

Shameless Prayer

I always remember when I was a student studying theology I was at a College Communion service and I found myself watching my Professor praying as he partook of the bread and wine. It stuck me that he seemed almost transfigured, in some place I had never been. It was if he was deep in some ocean, where I was only paddling in the shallows. And I was heartened by that. This man was my teacher, instructing me in the things of God, and it mattered to me that – as we might put it now – he clearly knew how to walk the talk. His teaching was informed by deep experience of his subject matter, the living God.

Well, maybe it was a similar experience that led the disciples to ask Jesus to teach them to pray. We read that ‘At one place after Jesus had been praying, one of his disciples said, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’ Maybe there was something about the sight of Jesus praying that stirred the disciples. They were used to hearing Jesus teach, but when they saw him at prayer they wanted to know more. And so there follows this prayer that Jesus taught them, the same prayer we recite week in week out centuries later. And the first thing to note is that this is a prayer for Jesus’ disciples, a prayer that unites them and binds them together. You see, in those days different rabbis would teach their disciples different prayers that would mark them out and identify them, and you would be known by the prayer that was distinctive to your group. Apparently John the Baptist had done that. So – I remember some years ago at the first Live Aid Concert held in Wembley Stadium David Bowie got the whole crowd to join in the Lord’s Prayer, claiming that this was a prayer for all of us and not belonging to any one particular tradition. Well, nice idea, David, but it’s not true. The Lord’s Prayer is the Jesus prayer and it’s freighted with distinctive Christian content and it binds us together and unites us with Jesus whenever we say it.

Now, there are two things I want to note about this prayer this morning, and the first is who it is addressed to, who we are praying to, and this is a God who Jesus calls Father – and he invites his followers to call God the same. It’s often noted that the word ‘Father’ here, the Aramaic ‘Abba’, is a respectful but affectionate term used by a child of his or her father. It’s a bit like ‘pappa’. And that one word alone speaks volumes about prayer and who we’re talking to. It is not primarily God as Sovereign Lord, the God of glory before whom angels

veil their faces and human beings are mere dust that we are addressing. No. In prayer we are children addressing a loving parent who knows our needs before we even ask. And that is deeply reassuring and an encouragement to prayer, and it's why Jesus can go on to ask what sort of parent will give their child a snake when they ask for a fish or a scorpion when they ask for an egg. This is not how parents treat their children and it is not how God treats God's children.

That brings us, however, to the second point which we learn from the Lord's Prayer, and that is the goal and purpose of prayer. The Lord's Prayer begins with 'Father' – 'Abba' and there then 'hallowed be your name, your Kingdom come', and this is perhaps harder for us to hear. What it means is that ultimately prayer is not about us and our needs and our desires and our requests – it is about the hallowing of God's name in the earth and the drawing near of God's rule. This reflects the fact – the troubling fact – that for Christians our abiding desire is not to see our own needs met and our own yearnings satisfied but rather that somehow God's name should be honoured and hallowed in us – in other words that somehow God might be revealed and glorified and God's rule draw near. And that is hard. It is hard sometimes to defer to God and to say that God's glory matters more than our wishes. It's hard when you are passing through the deep waters of tribulation to pray not that things will be put right for you but that somehow God will be glorified in you. It's hard when you have a troubling medical diagnosis to pray not that you will be healed but that somehow the realm of God will be shown in you, however that might happen. It's hard to submit your desires to the glory of God. But that is what we learn from this passage. In the Lord's Prayer we are invited to ask all kinds of things from God: give us our daily bread – i.e. meet our bodily needs; forgive us our sin - i.e. have mercy upon us; do not bring us to the time of trial – i.e. spare us from evil. But over it all stands these dominical words: 'hallowed by thy name. Your kingdom come'. And that is to be our concern in all our prayers and longings.

Well, if that is a little troubling, there is however another side of this that our passage invites us to pursue. A zeal for God's name to be hallowed, that informs our prayers, yes; but this has an edge to it because it implicates God as well as us – it puts God in the frame. Let me explain by considering our passage from Genesis this morning. It is a dramatic scene – the fate of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are in the balance. God has heard the outcry over life in these cities and now it is payback time. Sodom and Gomorrah are ripe for

destruction. And Abraham is appalled at the prospect of God obliterating these cities, irrespective of the presence of the righteous. And suddenly the scene resembles a stall in a middle-eastern market place as Abraham haggles and barter over the fate of these people. The question is, how small a remnant of righteous people must there be in these cities for God to spare them? 50? 40? 30? 20? And Abraham is determined to beat God down, to get a good bargain. He is questioning God – indeed he is almost shaming God into being merciful. ‘Far be it from you to do such thing!’ he says. ‘Should not the judge of all the earth do what is just?’ In other words, what would people think of this? Would wholesale destruction of wicked and innocent alike hallow your name and bring glory to you? Would that not bring shame upon your name? And so God is pushed.

