

ROADSHOW 3 / 2015

THE LORD'S PRAYER

As usual, a few introductory comments.

- The Lord's Prayer is a subject to which books could be, and have been, devoted – even some rather long books. This evening is therefore a very brief (and individual) summary of what one person makes of the LP, when he prays it. I do hope for the response of others, because I want to learn how I can make the LP *richer* in my own use of it.
- You may have gathered over the past couple of years that I am personally a little chary about over-using the LP. Why? Because I think that we can become careless with it, and use it without due care and attention simply because of our familiarity with it, and this applies to me as much as to anyone else. We use it in our public liturgies, but for very specific purposes and in very specific places. For example, before we receive Holy Communion in the new HC service - the LP is our corporate and shared action of prayer before, “in love and charity with our neighbours”, we move humbly forward as individual disciples to receive the sacrament. I am, as I said, cautious about using the LP as a prayer for all occasions perhaps simply because we know that everyone will be able to join in. It is a prayer of the community as well as a prayer that we can and should pray on our own, but this does not mean that we should not pray it very carefully.
- There is at present, as you probably know, something of a contretemps with regard to the LP on our neighbouring island. The Church of England produced a short advert on prayer, during which different people (including the Archbishop of Canterbury) recited the LP. This was to have been shown in cinemas in the run-up to Christmas when the new Star Wars film is getting its initial run. This has now been banned, so to speak, by the cinemas, lest it seem offensive to some. Briefly, I am not sure it is an appropriate place for an advertisement of this kind (although I enjoy the cinema). But I think also that there is a lot of hypocrisy around the whole issue from the cinema proprietors' standpoint, who are suggesting that they will not be drawn into religious or political controversy but are happy to show other advertisements that are certainly “plugging a particular line”, socially, politically and culturally. And there are plenty of other advertisements, in the cinema and on TV, which willfully demean Christmas and hence the religious sensibilities of believing Christians.

- A final point - This controversy has underlined, however, the interesting fact that the LP is a prayer that religious believers of almost any hue, may share in. It is a Christian prayer in that Christ taught it to us, but there is no reference to the Trinity or to the divinity of Our Lord. It is based around the loving fatherhood of God and our relationship with Him and with the world around us. It is genuinely a prayer that those of other religions might pray without disrespect either to Christianity or to their own faith.

OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY NAME.

- We must admit that we are careless about saying the Lord's Prayer, certainly in public. Listen to words of the ancient Syrian Liturgy of St James, a very early Christian liturgy and how it introduces the LP: "Count us worthy, O Lord, Lover of mankind - with confidence, with pure heart, with contrite soul, with sanctified lips, to be bold to invoke thee, the Holy God, and to say."
- As a child, the opening of LP, "Our Father who art of heaven" always seemed to suggest to me that God was not near us – he was somewhere else, above us. There was a comfort in knowing that members of my family, eg. grandparents who had died when I was young or before I was born, were with Him in heaven.
- It is saying more than that, without contradicting it. It is not a spatial description of God. Think of Solomon's prayer of dedication of the Temple. 2 Chronicles 6. 18ff - "But will God indeed dwell with mankind on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You; how much less this house which I have built. Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You."
- So, we are addressing God in all his power and majesty – who is beyond anything that we can conceive or know and yet we call him Father – an intimate, family way of addressing one's father. But always remember it is "OUR Father." – not my possession or a genie at my disposal. Far above all that we are or could be our comprehension and yet we may call him, in an intimate way, "Father". The great mystery *and* the great beauty of our Christian belief. Never ever to be trivialised.
- Hence "Hallowed be thy Name". What is in a name? For the first hearers of this prayer, everything – that which gives, in the fullest sense, reality and identity; it was not simply a means of telling Tom from Dick or Harry. This Name of God is the fullness of what God is, his total utter holiness. Everything that makes for

holiness - love, goodness, wisdom, power – is there in God beyond anything that we can grasp in our finite minds and hearts. Nor is “Hallowed be thy Name”. even a reminder that we should not break the third commandment – *Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain*. It is immensely profound; it is a prayer that the Holiness of God may be always before our eyes and we pray that we will be drawn towards that holiness, so that we ourselves may become ever more holy. It is sad that the word “holy” when applied to humans is almost an insult.

- In the orthodox traditions, this is very central to understanding discipleship. We are made in God’s image and likeness – the image remains, despite ourselves. The call is to grow into the likeness of God so that, with God’s grace, we may become more holy, closer to God in the sense of closer to Godliness. Hallowing God’s Name, God’s identity, God’s reality is the trajectory of that journey
- So – the first couple of phrases of the LP is, ideally, a devout preparation of prayer, as God is placed at the centre – the centre of everything. Praying those words fully and prayerfully could take an hour of concentration and contemplation, even a lifetime.

THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN..

