

I suggested a few weeks ago, when we moved to Matthew's sixth chapter, that there was something of a shift in Jesus' teaching. Up until that point he had been reminding the people of valued teachings from their tradition and intensifying the meaning of those teachings: "you have heard it was said... but I say to you..." That cycle of teachings seemed to come to an end, and another begin. Now we have shifted to teaching on giving gifts to the poor, prayer (today) and fasting (next week). In place of the phrase "you have heard it was said", there is now an apparently different one: "Do not do as the hypocrites do..."

And yet, the difference between what has been heard to this point and what we now hear is really only apparent. The charge of hypocrisy is the clue. It is a sharp charge, which typically has to do with saying one thing (usually of a moral nature) and doing another. Yet this is not quite the sense we have in this gospel reading. Here the point is not so much about saying one thing and doing another, but doing something and *naming* it as something else. In particular, what is named as an act of godly devotion – almsgiving, or prayer or fasting, is identified by Jesus as being quite something else. Just as he previously challenged our inner thoughts and motivations when we meet externally the demands of the law, here Jesus again questions whether almsgiving, prayer and fasting have been met with the internal thought which will make them "holy" actions.

Today it is prayer Jesus addresses. Having spoken previously on nature of the the Lord's Prayer, I'll focus more generally this morning on the theme of prayer *per se*, seeking to understand what it is that Jesus challenges in our practice of prayer. The charge of hypocrisy in prayer arises because of a clash between what is happening in our prayers, and what we *say* is happening, Jesus paints us a picture of an extravagant and attention-seeking pray-er who comes before God in prayer in a very public way. The image is quite grotesque and quite possibly rather an over-statement of any real practice, but we still get the point. These Jesus charges as "hypocrites", for while they *look like* they are praying to God, they are, because of their ostentatious prayers, found in fact to be praying to those *who observe them*. To put on the show – to be *seen* to be praying in a particularly fancy or impressive way – this is to be addressing not God but those who watch, for the response which is sought is the acknowledgement of the crowds that I am one who meets my religious obligations. When this acknowledgement is given – or even simply sought – the prayer of the hypocrite is answered. It is in this sense that Jesus declares that the reward for the prayer has been received; because the

prayer is addressed to the watching crowds, so also is the answer given and received when the crowds notice.

But we must be careful here. These poor deluded hypocrites are, perhaps, too easy a target for us. The kind of behaviour Jesus describes is just what most of us here, at least, would usually shy away from. This might be because we aren't quite sure how to pray in public, or because we naturally shy away from public displays of our devotion. And if we aren't *naturally* disinclined to this kind of show, we know well enough the teaching of Jesus on this matter, and so we know that when we pray we ought not to make an outward show of it.

But this doesn't protect us from being found guilty of what Jesus attacks here. The alternative he proposes is that we withdraw and pray in the hiddenness of our own room. Yet the problem is that even there we will find that we are not yet alone, for we are still at risk of observation – this time observation by ourselves. The point about the way to pray is not that there is a significant difference between praying in public and praying in private. There will always be – and must be – both private and public prayers. Some people, because of personal piety or simple abilities with words, will draw attention to themselves in public prayer. The difference which matters in our prayers is whether we are seeking to be noticed by God, or settle for being noticed only by ourselves or others.

It is in fact very difficult to pray. The difficulty is not finding the words, but releasing the words so that it is in fact God we are addressing and not ourselves or those who may be watching. The fact that Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer doesn't really help here. If it is not prayed in the right way, then the Lord's prayer becomes just another "heaping up of empty phrases" which Jesus criticised and which led him to give the Lord's prayer in the first place. Simply to pray the Lord's prayer because Jesus said that we should is much like keeping the commandments on killing and adultery we met back in chapter five – we can still find ourselves susceptible to thoughts and motivations which render our external control largely pointless before God. There is little to be said for not killing if you consider a sister or brother a worthless fool; there is little to be said for "abstaining" from adultery with your body if the mind is in a lot of places it shouldn't be.

It is the same way with prayer: there is nothing to be said for praying the Lord's Prayer simply because Jesus said to. For if this is our approach, then the prayer becomes an empty action, for foremost in our minds is not divine prayerfulness but the fact that we are being obedient in praying as Jesus

taught. God is not impressed by the way in which we pray, or the words we use. It is difficult to pray, particularly for those who seek to take it seriously, for prayer is a laying of our lives in God's hands, and yet this doesn't actually happen if we comfort ourselves that we have done this in just the right way – perhaps by uttering the words Jesus has given us.

