

Sermon July 25<sup>th</sup> 2010 (Hosea 1 v2-10, Ps 85, Col 2 v 6-15, Luke 11 v1-13)

In the New Zealand prayer book there is a lovely inclusive rendering of the prayer that Jesus taught which is so familiar to us, the prayer that we say in our liturgy each week and that we encounter in our gospel from Luke today, "the Lords Prayer". Although many people consider it a bit sacrilegious to tamper with it, there are many versions in many languages. An exercise that I often suggest to people, and suggest to you is to attempt to **translate** it into your **own** words, and then incorporate that version into your own prayer life, since it will then be genuinely from your own relationship with God.

When we do this I'm always amazed at how differently we all understand the same prayer, and how unique each person's interpretation is. And so today, in only a few minutes I want to say a few words about this prayer, and the topic of **prayer**, which is the heart and soul of our religious life.

Prayer is an inward and dynamic aspect of communion with our eternal source of being, our creator. At a basic level, whether we're talking about our own personal or our corporate prayers, prayer is essentially **communication** and **relationship**

In a book called "**The Meaning of Prayer**" written in **1915**, Harry Emerson Fosdick says this in his preface-  
"Only a **theoretical** God is available to those who cease to **commune** with God. And a **theoretical** God saves no-one from sin and disheartenment, and fills no life with a sense of divine purpose. Such vital consequences require a **living God** who **actually** deals with human beings". (p xi)

(8am beginning)

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In our gospel reading from Luke, (also Matt) the disciples approached Jesus and asked him to **teach** them to pray. Clearly they saw that Jesus had a living relationship with a very real and living God. I imagine however that Jesus was in a bit of a quandary. On the one hand he had learned his

own Jewish culture's rich forms of prayer. But since his baptism, he had moved beyond those forms. He was living quite a different life of prayer, life in the Spirit, practicing a deep living intimacy with God, which was probably wordless most of the time. He set an example of prayer that was to re-define who God was to become for his followers.

So then he had to try and convey to his disciples and to the "Gentiles" something about what prayer was, to teach them **how to** pray, and yet not teach the traditional Jewish way of prayer. So what could Jesus do? What would **you** do if someone asked you to teach them how to pray?

Jesus opts for a prayer which is simple and straightforward. He gives them a formula- very **basic** direction about praying, one that to be sure, has stood the test of time, but one that is not exactly a "**how to**" manual on prayer. So he doesn't really answer their question. He only gives them **words** to say. He doesn't teach the meaning of those words or tell them exactly how to cultivate a living relationship with the God, with whom he himself communicates. And prior to this, the only other instruction he has given is -"Whenever you **pray**, go into your room, shut the door and pray to your father who is in secret".

So his listeners are left to discover the meaning of his words for themselves. The whole idea of prayer may have seemed a bit of a mystery to them. And that is where **we** come into the picture, and can connect with the first followers of Jesus. I'm sure many of you can relate to this. Does the realm of prayer seem somewhat of a mystery to you too? How many have received actual instruction in how to pray? I suspect probably not many of us.

So what is prayer and how do we pray? When we say "**let us pray**" in church, what are we really saying?

Well we may be saying "**let us focus ourselves on God**" or "**let us consciously evoke God's presence together**", or perhaps "**let's exercise**

**the relationship we already have with God", or most importantly "let's listen to God".**

A couple of years ago I was in a summer school class of 150 at Vancouver School of Theology. Our teacher was that great master of the Christian prayer life -Father Thomas Keating, a Benedictine monk from Colorado, writer of a number of books on a type of prayer called "contemplative" prayer, or "centering prayer", or "prayer of the heart", which several of us in this diocese had been practicing for a few years. Thomas's expertise is in what is called "the inner transformative process". This is in fact what contemplative prayer leads to. It is **wordless**, a form of silent meditation. It is prayer that allows us to enter into God's transformative process inside us, allows us to be in communion with the God within us, so that we are open to the possibility of healing and can be renewed in our walk in the Spirit. It is a choice available to anyone who wants to grow more conscious in their Christian practice.

And although Jesus is not teaching his beginners here how to practice **this**, he did in fact spend most of his prayer life in this mode of prayer, and here he is attempting, in giving them the "Lords prayer" to put his experience of God into simple words to begin to teach the whole inner movement of the heart towards God.

