

Earth-Shattering Prayer

A sermon on Luke 11: 1-13 & Colossians 2:6-19 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 July 2022

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Message

The Lord's Prayer is a manifesto for a whole new way of relating to God and the world.

Sermon

For most of us, prayer is something of a challenge. We recognise that it is a crucial part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus but, in both theory and practice, we have difficulty with it. Sometimes it has been spoken of in churches as though it were something we all just knew about. We have been urged to pray, and to put more time into prayer, but we have often been given little or no guidance as to how. It can feel a bit like being urged to communicate more with your Vietnamese neighbours when you speak no Vietnamese and they speak no English. Nice idea, but how do you even start?

In tonight's gospel reading, Jesus's disciples see him praying and ask him to teach them to pray. It is probably worth noting that Jesus apparently hasn't hassled them about praying before this. He simply models the practice of prayer and waits until they are eager to know and ask for help. God is certainly keen for us to engage and relate, and God takes the initiative, coming to us and relating to us generously. But while God certainly hopes for us to respond, nothing is demanded. The gift is given freely, with no strings attached.

And when the disciples do ask Jesus to teach them to pray, how does he reply? He doesn't give them a lesson in the theory and theology of prayer. He doesn't discuss the complex relationship between prayer and God's action in the world. He does give a couple of brief illustrations to assure people that God is eager to hear and respond to their prayers. He reminds them that even people who don't care can be persuaded to act if you persevere in asking, and that even mediocre parents know how to give good gifts to their children. How much more surely then, he says, will God respond to your prayers and give you what you need. But that's about it for theory.

Instead, what he offers them, by way of teaching them to pray, is the text of a sample prayer. "Here, pray this," he says.

The prayer he gives them is the one that has thus come to be known as "the Lord's Prayer". And even before I look at the content with you, I want us to note the practical significance of the way Jesus answered their request. "Here, pray this."

The implication is that we learn to pray by praying. It might be a desirable goal that we would all learn to pray rich deep prayers that come from the heart in our own words, but Jesus doesn't expect us to be able to start there. "Here, pray this." Get started by using my words, and keep praying them until they become your words, until they sink deep roots into your heart and mind and begin bearing fruit.

We heard the version in Luke's gospel tonight, and the fact that it is slightly different to the version in Matthew's account should alert us to the fact that the important thing is not the precise wording. The prayer had taken on different wordings in the congregations that these

two gospel writers were a part of, but it is still identifiably the same prayer. “Here, pray like this.”

There is something else that is important about beginning with the words of Jesus. It is not just training wheels for prayer. It is also fundamental to the nature of prayer for followers of Jesus. Prayer is not something we make happen. We don't generate it by our own efforts. Jesus is our great high priest. He is the one who is at the right hand of the Father praying for us and for the whole world day and night. Our prayers are not separate from that. Our prayers are offered “in Christ”. We participate in the prayer that Jesus is offering. We are not starting from scratch; we are simply joining in.

As the Apostle Paul said, in one of our other readings, “having received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives *in* him, rooted and built up in him.” Whatever prayers we offer are offered “in Christ” and are offered as a participation in the praying he is already offering. So to begin our praying by beginning with his sample prayer makes absolute sense. How else would we learn to participate in his praying?

We are a bit like the new drummer for the Rolling Stones. When Charlie Watts died last year, Steve Jordan was not chosen for his ability to do something new and unique and innovative. He was chosen for his ability to do exactly what Charlie had been doing. If the Stones are still going in five years time, he might be starting to make his own creative contributions, but for now, his job is just to blend in seamlessly to the music they are already making. Our job is to learn to blend into the prayer Jesus is offering.

When we begin to unpack the content of the prayer Jesus gave us, we discover that it is quite revolutionary. It is something of a manifesto for what Jesus is on about, for his mission in the world, both then and still. Which is another insight into why it is so important. Praying this prayer gathers us into the life and ministry of Jesus. As we let it speak to us and through us, it begins to write the values and agendas of Jesus into our hearts and minds. Praying this prayer does not only teach us how to pray; it teaches us how to be. If we allow it to do its work in us, it will continually reshape us in the image of Jesus.

You can see how this reshaping in the image of Jesus begins right from the first words of the prayer: “Our Father”. I'm not going to get into the discussions today of whether we should be saying “Father and Mother” or anything like that. It may be an important discussion, but not for my point here.

The point is that we are invited to address God the same way that Jesus addresses God, and that is with a name that is unique to the relationship Jesus has with the Father. If Acacia introduced me to you saying, “This is my dad,” you wouldn't begin addressing me as “Dad.” That might be her relationship with me, but it is not yours. So there is no automatic reason to assume that just because Jesus can address God as “Father”, we might too. But Jesus invites us to do so.

The Apostle Paul said “when you were buried with Christ in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith”, and so we begin to see that being “in him” through baptism, we have now been generously adopted into the same kind of intimate familial relationship that he has with the Father. It is not that we stand independently as children of God, as Christ's

equals, but that we are gathered into him, and in him, we share in his relationship to the Father.