But the difficulty is not the technique but the spirit of prayer. And the solution, as always for Christians, lies in the meeting of God's demands of us in the gracious gift of Jesus himself. Jesus is the one who receives from God, and gives to God, as it is appropriate for a human being. He is the one who prays for himself, but without self-consciousness. The work of prayer for believers, like any good work we might seek to do, is a matter of joining our prayers to those of Jesus.

There are two ways in which we might understand this happening. The first is indicated by noting that in our regular worship the saying of the Lord's Prayer is usually introduced with something to the effect of, "and we join our prayers to the prayers of Jesus, saying, Our Father..." This is a very deliberately chosen introduction, for it seeks to remind us that it is not the repetition of a formulaic prayer which impresses God, but the prayer of the human being Jesus of Nazareth – Jesus the Christ, for us. If we declare that we are saved by the good work of Jesus, then we mean also that our prayers have their worth in connection with the prayer of Jesus.

The second sense in which our prayers have their force in connection with the prayer of Jesus is rather more profound and, I expect, rather less well understood. Again, the clue is often in the liturgy – usually in the opening prayer or the one before the readings or Holy Communion – but unless it's emphasised it may not be heard. Just from the way in which we usually talk about our worship, it is clear that most of the time most of the church is not Trinitarian but Unitarian in its worship and its understanding of prayer. That is to say, even while we might use the language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (or "equivalents") in our worship, we do this in such a way that it is *our* work to worship God, whether in words of praise and adoration or in actions of petition and intercession; the Trinitarian language becomes empty phrases heaped up. We might imagine ourselves here "on earth" and God "in heaven", and the action of worship as being a shooting of liturgical arrows in God's direction. Good worship, we might imagine here, is getting the aim right – which corresponds to a liturgical "heaping up of empty phrases" which cover all the right territory and yet still require us to get them off the ground and moving heavenward. The "unitarian" character of this – as distinct from Trinitarian worship – is that God is not involved in worship but the passive recipient of worship. Here God is not really present at all, but distant, and our worship seeks to bridge the gap. The Lord's prayer, improperly used, can be

one way of attempting this bridging because Jesus gave the impression that it would do the job.

Quite distinct from this is Trinitarian worship, which believes God not to be distant, but to be present. And yet this presence is *very* specific, and not a ghostly wafting of the divine through this hallowed hall. Trinitarian worship calls for the gift of Spirit, that the humanity of the Son might be made present, that the Father of the Son might be worshipped. Taking the lead of St Paul we speak of the church as "the Body of Christ". But this is more than simply a nice image. In the act of worship, we *hope* (in the strong, Christian sense of that word!) that the Spirit *is* given, that the humanity of the Son is made present *in our own humanity*, and that the Father is thereby properly addressed in worship. As far as prayer goes, the gift of the Spirit means that our prayers are, in fact, heard by the Father as the prayers of the Son.

Perhaps all this sounds very technical and theological and hard to follow, but it matters. We are not here – or ought not to be – because we are religious, in the sense that word usually has in common usage. We are here because we seek a humanity which we cannot create for ourselves, but which we believe or have heard is a gift of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Conversion takes place when we receive a glimpse of that humanity and embrace it, and it is from this re-thinking of ourselves that we might dare to imagine that not *our* prayers for ourselves, but *Jesus'* prayers for us, are what really matter. For our prayers to avoid the charge of hypocrisy, they must have the innocence and openness, and the hiddenness from ourselves, of the prayers of Jesus. To borrow from the previous passage (Matthew 6.1-4), in our praying the left hand must not know what the right hand is doing.

Such prayer is something which only God can make happen. Our first prayer then, is not for ourselves, but a prayer for God, that God might be the place at which we begin in all things. Just so, we are to begin our prayers with the petition that the Father's name be "hallowed". For where God is accorded proper honour, true humanity is found.

From that point, by the grace of this God, all other prayer flows; indeed our very lives become a prayer, heard and honoured by God.

Well then, do we join our prayers to Jesus as members of his body, and look for the fulfilment in our own lives of the promises made and fulfilled in him.

Such prayer is never empty, and catches the ear of God.