So let's look at what Jesus is actually saying here in this gospel teaching, i.e. the "Our Father". What is he really telling his questioners when they ask him? And what might they be hearing? What are some of the essential aspects of this prayer of Jesus?

Well first we need to know that Jesus' native middle-eastern language was Aramaic, and so by the time the translation of what we call "the Lords Prayer" gets to us, it has been through many interpretations. This shortened version in Luke's gospel (taken from Matthew's) is what we have today, so what can we say about it?

Well first, **the very act** of choosing to focus on God's presence is an important part of prayer. It is an acknowledgment of God's activity in human life. Remember that Jesus said, "Your father knows what you need before you ask him". But this doesn't mean we shouldn't ask. This is the difficult thing to understand about prayer. When Jesus later says to the disciples "Ask and it shall be given to you" etc, the paradox is, that it's in the very **act** of asking that we receive, not perhaps what we thought we wanted, but receive nevertheless. It's in the very act of seeking that we find, again possibly not what we thought we wanted or needed. And when we knock we may find the door is already open. In Mark's gospel Jesus says (11v24) "Whatever you ask for in prayer, **believe that you have received** it and it **will** be yours"

So Jesus teaches the disciples to say "**our father in heaven**". But how can he explain all that he means by these 4 words? How can he tell or them about his own experience, or show the nature of his relationship, and what this means for **his** life. He will do that later in John's gospel, but not here in Luke's.

Next come words of affirmation "**hallowed be thy name**", the desire that God's name will be made holy throughout creation- Again only 4 words, yet simply a shorthand way of saying something much more profound. Then "**Thy kingdom come**", both a prayer of hope, and a deep longing that the commonwealth of God will come into being on earth, and will bring peace and freedom for all people. Then one of the most important instructions. They must say "**thy will be done**"- again only 4 words this time to convey to the disciples, the most central dynamic of the human relationship with God.

So if we really examine what Jesus is teaching, we may discover there, meaning that we can discern from these words, some **underlying** music behind the words. What might we think that Jesus is **really** trying to teach his disciples? Here is a little of the music that **I** hear Jesus speaking-

-- You must hold fast to *God* like a child in a communion of the heart, and honour *God* with deep respect as you would a parent

--Know that *God* is the sacred source of all our life on earth and that *God* must constantly have first place in order to grow in human hearts and lives.

--Know that the whole realm of *God* lies both in and beyond mere physical reality on earth.

--Know that *God's* will for this world is all-important, and we must align ourselves with this desire of *God*, in order to thrive and grow and witness to *God's* presence in the world.

And - the most difficult thing of all for us. Learn how to **surrender yourselves to *God's* divine will**, and make *God's* will more important than your own.

Thomas Keating says that we do not have to wait for a mid-life crisis, to learn that nothing we ever planned in our lives is going to work in the way we expected. He says that we look for happiness in all the wrong places, and that we are not ready to turn the whole project of our lives over to *God*, unless and until we have discovered where true happiness is **NOT** to be found.

And lastly I hear that -

--You must accept yourselves as *God* accepts you, and experience yourselves as forgiven people, so that you will know how to forgive yourselves and others.

--and you must allow *God* to be your advocate and guide and protect you from all spiritual and human adversaries.

For *Jesus*, in his relationship with *God*, **prayer was the language of his heart. He also wants this for his disciples, and thus he wants this for us as his followers.** Prayer is for communicating with the divine presence in our everyday lives-a divine presence that is both within us, and all around us in creation, in a realm that is beyond anything we can see

or touch physically, but which we either experience or simply believe is there.

As Jesus intimates, we can only enter into such a relationship **if**:

- a. we have total trust that God is with us, inside us, around us
- b. we trust that, knowing us through and through, God will provide everything that we can possibly need,
- c. and if we will reach out and make a move,
- d. and if we persevere in our commitment to communicate.

Just as perhaps for the disciples, the answers to what we ask for may not be what we expect. We may first need to have all our plans ruined, and be prepared for surprise. The only promise God has actually made, is that God would send us the Holy Spirit. This we can count on through our baptism and through a regular active prayer life. We must learn and re-learn however to deeply trust the intimate God who Jesus came to introduce to us. Then we can be assured that what will be given to us, or the answers we get to our questions and prayers, will be more than we can possibly ask or imagine. Thanks be to God.