

Lord's Prayer 2

Last week we looked at the prayer as a whole. We noted its two parts, the first in which the verbs expressed wishes, the second in which the verbs were commands. I said it seemed to me that the second part of the prayer, the give us, forgive us, lead us not and deliver us clauses, were the means by which we might attain the first, that is God's kingdom - heaven on earth. Perhaps they are the means by which we can go some way to the conversion of earth to heaven by enabling God's will to be done here on earth. The key is aligning our will with God's, and today we get some clues about ways in which this might be done.

Give us this day our daily bread

'Daily' is a difficult word, not used anywhere else in Greek, and so we're not certain of its meaning: it could mean what we take it to mean, or it could mean 'give us today tomorrow's bread', or what we need for tomorrow. This allows for a little bit of forward planning, which seems not unreasonable, perhaps.

But however we resolve it, if we're asking, we're saying that we are powerless. We are dependent on cosmic powers, sunshine and rain to name but two. And so we ask, demand. And if we're asking, we are acknowledging that we are hungry, that we are lacking. Consider the beatitudes:

- those who know their need of God, the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.
- those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled.
- God will satisfy those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires.

It could be an allusion to the Eucharist – and this is how many in the early church saw it. Or perhaps 'give us now a taste of the bread we shall eat in the Kingdom of God': give us a foretaste of heaven. Bread for today, but also a foretaste of the bread of heaven, the presence of Jesus at his table, heaven on earth. All very Psalm 23: Exactly the emphasis of George Herbert's Love bade me welcome (Herbert): you must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat – so I did sit and eat.

For me, this section also means simply *keep us going, give us what we need to get through the day*. We don't live just by having our material needs fulfilled, we need courage, hope, inspiration, creativity. And I suggest that this is a useful, practical interpretation of this part of the prayer, to take stock at the beginning of the day of what is likely to happen to you, and plan wisely for that, being careful with your energy and effort knowing what you might face before bed. This is the kind of thing that is recommended in the wisdom literature – intensely and immensely practical tips on daily living.

But the most important thing about the section is that we ask – out loud. I asked last week if the prayer was simply an incantation, or was it a guide to how to pray. Surely the latter: we don't just say it, but we do what it says. So when we ask for today's needs, I suggest that we list them in some detail. For example, I need creative inspiration tomorrow to make plans in Bradbourne, I need energy to deal with a dying man and a grieving family. I need rational thought to decide whether it's worth spending money on another pair of glasses for only very marginal improvement. You get the idea. The reason I think it's worth asking **out loud** in this kind of detail since I know, and it's a common observation, that saying things out loud quite often makes things seem different, changes the perspective. It can make us realise that that is not quite what we meant, and it can make us re-examine the issue more thoroughly. So ask for our daily needs, and ask in detail.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who (have) trespass(ed) against us

This is the hardest bit of the Lord's Prayer: it tells us that we have to be willing to change. Can I ask to be forgiven unless I forgive? It's in our capacity to forgive that we show we've been forgiven.

And asking to be forgiven hits me here as the important thing. And I'll go further, actually putting into words our thoughts. We can't, it seems to me, verbalise our shame without regretting it.

There is something uniquely and completely healing about verbalising our shame. The prodigal Son recognized this: I will arise and go to my father and will say to him ...

It seems we don't have to repent publicly. Father of the prodigal son, welcomes with open arms and comes to meet us before we have a chance to greet him and ask for forgiveness. All we have to do is turn towards him.

Eckhart went further: truly to have committed a sin is not sinful if we regret what we have done. Tell that to the magistrate. The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon received. Tell that to the jury on the paedophile case.

But do we feel forgiven?

So what does that say about all those who seek, but for whom the prize seems elusive? Is it because we find it difficult to forgive ourselves?

We are not perfect. Paul – instead of the ...

We are all bound to fail because we set such a premium on success (whatever that is). Perhaps we should remember that 'If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.' Chesterton.

We need to accept our own failure, and forgive ourselves. Repentance to be 'therapeutic rather than vindictive'. Paul saw that the only way to change a human heart was through acceptance and forgiveness. It is only when I find someone who does not criticise my behaviour that I can find the will to do something about it: I need help when I'm down, not just on the way back up. Love our enemies – and one of our enemies is our reluctance to forgive ourselves.

Guilt and healing

Guilt is one of the most destructive human conditions: guilt. Funerals.

It gives rise to shame, to horror, to tears. But Isaac – a great gift to have been shown one's sins. The forgiveness that comes with all this frees us from the tyranny of guilt (Colossians) that disables.

And for the exposure of guilt, or what is causing it in us, we need to dig deep down into our psyches – we must put our whole existence on the line. We have to work.

Penance is the surgeon's knife that can shed light on the problem, and then forgiveness comes with understanding.

This is confession, and it's fundamentally about love.

Forgiveness/healing is about letting God love the hell out of you. Sozein

The healing of guilt is to my mind what so many of Jesus' acts of healing are all about: possession, demons, disabilities – guilt.

It is hard work. All healing comes from God's grace but with human cooperation: the contribution of the sinner is needed. And when we know we've been forgiven, we can forgive others.

One of the early church fathers: 'it's a bit like teaching a child to do something. The parent does it carefully a few times, then steps back and says now you show me. God forgives us and then steps back and says now you show me how to forgive.'

It is almost as if the act of putting them in into words itself releases the guilt and lets it out. And it is humbling to do this in front of someone else. That is what best friends are for, that is what the confessor is for. In my experience the confessor has heard it all before, and is unshockable. It takes great courage to tell someone else, and there is a great deal of shame, but then we have the resurrection part of the story, since we arise changed and renewed. One must assume that confessor's advice comes from God. Always what is God's will.

What takes place in us when we accept it affects all those with whom we come in contact because it changes the way we relate to everyone and everything. And if we think that our sin is too great to be forgiven, that's inverted pride. It's an unchristian attitude.

Finally

So these two sections of the Lord's Prayer have something in common for me. And that's the need for us to put into words our needs and the things that we accumulate guilt about. Not just thoughts, but actual words. And as for doing this with someone else, if you have a friend who will listen to you, you are richly blessed.

Give us our daily bread .. and part of that daily bread is the knowledge that we are forgiven. That liberates us from carrying around the clutter that weighs us down. And that, liberation, is what the Christian Gospel is all about. Liberation from distraction so that we can align our wills with God's, and so make heaven here on earth.

O my Saviour, lifted
from the earth for me,
draw me, in thy mercy,
nearer unto thee.

Lift my earth-bound longings,
fix them, Lord, above;

draw me with the magnet
of thy mighty love.

Lord, thine arms are stretching
ever far and wide,
to enfold thy children
to thy loving side.

And I come, O Jesus:
dare I turn away?
No, thy love hath conquered,
and I come today.

Bringing all my burdens,
sorrow, sin and care,
at thy feet I lay them,
and I leave them there.

William Walsham How, 1876