- These phrases are utterly inter-connected. “The Kingdom” is at the very heart of Our Lord’s teaching. It means, not a place or a territory in our sense of it, it means the *realm of God*, the *place where God’s rule is apparent*. So, where God’s will is done, there is the Kingdom. Where God’s will is not being done, there the Kingdom is not.
- The Jewish rabbis, around the time of Christ and before, would probably have spoken more about the *revealing* of the Kingdom and that is a useful understanding for us. When God’s will is done, the Kingdom is revealed. We therefore have to admit that the Church and the Kingdom are not coterminous, they are not the same thing – there are aspects of the Church, being peopled by humans, that are not of the Kingdom. We also need to understand that there are places and people outside the life of the Church who are living out Kingdom values, where God’s will is being done, sometimes even unknowingly by those who do it.
- “On earth, as it is in heaven” – again, not *upstairs*, *downstairs*. Rather we are speaking of our knowledge that in God’s presence in its fullness, there is a perfection of love, of goodness, of wisdom, of truth.. In this life, we are seeing, in

St Paul's expression, puzzling reflections in a mirror, we see through a glass darkly. But then – face to face. Our prayer is therefore that God's rule, God's realm may break through ever more and more into the life of the world, so that the perfection of God may take over the life of this world, and may take over our lives.

- We need to make sure that those words “Thy will be done” are not said grudgingly, even as a reproach to God for being so mean to us.. A Victorian hymn shows us just what this can mean – *Should pining sickness waste away / My life in premature decay, / My Father, still I strive to say, / Thy will be done.* William Temple once said that those words “Thy Will be done” are a battle cry. I would add, “They are never a reproachful whine”.
- Not a soft petition, because it is not about other people, abstract hopes, and what God is to do. It is also about us and our membership of the Kingdom of God, our constant, daily responsibility to be agents of the Kingdom – God's love, God's goodness, God's truth – in the world. We shouldn't pray it is there is absolutely no self-examination going on at the same time.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

- We have always to remember that the LP is a shared prayer, even when we pray it alone – it is a prayer we pray with Christ *in us*. It is also a prayer we pray as part of the community of God's people, the community of Christian disciples, the Body of Christ. Therefore this part of the LP is not “give me today my daily bread.” I always think of it primarily as being about our sharing and about our constant dependence on God each day. The children of Israel in the wilderness cannot hang on to the manna because they're not quite sure of God. The man who plans to build larger and greater barns (in Our Lord's parable in Luke 12) so that he can live a life without a sense of dependence on God loses everything, including his life. Our daily bread – not make me self-sufficient so that I can no longer need acknowledge that everything is a gift of God and my need of God.
- In a wider context it means also the bread of heaven, the Word of God that comes down from heaven (John 6) is something we need for nourishment every day – we can't bank it, we can't take a break from it because we have enough stored up of spiritual nourishment - “Give us this day our daily bread” – replenish us with both material and spiritual strength, not simply as individuals but together.
- I mentioned generosity earlier – I am now indebted to Gregory of Nyssa, one of the fourth century Fathers of the early Church, a fine theologian who seems to

be becoming of greater interest to modern theologians in recent decades. I am actually indebted to Gregory of Nyssa *via* a recent book by Archbishop Rowan Williams *via* another Gregory, the present Dean of Armagh, who pointed me in this direction as we were driving home after a roadshow a couple of weeks ago. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us (and this is no present-day trendy) that because the bread of God is for everyone, I have only properly and rightly received my daily bread if no-one goes hungry or distressed. If I am satisfied by my daily bread and there are those who remain hungry, whether on my doorstep or further afield, I have not worthily received my daily bread from the hands of a loving God. This is not a modern twist on this phrase— this understanding of the LP as driving us out to action and the resolve to seek justice for all goes back to the earliest centuries of the Christian Church.

- Rowan Williams adds to this that our reason for praying is not that we may become nicer people, but rather that we are gradually becoming attuned - tuned in - to the will and purposes of God and, as this happens, things will start to change, as they must do, not only in our lives but around us, through us.. “Give us this day our daily bread” is not a selfish prayer. It is downright dangerous and demanding.

AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US

- Need to make the effort to recall that for which we need forgiveness – that’s one of the reasons why I worry about the LP being rattled off. What do we need to be forgiven of? Behind the denial (that we’re all good at), behind the self-justification (that we’re even better at). We have an inbuilt propensity as humans to do harm to ourselves and to others, by what we do and say, and by what we are too cowardly, self-centred or lazy to do or say. We really should not say the LP without some preparation.
- And a point never to miss, and a word never to miss, is that tiny conjunction “as”. The two belong together totally and completely. It is in part that we have no right to expect to be forgiven for anything if we are unforgiving resentful people. Matthew 18 – the man who is forgiven a debt of 10,000 talents – one talent reckoned to be about 15 years wages for a labourer and refuses to deal with someone who owes him a hundred denarii – again a denarius would be a day’s wages.. We don’t find it easy to think of ourselves as sinners or, if we do, it’s even easier to think of other people as being greater sinners than we are and therefore we needn’t worry overmuch about our sins. It doesn’t work like that. We are indeed all sinners. Sin means *missing the target*, missing the target of God’s love, God’s compassion, God’s generosity and so messing up our own lives far more than we ever imagine and, far worse, messing up other people’s lives on a constant basis by our own words and actions or lack of actions. We are warned again and again of the eternal danger to our souls of comparing ourselves favourably with others when it comes to the damage we do through our own sinfulness. An aspect of the sin against the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth. So we are reminded that those resentments and spiteful unforgiveness is a barrier to our being forgiven by God.
- Why? Always remember that if we need the inflow of love and grace into our lives from God, we cannot ask for this if, in our lives, we are deliberately refusing that flow of God’s grace and love to have an outlet *from us* into the lives of others. It cannot happen. We need always to be reminded of that.

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL

- Difficult one! Surely a loving God could never *lead* us into temptation. Again, without trying to find an escape clause for God, I would say that temptation is a constant backcloth to our lives, every day. (Genesis 4 – “sin is crouching at your door.”) Yes, there may be the huge temptation that will apparently arrive from nowhere, but also the daily temptations, sly crouching temptations – to arrogance, to vanity, to controlling others, or the temptation of “not getting involved”, or of finding other priorities that we can always justify.. The best of us and the worst of us are in the constant presence of temptation – what this prayer surely means is that we will be always make ourselves aware of the presence of God in every situation – because he is present everywhere – pray for his presence not simply as a wagging finger of warning, but as a presence that will enable us to remain always in touch with him. Our prayer is that we will have to face no temptation without God’s presence being real to us, and this means preparation and our constant awareness of temptation even in the best of places and among the best of people.
- We need therefore to link back to the prayer “Thy will be done”, even in the most irksome, painful and tempting situations. I believe that this petition is also to pray that we will not be unable to recognise temptation. There is a thin line between great goodness and great evil. The people who are capable of the greatest goodness are capable of the greatest evil. It has often been suggested that the people who don’t even attempt to do much good are probably less likely to do much evil but this is not an excuse that will work with God!
- Dostoevsky – “Without God, everything is permitted”. *Without the awareness of God, we are capable of anything*. Hannah Arendt, the German-American writer who covered the trial of one of the Nazi leaders, Adolph Eichmann, in Jerusalem coined a chilling and now famous phrase when she saw how ordinary, utterly normal and *un-monstrous* Eichmann seemed – she wrote of “the banality of evil”. The sheer ordinariness of evil that can trip any of us up and ensnare us.. Without God, and an awareness of God’s presence, I believe that we are capable of anything.

FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM, THE POWER AND THE GLORY, FOR EVER AND EVER.

- This conclusion doesn't appear in many of the earliest manuscripts of Matthew's gospel (and doesn't appear in Luke's Gospel at all) and it is not always used as part of the LP, even in the BCP, although we tend to think that it is distinctively protestant.
- Kingdom – the only kingdom that ultimately matters, that matters in eternity, is the Kingdom of God. Revelation 11 - "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever." It is that for which we are to strive in our daily lives. To conform our lives, individually and together, and this world to the Kingdom, to the reign of God, his Kingdom which is the source of true power and glory.
- We see everywhere around us the lust for power and glory and we can very easily be seduced by it. It leads nowhere other than self-worship and therefore self-destruction. If we are to put power and glory into perspective, it can only be when we see its limitations and temporary nature, unless it is placed utterly at the disposal of the Kingdom of God.
- As we begin to think ahead to Christmas and the way in which the Incarnation turns everything on its head, it might be helpful to remind ourselves of just what that story means. Whose Kingdom was the important one at that first Christmas? The novelist John Buchan wrote a fine biography of Caesar Augustus, and drew a wonderful spiritual contrast between the Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor who called the census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and the Christ-child who was born there - Gaius Octavius Caesar, the man of whom it was said that he found Rome as brick and left it as marble, given the title "Augustus" by the Roman senate, and regarded by many of his subjects as, literally, divine? Or the child born in a stable in Bethlehem? In describing the enormous funeral that Gaius Octavius Caesar was given, Buchan writes that those present comforted themselves by reflecting that Augustus was, after all a god, and that gods don't really die, they simply go on somewhere else.. But then Buchan continued - Meanwhile, he writes, the one born in Palestine was to proclaim a kingdom mightier than the Roman, and to tell of a **world saved not by a man who became God, but by God who became man.**
- The conclusion of the LP reminds us of the true Kingdom you and I seek to serve – it won't bear much relationship to the priorities of power and glory we see them around us but then, this is what this prayer is all about.