

Eucharist, 24th July 2022

Genesis 18:20-32, Colossians 2:6-15, Luke 11:1-13

Father Christopher

It's very tempting to dive straight into this morning's gospel passage and say it's all about Jesus teaching the disciples the Lord's Prayer. It *is* at least partly about that (though it's rather a shorter version here: there's no '*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven here*', for example), but pay a bit more attention. It's a bit late for that if you weren't listening, and to be fair, this was in the first sentence, while you were probably just turning round, adjusting your feet, before you'd tuned in. But the most important part is, I think, in the first sentence: we are told that Jesus was '*in a certain spot praying.*'

So, Jesus, despite being the Son of God, despite being fully God himself even, still prayed.

Why, might you ask? Well, he was also of course fully human, but within the Trinity is a constant bond of love, the greatest bond of love that is possible in fact. And the prayer between the Son and Father during Jesus's earthly life will have been a vital part of that. He might have been perfectly self-sufficient, but his prayer to the Father is something that he won't have been able to help; with Jesus it will have been a constant; it will have been central to his identity. For the Father is in the Son, and the Son in the Father. And so Jesus's prayer to the Father is the greatest form of prayer.

We get little glimpses of it ourselves, from the Cross of course, but perhaps most powerfully in the garden of Gethsemane, the Agony in the Garden, as Jesus prays:

'If it be your will, let this cup pass from my lips; but not my will, but your will be done.'

In that prayer he sweated blood it was so intense. So it is natural that the disciples should be there watching, perhaps even listening, as Jesus prays. For we are told that when he stopped, only then did one of the disciples speak to him. So it sounds as though he's been waiting. And it also sounds as though Jesus was probably praying out loud. Certainly, reading in your head wasn't normal then, and it's reasonable to assume that praying in your head wasn't either.

There's a great passage in St Augustine's Confessions, written around 400, when he describes seeing St Ambrose reading, and he was astonished at how he did it:

"His eyes were drawn through the pages, while his heart searched for its meaning; however his voice and tongue were quiet."

So Jesus's disciples are probably sitting, watching, listening, as Jesus prays out loud. And one of them, quite reasonably asks,

'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'

We might skate over this, knowing the story too well, knowing that it leads to Jesus teaching the Lord's Prayer. But note again, the disciple is not asking for one prayer, to learn by heart, but is asking a very general question: '*teach us to pray*'.

Lots of people I speak to about prayer seem to think that you either have it or you don't. Rather in the same way that English people seem to think you can either dance or you can't, or you either have rhythm or you don't, whereas in my view you can learn either of those things, just as you can learn to pray. So the disciple was very sensible in asking how to pray. We should all be asking that question.

What about the answer? Well, it is a form of words, one we still use, if generally St. Matthew's fuller version. But it is also a way of praying:

- '*Father, may your name be holy!*' God is praised, adored.
- '*May your kingdom come.*' Partly adoring God, but also asking for this world to be transformed into God's kingdom.
- '*Give us every day the bread we need.*' Going from the huge, unearthly prayer, down to the small things we need in this life.

- ‘*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who owes us!*’ A plea for forgiveness, but also a reminder to be repentant. And thanks for the forgiveness of others.
- And ‘*Do not lead us into testing.*’ Now, people have wondered about this one, and indeed the Pope recently changed the Italian translation of this to ‘*Do not let us be led into temptation.*’ The Greek however is quite clear: it says to God, ‘*Do not lead us...*’ And that is because of the understanding in Judaism at the time that God is responsible for all things, even the bad and the difficult. But either way, this is a prayer not to be tested, because we know that we are weak, and it is therefore quite reasonable to ask God that we not be tested.

Now, how many of us **here** have asked someone else for help praying? Because there are lots of ways to pray, some ancient, and some more modern and experimental. Or, do you only pray when you’re in church, letting someone else lead you, sometimes listening to the words, sometimes not? Do you pray with your children, or with your parents; with your spouse or partner? In silence, or out loud? What time of day?