Then jump ahead to another story of a later time and picture Moses up on the mountain, receiving the Law of God. And while Moses is up there basking in the glory of God the people down below are busy partying and constructing an idol to the very gods of Egypt they have just been rescued from, making a golden calf. And God has already been sorely tested by Israel and when God sees this latest debacle the divine fuses finally blow. It’s judgement time! But what does Moses say? ‘Just think of your reputation, God! What are the Egyptians going to say when they hear that you led the people out of captivity only to destroy them in the desert? What will the nations make of you? Will that bring honour to your name?’ Listening to Moses I am reminded of a little prayer I came across which goes,

Lord, give us grace,
for if thou give us not grace,
we shall not give Thee glory:
and who will win by that, Lord?

So return to that first word in the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Father’. As we’ve seen it denotes intimacy and respect and affection. But it is a loaded term because a father has responsibilities and we surely expect certain things of a father, indeed we have a right to expect – maybe even to demand - certain things. We don’t expect a scorpion from our father when we ask for an egg and we don’t expect a snake when we ask for fish, and if our fathers treated us that way we would shame them – and all the more so with God.

So too with the other picture in our passage, that of someone awakening their neighbour in the night because a guest has arrived and must be fed. And

we are told that it is this man's persistence that makes his neighbour get up, no doubt waking up the rest of his family in the process as they would all be sleeping in the same room. But the word 'persistence' there should really read 'shameless persistence', for shame is the issue here. In this culture there were strict protocols and expectations about hospitality. It would be incumbent upon this man to offer hospitality to the guest who comes knocking on his door in the night or else he would be shamed, and the neighbour knows this and it is therefore his responsibility to do what he can to help. There is pressure on him to respond to his neighbour in need and surely therefore similar pressure rests upon God – indeed all the more so.

To give just one example, as someone who has been a minister all my working life I know what it is to fret over the church. In my lifetime the church has declined massively and in this part of the world only a tiny fraction of people attend and I know what it is as a pastor to fear for the future of the church and to yearn for growth and revival. And at times this can become a burden when you fail to see much new life and only further decay. And it comes as such a relief to be able to pray, 'Well, God, it's your name that is in jeopardy here. We're not in it for our glory but for yours – so over to you! A church that is derided as a laughing stock does nothing to honour you, so bring new life. And – echoing that little prayer quoted earlier – if you don't, well who will win by that, Lord?

So this passage provokes some deep musings on prayer. The goal of prayer, the point of prayer, the purpose of prayer: the hallowing of God's name the coming of God's Kingdom. And so we submit our longings and our desires to that end, praying that whatever happens in our life somehow God will be honoured and revealed in us. But we have a certain leverage when we pray, precisely because God must act to defend God's name. And so we learn to pray with the boldness and the confidence and the persistence of Abraham and Moses, and of the neighbour in need of bread, and of children dependent upon a loving parent. Amen.

Sovereign God over all the earth,
this is your world that you have made and that you love,
and you have entered it in order to redeem it.
O God it does not hallow your name
when people fight and murder brutally
in the name of their religion,
and kill in the name of their god.
So honour your name, we pray, and bring your Kingdom near
by bringing peace and an end to cruel conflict...

And God, it does not h allow your name
when people are displaced by war
and must wander the earth in search of a home;
and when people are shunned and rejected
because they are a different nationality or colour,
and are seen as a threat.
So honour your name, we pray, and open our arms
to receive you as you are found in the refugee.

And God it does not hallow your name
when your world is divided between the haves and the have-nots,
when the system is stacked against the poor and the vulnerable,
when the powerful control resources at the expense of the powerless,
and when preventable disease takes the lives of children.
So honour your name, we pray, and bring justice
and an end to all that take away life in all its fullness...

And God is does not hallow your name
when tyrants rule, who are no longer responsive or accountable
to the people they govern,
and where elections are rigged and where corruption is rife;
and where those who speak out are imprisoned,
and people disappear.
So honour your name, we pray, and bring righteousness
and an end to misrule.

And God, it does not hallow your name
when your church is shamed –

when it is divided and at war with itself,
no longer shining with a clear light,
no longer a place of refuge and rest and new life.
So honour your name, we pray, and send your Holy Spirit
to revive us, that you may be honoured and glorified
in your people.

And we pray that your Kingdom might draw near
to those in our fellowship who have been recently bereaved,
especially Joke and her family,
and to those who are troubled or anxious,
and to those currently on holiday and finding rest and relaxation.
O God refresh them with your love and grace