

25 July 2010

Sunday 17C

Sermon notes:

Luke 11.1-13

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

---

In our gospel reading this morning we've heard what we now know as "The Lord's Prayer", although we're more familiar with the version given in Matthew's gospel. It is a very familiar gospel passage and prayer, yet it's the very familiarity of the prayer – and of prayer itself – which can cause us a problem. Knowing this teaching on prayer so well, we might miss the force of the request which the disciples put to Jesus: Lord, teach us to pray. This strikes me as a surprising request. Like most of us, the disciples are people of a worshipping community. Since they were children they were taught to pray – how to stand or to sit, what to do with their hands, what words to say, how often to say them.

And yet they ask Jesus, "Teach us to *pray*." Clearly there is something in what they've seen in Jesus' pattern of prayer which attracts them. And so Jesus gives them what we now have as "the Lord's Prayer". Does this mean that we, now having these words, know how to pray? Are the words of the Lord's Prayer the answer to any question we might have about prayer? Most likely all of us have had the experience of saying the Lord's Prayer and yet getting to the end "automatically", without having really done anything other than parrot the words, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...". Clearly, just saying the right words can't be what it means to know how to pray. If this *were* so, then prayer would be nothing different from a magic spell – the right words said in the right place at the right time. ("Open Sesame" gets you into the robbers' cave regardless of how "sincerely" or "meaningfully" you say it!). Whatever prayer is, it is not this!

And so it appears that, even though we have Jesus' response to his disciples' request, we are ourselves not yet able to pray; the words are not enough. Having been taught to put our hands together, to bow our heads and close our eyes, even to say the Lord's Prayer, we are not thereby necessarily able to pray. Prayer – at least Christian prayer – is not set patterns, words, or actions, although it does *involve* all these things.

That being said, the temptation is now strong to rush in with the solution that it's not the words which matter but our sincerity, our intention, our earnestness, our focus. This temptation is strong because we usually imagine that effectiveness in

godly things is always about *us* and what we do. "If only I believe hard enough, or pray hard enough, or empty myself enough, or..." ... whatever. But in response to the disciples' request Jesus does *not* say – "All that matters is that you really mean it, and then you'll be OK". He clearly *does* say that we must persist in prayer – this is the point of the parable of friend who won't get out of bed – but he *doesn't* say that it's a matter of being sincere. It appears that all Jesus gives the disciples *is* a formula or a rule for prayer, as if that were all that mattered.

It seems, then, that the Lord's Prayer is both just what we need – for Jesus gave it to us – and clearly not enough, for God is not impressed by our simply knowing the right words and getting our religious practice and prayer right (cf. Psalm 51.16; Isaiah 1.11).

How can this be so? How can the Lord's Prayer be both enough, and yet not enough?

-----

We tell ourselves often enough – or tell our children – that prayer is "simply talking to God"? How we talk, however, depends upon which God (god) we are talking to. And it's here that the nature of the Lord's Prayer as *Christian* prayer becomes clear. It is our tendency to approach prayer as if what really matters is getting the words or that attitude right. But this is just another form of what we know as "justification by works". St Paul contrasts justification by works of the law with justification by grace through faith. Not the work we do but the work which Jesus has done, and which we might receive as our own through faith – this is what sets us right before God.

If we seek to stand right before God, it is through Jesus Christ that this is possible. If we seek to pray "right" before God, it is again through Jesus that this is possible. But this is not because Jesus gives us the words to pray. We've already seen that the words don't do it. To pray "right" before God through Jesus is to let Jesus *be* our prayer. Prayer may well be "talking to God", but it also has to do with God's talking to us. And the simplest and clearest thing God has said to us is "Jesus of Nazareth" – God's "word" made flesh. To pray is to speak back to God what he has spoken to us; and when he speaks *Jesus* happens.

If, as St Paul declares, Christ is our righteousness, then we may also declare that this same Jesus is our prayer. Prayer cannot simply be "talking to God"; it is rather speaking to the God who has spoken to us, and God has said, and done, and lived, Jesus of Nazareth.

(We might note in passing that this has importance for what we are doing when we come together for worship – not generating emotion or sincerity or even doctrine, but speaking to God of the one God has already sent – and being *made* that one in the process).

The prayer of the church, then, is not the mere words of the Lord's prayer but Jesus himself. It is in this sense that we can say that God knows what we need before we pray – not because God "knows everything", but because what we need is what Jesus had and is. We need to know ourselves and to know God as Jesus did. We need to be supported and to have the freedom Jesus had. We need to be loved and to love as he did. Jesus – crucified and risen – is the prayer of the church; if we utter only "Jesus is the Christ", then we have prayed as we should.

"When you pray", Jesus said, "say, our Father..." – and just so we *should* pray. Yet in that prayer we ask, *Father,*

*your kingdom – Jesus Christ – come;*

*your will – lives such as Christ's – be done;*

*give us this day what Christ trusted you for;*

*give us, and make of us, the forgiveness which is Christ;*

*rescue us in the end – as you raised Christ – from evil.*

To pray is as difficult – and as easy – as it is to believe ourselves to be made whole in Jesus.

If we can rest in the grace of God which is Jesus Christ, if Jesus is Lord, then we have prayer "licked".

And so we may trust that whoever asks will be given what they ask, whoever seeks will find, whoever knocks will have the door opened, for our Father in heaven is faithful, and gives the Spirit to all who ask, that his people know themselves in and as the Body of Christ.

For such a promise, and the power to bring it to fruition in his people, to God be the glory forever. Amen.