

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer
Prof John Morris, Sunday March 29th

5. *The Lord's Prayer*; Psalms 4 & 31; Chapter 2: Come unto me; Collects: 1,2,3

At 10.00am each morning many of us are saying The Lord's Prayer during the daily reflection and our Lent "Pilgrim" course this year focuses on the Lord's Prayer. The prayer is so familiar, so well known, that it poses the danger that we repeat it automatically without considering the meaning of each part. Tonight's talk can only scratch the surface of what needs to be a lifetime study.

What we know as The Lord's Prayer is not in Mark's gospel, but in Matthew as part of the 'Sermon on the Mount' and in Luke when the disciples, having seen Jesus at prayer, ask him how they should pray. The two versions differ slightly; only Matthew has "Your will be done on earth as in heaven", neither have the doxology ("For yours is the kingdom ..."). Some scholars think the Matthew version was said early in Jesus' ministry in Galilee, the Luke version later, when the disciples ask Jesus "Lord, teach us to pray". Others think both are compilations. Jesus was a devout Jew, so it's no surprise that much of the prayer is closely related to prayers in Judaism. Many Jewish prayers start "Our God in heaven, hallow thy name"; "Lead us not into sin" is part of the 'morning blessings'; one website lists where in the Old Testament you can find every phrase of the Lord's Prayer. So, the prayer is not uniquely Christian and it is possibly one that Jesus used regularly.

Jesus' original words would have been Aramaic; what we have now are modern renderings of early Greek and Syriac versions. The earliest English translation from Greek or Latin was in about 650 from Lindisfarne; the version we are most familiar with is the 1662 BCP. I'll dispense with the BCP "Thy and Thine" and use "Your" because I don't want our thinking to be either terribly formal or antique. It should be OUR way of saying things NOW. If you were talking to Queen, it would be YOUR majesty, not "Thy majesty"!

The prayer starts "Our Father in Heaven", or simply "Father". We often take scant notice of the word "Our", but it does express that we are people who all consider ourselves children of God and who call God "Father". Even "Father" sounds rather formal; "Abba" is actually more like "Daddy". Jesus invites us into the same relationship with God that he himself enjoys. The "Our" also reminds us we are part of one worshipping body; all those who acknowledge God as Father. If we are to call God "Father", it is clear that we should behave as children of God; the words therefore carry a responsibility as well as a claim. The "in heaven" introduces an element of mystery; heaven is beyond our comprehension. The whole phrase implies a sense of closeness, but also of awe.

"Hallowed be your name". We must consider God's name as holy/sacred. It should never be trivialised, but it *can* be spoken unlike in OT Judaism where the word Yahweh could not be uttered. Although we must speak of God with awe and reverence, we should openly speak God's name among our friends and acquaintances. Rowan Williams sums it up as "understand that when you are talking about God it is serious .. even more wonderful .. than we can imagine." This phrase of the prayer gives a lovely sense of intimacy ("Our Father") mixed with awe (Holy God in heaven).

"Your kingdom come" is a direct request. The phrase has its echo in Jewish prayer "May God establish his Kingdom during your life". Jesus often spoke of God's kingdom and his audience would have been familiar with the concept. The Hebrew word "kingdom" refers to a reign and, when used of God, refers to his authority as the heavenly Kingdom. The Jews looked to the establishment by the Messiah of God's rule in this world in the future; the eschatology of the "new age". This is clear from the disciples' question in Acts after the resurrection "Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel" only to be told "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has chosen". Jesus goes on "But you will receive power". This makes it clear that the kingdom is not just something for God to achieve; it for us

to work towards. Following Jesus' commands to feed the hungry and clothe the needy are just part of the kingdom to which Jesus refers. So, let's leave the times and the seasons to the Father, but acknowledge again that the request "Your kingdom come" lays on us a responsibility to keep on following Jesus' commands in this life.

"Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". William Barclay points out that this is virtually the same as "Your kingdom come" because "The kingdom is a state of things on earth in which God's will is done as perfectly as in heaven". The request "Your will be done" is nothing less than God's invitation to us to join him in making things on earth the way they are in heaven. The "kingdom" is both spiritual and intensely practical; it is how we must live in the context of all of God's creation. Put simply, it is our responsibility to establish as far as possible God's kingdom of universal justice in what is at present a very unequal society and world. What a staggering task!! Every time we say this phrase we should consider how we can play our part.

"Give us today our daily bread". I learned recently that the word which our bible translates as "daily" is unique to the Lord's prayer in all ancient Greek writing. Also, I'd never before spotted the apparent repetition "this day" and "daily". I read that the Syriac text is better translated as "give us this day the bread we need". Here we have an echo of a point we considered last week - the difference between what we want and what we need. Note, too, the request is only for one day; this reminds us that each new day is a fresh gift from God. Bread often features in the NT: Jesus broke the few loaves the boy had given before feeding the 5000; and at that Passover meal with his disciples, he broke the bread saying "This is my body for you". Our 'daily bread' is not simply essential nutrition for this physical life, but also spiritual nutrition for eternal life.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us". Anglicans usually say "trespass", but trespasses, debts, sins - all three are commonly used. The original Aramaic can apparently mean either sin or debt. John Wycliffe used "debts" in his 1395 translation; it was Tyndall who introduced "trespass". Because we now use "trespass" and "debt" in rather specific senses (one of property, one of money), for me "sins" is by far the best. Asking for forgiveness from God was a staple of Jewish prayers, which also considered it right for individuals to forgive others, so it was probably commonplace in Jesus' time. We now take a legalistic view of debt and trespass; sin is much more general. Jesus used the parable of the unforgiving servant to show that having *our* sins forgiven cannot be a one-way process. Like all God's gifts it brings responsibility - in this instance to forgive others who have wronged us.

Finally, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The first part seems an odd request - who would think that a benign, father God, would purposely "lead us into temptation"? Pope Francis says it is a poor translation and that "do not let us fall into temptation" is much better. As the letter of James puts it "God .. himself tempts no one." The Greek word often translated as temptation can also mean 'testing' or 'trial' and there is evidence that "do not bring us to the time of trial" - literally "spare us from the last judgement" - may have been Jesus' original meaning. On the other hand, coming shortly after the plea for "our daily bread" it can also be a request for strength not to be caught up in material pleasures. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said to his disciples "Pray that you may be spared the hour of temptation". Whichever is original, we are all well aware of many temptations in our lives and we should perhaps consider what are the particular temptations of this present "time of trial". Finally, "deliver us from evil". Scholars debate whether this means "evil" in general, or "the evil one (devil)" because, in John, before his trial Jesus prays for his disciples, that God will "keep them from the evil one". I suggest that any distinction is of little importance.

As we say The Lord's Prayer in our compline tonight, let's think again about the meaning of each phrase, and about our responsibilities as well as our requests to Our Father in Heaven.