this.

But for me, the opposite is the case. We are to be like children not in this emasculated way, waiting to be told what to do, but children in the way that children explore, and take risks, and try new things, and move on, and make the most of what they are given. Like children in being imaginative: see children at play, happier with a cardboard box and their imagination than with the latest Jedi knight figures. Children open, *in your face*, up front, independent in thought. It is in this sense, I believe, that Jesus encourages us to be as children, this imaginative liberating sense. This is a very subversive message. Children are honest, open, straightforward: imagine how the political processes of the world would grind to a halt if people started being honest, open and straightforward. That the church has tried to control its followers, and keep us in subjection for 1500 years and more is a disgrace, a sin, a crime.

In the *thy will be done* clauses, God wants us to align our wills with God's, and of course we need to discern God's will. This is not simply a case of accepting whatever is handed out to you. Discernment is an active process, like experimentation in science. The Gospels say, again and again, that God's will is that we are to make the best of our gifts and talents. That is easy when you know what your talent is, but when you don't it is more difficult. And nothing is easy in the face of all the distractions that society provides for us, or when we can so easily mistake our ego-driven will for God's. So prayer and listening are steps along the road to discerning God's will. Listening, not babbling on to God, but listening.

Making the best use of our talents is bringing together our deep gladness with the world's deep need. It means cooperating with, and using, nature creatively and responsibly. It means living delightfully not miserably, it means enabling others, not stifling them. It means replacing attachments to attitudes, to possessions, to practices, to clubs we are dependent on, with attachment only to God. After all, he came down to earth from heaven to show us how we must be saved – saved from tunnel vision, from selfishness, from isolation, from prejudice, from being cut off from each other and therefore from God. And saved to 360 degree vision, openness, to freedom to merge our deep joy with the world's deep need. Discerning God's will means getting rid of all the upholstery that has accumulated around us. It requires a return to childlikeness.

Let me give you an image.

WW Junior. One of the older pupils came in, obviously going off on a hiking or scouting trip, with bag and rolled up sleeping mat. He was confident, radiant, fully human, in tune with something. I wondered what on earth I could do to interest that young man in Jesus's message: he was, in so many ways, already in touch with it, utterly at home in his skin; his heart and God's will aligned. It seemed in a brief moment as if obstacles would part before him, as the waters parted before the Israelites as they aligned their will with Yahweh's. This is the childlikeness that I speak of, the childlikeness that is the key to entry of the Kingdom of God – here are now if we let it.

Through the acknowledgement of our dependence, of our humility (that is, our proper place before God), the layers of earthbound upholstery are stripped away so that we can see more clearly, uninhibited by clutter. The LP liberates us for action. And don't let us be half-hearted in our action: Holy Scripture repeatedly tells us that God favours brave risk-takers like David confronting Goliath; God favours the unconventional like the fishermen told to do what they'd never done before; God favours those who make the most of what they've been given.

When our will is thus aligned with God's, the waters part, the door back into Eden is flung wide, the kingdom of God is here.

Prayers

- Reflect on what our gifts are.
- Reflect on where our deep gladness and the world's deep need might converge, that is, on what only each one of us can give to the world.
- Listen to what God is saying to us.

Almighty God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplications unto thee; and dost promise, that when two or three are gathered together in thy Name thou wilt grant their requests; Fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants, as may be most expedient for them; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting. *Amen.*