On one level, people do, I believe naturally pray on a very basic level, it is an instinctive thing, but it is also something that it’s our duty to teach others how to do: collectively Christians have passed on the practice of prayer from generation to generation, from Jesus doing so, as in this gospel reading, to today. And it is our duty, and our joy, to continue doing that. For the sake of the continuation of our faith, but also for the wellbeing of our brothers and sisters.

Prayer is the lifeblood of Christianity. If you come to church but don’t pray regularly, even daily, during the week, then you are missing out on a central part of what our faith has to offer; added to which it is our duty to praise God every day. So teach others to pray, and if you need help yourself, as indeed I think we all do then ask someone, including Mother Emma or me, for help or for ideas that might improve your prayer. There’s a danger that in saying you need to ‘learn’ how to pray that it sounds as though it’s complicated, something you have to be initiated into. And that would be a mistake. But there are lots of ways that you might find useful, most of which are not difficult.

The fundamental thing though is to come to our heavenly Father in simplicity, opening your heart, not always using words, frequently just in silence; listening to God as much as speaking. And trusting in God’s openness to us, and trusting in his response to our prayer.

Lots of the formal ways of praying are actually about doing those things, rather than about the precise words used, which is often as much about helping the mind to switch off from the shopping list as the words themselves: such as the rosary.

The same with the Orthodox ‘Jesus prayer’: if you repeat ‘*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*’ over and over again, something of the meaning of that mantra will penetrate our head, but more importantly, it helps us to get out of our daily grind, and approach God. And even if you’re skeptical about some of this, especially if you’re skeptical about it, **just try it**. Because over time prayer will change you, as you draw closer to God, and as your relationship with Him deepens.

Part of prayer is obviously asking for things, and I think it is quite right that we do. We should ask what is in our deepest hearts, and if we do not know what to ask for, offer up to God the situation or person we are concerned about, as Abraham does in asking God for mercy for the people of Sodom.

We also heard in this reading: ‘*For everyone who asks receives.*’ That does not mean that if we present a shopping list, we will be given everything on it. But we should ask for what we desire in our heart. God may not give precisely what we have asked for, but we will receive what we need in response, if we are open, and patient. People often ask what the point of prayer is, given that God surely knows our needs before we ask him. So why bother?

A fair question, but given that all is from God, we first of all have a duty to give thanks; to see God as a kind of heavenly Father Christmas however is not to appreciate that the God we believe in and worship is not like a Greek god, sitting on a cloud.

Our very being comes from God, we depend on him, and even in our prayer, we are relying on the Holy Spirit, offering back to Him ourselves, with His aid. In praying for the future, we are acknowledging our **relationship** with God as the constant, permanent source of everything in our life. Even when we don't feel like it, are angry, or feel our faith to be weak, persevering in prayer demonstrates our absolute trust in God.

Something Rowan Williams said in this vein, which I've repeated to some here before, has stuck with me as an important explanation of what prayer is. Rather than a transaction between me and God – me getting on with things on my own, asking God for something that I need, Him either giving it or not, and I continue with my life as I was before – in prayer I am joining in with what is already happening, constantly, in the whole of creation, rather than sending my lonely, weak voice out into the ether of space, which may or may not be picked up.

Think of the hymn, 'All Creatures of Our God and King', the great hymn of St. Francis. The sun and moon praise him, the sea praises him, all the animals praise him, the angels and cherubim praise him. And that praise by all creation of God, in earth and heaven, is continuing all the time, just as the angels in heaven constantly cry '*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts.*' When we pray, we are simply joining in with that great hymn of praise, joining in with the whole of creation, but in the power of the Spirit: so it's like a great circular dance, between God and all of his creation. And all we're doing in praying is co-operating with that; stepping into it; reminding ourselves of it; consciously coming back into the presence of God which we never left, and which it is not even possible to leave.

That is what prayer is. It is not us giving to God, or us just asking for a favour, as we might our parents, or our bank manager, but **dwelling** with Him, *resting* with Him, or indeed wrestling with him; thanking Him, and coming back into our right relationship with God, which is after all the most important thing we can do with our lives.

Amen