The prayer reminds us, though, that we cannot presume on that relationship. We are invited to address God using the same name that Jesus uses, but we are also to pray that God's name will be hallowed, honoured, used with the utmost respect. This prayer has powerful political consequences, both then and now.

The opposite of hallowing someone's name is to drag it through the mud, and God's name is dragged through the mud whenever people wrongly invoke it to justify their actions. It happens all the time. God's name is dragged through the mud when those who are identified as God's ambassadors manipulate and exploit and abuse people. God's name is dragged through the mud when the leaders of nations claim to be acting on God's behalf when they order the invasion of other countries and the bombing of towns full of innocent men, women and children.

We are called to pray that God's name will be hallowed, that the sound of God's name might instead cause people to stop and reflect on the truthfulness of their words and actions and that the very sound of the name might be a powerful force for the ending of exploitation and destruction and every form of evil. The more we pray this prayer, the more passionate we become about the honour of God and the more disgusted we become by blasphemous misuse of God's name.

"Your kingdom come," we pray. Matthew's version, which we know better, adds, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This is not a separate idea. In essence it is simply an expansion of "your kingdom come". A whole series of sermons could be preached on this line, so I will have to confine myself to a comment or two. Note that we pray for God's kingdom to come, not for us to make it to God's kingdom. Many religions see this world as something from which we eventually escape to go elsewhere to be with God, but Jesus does not teach that. Jesus teaches us to pray for the kingdom to come here. He teaches us to pray for the marriage of earth and heaven, not our transfer from one to the other. The earth and our physical bodies are all part of God's promised future.

Describing the vision as a "kingdom" has huge implications for our life in the here and now. Not only are we now to regard God as our Father, rather than as some distant foreign power, but we are to pray for the establishment of God's kingdom, here and now. We are to live that, to give our allegiance to God's kingdom, to God's will, now, and that means that no other kingdom or nation can ever again rely on our unquestioning allegiance. This is the sort of prayer that had Herod dispatching the death squads and Pilate signing an execution order.

If God rules, and we have given our allegiance to God, then we find ourselves living in this country as those who are suspect because we are praying that our ruler will displace the authorities of this nation. When people of other faiths pray like that, the anti-terrorism provisions are brought to bear. We might be committed to a non-violent change of power, but there is no less reason to look upon us as potentially treasonous! The fact that we aren't is a sign of how much we have allowed our own prayer to be domesticated and rendered impotent.

“Give us today our daily bread.” Many of our prayers begin and end here, especially when we are not learning to pray from Jesus. We can end up praying a shopping list of personal wants and needs. Jesus does not discourage us from praying for our needs, but his prayer places our needs in the context of the prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom.

Jesus celebrated the kingdom around meal tables all the time. He was constantly at dinner parties with those who were seen as social refuse, and he made every party a sign of the arrival of the kingdom. And so the prayer for our daily bread is a prayer that we might continue to do likewise; a prayer that the party might go on and that we might continue to celebrate the kingdom with those whose needs for daily bread have so often been ignored.

“Forgive us our sins, as we ourselves are forgiving everyone who is indebted to us.” This continues the same idea further, because it was often in the context of those disreputable dinner parties that Jesus spoke the words of forgiveness; words that caused so much scandal to the powers-that-be. “Who does he think he is, forgiving sins? Only God can forgive sins, and God does that in response to the required sacrifices being offered in our temple. Who does this bloke think he is?”

Well the answer was that Jesus thinks he is the one in whom the kingdom has come, on earth as it is in heaven. Now the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to all. Now, as the Apostle put it, he is “erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands”. And as those forgiven in Christ, we do the same, forgiving those who are in debt to us. Here the prayer is absolutely explicit that we are to live the prayer, not just mouth the prayer.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.” Or in other words, “save us when things get out of control.” This is the same prayer that Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. “Father, this is too much for me. Let me out of this.” And he urged his sleepy disciples to pray the same: “Get up and pray that you may not come to the time of trial.”

But we must pray this remembering that when Jesus prayed it, the answer was no. Ultimately he had to subordinate this prayer to the earlier prayer, “your will be done,” and he was swept into the whirlpool of “the time of trial”. In part he was swallowed into the time of trial so that our prayer might be answered, so that the whirlpool might expend itself on him and we might be saved.

This is an awesome prayer. It is a manifesto of all that Jesus is on about. In praying it, eagerly, consciously and actively, we are participating with Jesus in his mission of saving the world by establishing the kingdom of God on earth. And it could fairly be said that in praying this prayer, and allowing it to rewrite our values and agendas, we are offering ourselves for the life of the world. We are allowing ourselves to become part of the coming of the kingdom, of the establishment of God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.

So much is this so, that it could even be said that the basic defining characteristic of a follower of Jesus is the praying of this prayer. Would you follow Jesus? Then pray like this. Allow this prayer to become your breath, to become the nature of your living. Allow this prayer to bring you to the table to celebrate and offer yourself for the kingdom. Allow this prayer to carry you into the life of Christ and his intimate relationship with his Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. Pray this prayer, and live this prayer, and you will be following Jesus.