

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups July 1st 2007

Deeper into prayer – with Jesus

....together Mark 6: 5 -13



Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

The Jews were pre-eminently a praying people and it would be entirely natural for the disciples to ask Jesus, how to pray. They were also aware that the highest form of prayer is the prayer of the community of God's people emphasised by Jesus when he said, 'When two or three are gathered together in my name...' And surely we have our own recent example of the power of people praying together with one heart and one voice for Ben's recovery so far. And I emphasise that word 'heart' because known community prayers, including the Lord's Prayer, can sometimes roll off the tongue while our minds are on other things.

The great fault of prayer is that it can so easily become self-centered. It is all too easy to be concerned with what we want rather than what God wants. We can be so busy telling God that we fail to listen to him. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus puts God, our Father, at the centre of our lives. What an amazing thing that Jesus should tell his disciples and us, that we can address God in the same way as he always did - as our personal, loving, powerful Father. The minute we use that word, Father, two things are settled straight away. It settles once and for all our relationship to God which is one of intimacy and if God is OUR Father it settles our relationship with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. If we have put God first in our hearts and minds, then God's concerns will become our first priority – God's name; his kingdom and his will. God's name stands for himself – for his character and his purposes. His name is already 'holy', but we pray that it may be 'hallowed', treated as holy, because we want our Father to receive honour in our own lives; in the church and in the world.

The pattern of the Lord's Prayer should be the pattern of all our prayers for it begins by giving God his proper place and goes on to take life's past, present and future to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. 'Your Kingdom come' begins with you and me. As one Christian wisely prayed, 'Lord, revive your church beginning with me'. The Kingdom asks for the individual acceptance of the Will of God and so, when we pray, 'Your Kingdom come', we are really praying, 'Father, help me to do your will' for people do not enter the Kingdom in crowds, they must enter as individuals prepared to accept the Will of God and, when required, to pay the price of that acceptance.

As Paul tells us in Romans, 12: 2, the Will of God is 'good, pleasant and perfect' and so it must be for God is infinite in knowledge, love and power. Jesus is calling us to pray that our lives on earth may draw ever closer in obedience to God's Will. To pray that with sincerity, however, puts us at odds with the 'world' and our own self-centredness. Self-interest is usually true of our secular culture with which we are constantly being persuaded to conform. If we succumb, our name, our ego and our will become life's priorities and it is so easy then to value and seek other people's good opinion of ourselves rather than acknowledging God's sovereignty over our lives. We need to hand ourselves over to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ – to be united with him as we learned last Sunday – for this is no prayer for someone who wants to stay the way they are.

We now turn to our own petitions, asking God to give, forgive and to protect. In our first petition we should note that we are not taught to pray, 'Give ME my daily bread', but give US our daily bread'. Martin Luther had the wisdom to see that 'bread' was a symbol for 'everything necessary for the preservation of this life, like food, a healthy body, home, good government and peace'. But, we can be sure that Jesus means only the necessities of life when he uses the word 'bread', not the luxuries of life, where the world's culture knows no limits to personal greed. As Bishop Wright says, 'It is impossible truly to pray for our daily bread, or for tomorrow's bread today, without being horribly aware of the millions who didn't have bread yesterday, don't have any today, and in human terms are unlikely to have any tomorrow either. But, what can we do about this, as we pray this prayer in Church today and go home to our Sunday lunch? Well, obviously we can give, as best we can. We can become more politically sensitive and active, to support

programmes, not just for foreign aid, but for a just and fairer global economy.' And later he goes on to say, 'The next time you come to the Eucharist, bring with you, in mind and heart, someone you know, - you know of, - or have seen on television, who desperately needs God's bread today... As you return, ask yourself what this would mean when she or he prays, 'Give this day my daily bread'. Then ask how you might be part of God's answer to that prayer.'

The fact that Jesus taught everyone to pray. 'Forgive us our sins' confirms that sin is universal, but this is an unlikely prayer for a generation of people who are not concerned about sin. Only last week, I heard of a lady who said that she thought there were people living today, who did not sin at all, but - only in Dorking, of course! But, seriously, if you are not conscious of sin, how can you ask for forgiveness? Forgiveness is essential to life and the soul both in giving and receiving forgiveness and so it is not surprising that Jesus includes both in this prayer and goes further in v:14&15 where he states that our own forgiveness is impossible with God if we do not forgive those who have sinned against us.

Jesus is saying that there is the closest possible relationship between human and divine forgiveness and if we fail to forgive anyone, then, it follows we are also asking God not to forgive our sins. Louis Stevenson and his family used to say the Lord's Prayer every day in their worship together. One day, in the middle of this prayer, he rose from his knees and left the room. His wife quickly followed asking if he was ill. 'No, he replied, 'but I am not fit to pray the Lord's Prayer today'. How true that probably is of many of us from time to time. God's attitude to us in this area is determined by our attitude to others. On one occasion General Oglethorpe remarked to John Wesley, 'I never forgive' whereupon John perceptively remarked, 'Then I hope, Sir, you never sin'.

The fact is that evidence of true repentance is always found in a forgiving spirit. If we are disciples of Jesus who prayed, 'Father, forgive them', as he was nailed to the cross and if we acknowledge that we also nailed our Lord to that cross by our sin - however small - how can we not forgive others who have offended against us? Once we admit the enormity of our offence against God, then most offences we perceive, rightly or wrongly, against us, will appear insignificant and if they do not, it is indicative that we have minimised our own offences against God and our neighbour.

'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil' is our third plea to God and what could be more natural than to ask God, our Father, for protection in the face of trials and evil or the evil one, which is probably the better translation as is the case in Mathew 13:19, I quote, 'When anyone hears the message about the Kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown along the path', which you will recognise is from the parable of the Sower. On this basis, it is the Devil who tempts God's people to sin and from whom we need to be rescued. And you may remember, two weeks ago, when we were studying Jesus praying for his disciples in John 17 that our Lord prayed, 'My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one'.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are expressing our total dependence on God in every sphere of our lives. Jesus gave us this wonderful model of real Christian prayer in complete contrast to the prayers of the Pharisees and the heathen, at that time, who had such a false image of God. Jesus teaches us and demonstrated by his life and sacrifice that God is our loving Father, who knows our every need and acts on behalf of us, his children, through the power of his Spirit and seeks to rescue us from evil.

What he asks of us is our belief and trust in him with our love, obedience and sacrifice. As Jesus demonstrated by his death on the cross, the real test of love is how much we sacrifice - for God, for those whom we love and for our neighbour.



Witness: questions to discuss

The distinctive thing about Christian prayer is the nature of the God we address. What does the Lord's prayer tell us about God? How is this reflected in our own prayers?

The Lord's Prayer begins by focussing attention on God – on his name, his kingdom and his will - rather than our own reputation, influence and desires. How much is God a priority in your own prayers?

Why is God's forgiveness of us dependent on our forgiving those who have wronged us? Can you think of anyone against whom you harbour resentment or bitterness? How do you think God views this?

..... end your meeting by praying each request of the Lord's Prayer with time to pray into each section.