

Sunday 29 July: The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Teach us to Pray

Readings: Luke 11.1-13

Several weeks ago a woman, who is from Egypt, came to speak to me. She had converted to Christianity in Egypt and is seeking asylum in the UK. That was all I knew of her background. We sat down facing each other and then she said quite simply: "I want you to teach me about God." I have been a priest for fifteen years but no one has ever asked me that question so directly before. There was a silence. An open book, where could I begin? And so I asked her: "What do you want to know?"

And then she said to me without self-consciousness: "teach me to pray." Another silence and then she said: "as a Muslim I knew how to pray, five times a day, how to prepare, what to do, where to face, the words, the actions of prayer, but now I am a Christian -teach me to pray as a Christian."

Teach me to pray. I thought of the huge mosque I had witnessed in Jakarta where thousands of Muslims gathered, washed, bare footed, with their prayer mats all facing the same way, bowing down before God. It had seemed like order in the midst of the chaos of this teeming city- where great wealth and great poverty existed side by side. The call to prayer seemed a powerful act of solidarity in the face of life's sufferings where before God there was no segregation between rich or poor.

Teach me to pray. As a Christian I contrasted this with our morning office that day: a few of us gathered in choir stalls reading at speed from dusty black copies of *The Book of Common Prayer*. It did not seem to me to be what this woman was at this moment looking for. She was looking for a God who would hold her life together in this foreign land.

Teach me to pray. It is a vital question. I remember someone telling me that he thought he was an agnostic. "Why do you say that?" I asked him "Well I suppose its prayer. I can't pray. I have never got over feeling slightly self-conscious or ridiculous talking to the wall." I remember someone else quite recently coming to me and saying "for years and years I have prayed that I will have a child: prayed and prayed and now I am too old and my prayer has not been heard. I could not have knocked longer or harder on the door. I feel I can no longer pray because my deepest prayer, the prayer of my life, has never been answered.

Teach me to pray. It is at the heart of our faith because prayer is the point in which we reach out to what is beyond us. We may be the greatest of rationalists or pragmatists but if we pray with sincerity we are actually entering the realm of faith where human power and knowledge end and God begins.

Teach me to pray. The first answer that came to my mind were those words of St. Paul in Romans "Pray at all times" - that somehow our lives should become a pray: prayer not as formula but as an orientation towards God. Faith as Gerard Hughes said "moving down from our heads to our hearts": prayer an inner consciousness that God is part of our lives - as inseparable as the air we breathe or the water we drink - prayer as a consciousness of God in all things and in one another. Pray at all times- not a learnt exercise but an awakening- an awareness of the God who pervades our creation.

The next thought that came to me were the words of the tax collector which are found in Luke- the one who could not even lift his eyes to heaven but prayed “God be merciful to me a sinner” A prayer which became one of the most familiar and prayed prayers in Christendom- *the Jesus Prayer* which Patricia Frank and Brother Damian prayed together with us so movingly during the Parish Weekend: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” I wrote the prayer down for the woman from Egypt. It was a prayer, which over the years had been constantly in my own thoughts: a prayer you could say walking along the road, or when you woke in the night, or when you faced your fears. It was a prayer, which acknowledged ones deep need of God and sinfulness before God and somehow by doing that, also acknowledged his saving presence. Not a prayer of how we could change God but a prayer of offering -of how God’s grace could somehow change us. It is such a simple prayer- the name of Jesus filtering into us moving from head to heart.

Teach me to pray. Of course the words reminded me of the words of our Gospel today. They are the words of the disciple coming to Christ echoing the needs of a Gentile community who Luke’s Gospel addresses and beyond them becoming the prayer of the whole baptised family of the Christian Church.

“Lord teach us to pray” The request itself is prayer, that’s what I had heard from the Egyptian woman not a request for a lesson but a prayer already begun- a longing to know God more fully. In Luke’s Gospel the disciple’s request comes when Christ himself is praying as he does throughout this Gospel. The disciple sees Jesus praying and it awakens in him the desire to enter into that same way of prayer. Jesus involves us in his own prayer. It is far more than the provision of a text we can follow. Jesus is drawing us into his own relationship with the father. Jesus is leading us into this interior dialogue of love.

Much has been spoken of this word Abba father. In most languages those simple syllables of fatherhood and motherhood are among the first sounds a child makes. Perhaps the first recognisable words Anna Felicity spoke- *Mama, Dada, Papa, Daddy, Mummy, Abba*. Today we are more aware that images of fatherhood may have a mixed reception according to our own experiences of loving fatherhood or lack of it. But the word father here is once again the fatherhood we have seen in Christ himself, the father who is the creator, the giver of all, waiting for his children to return, who runs to meet them, who forgives not seven times but seventy times seven. God is the mother who will never forget her children, God who counts every hair of the head, who longs to give only good things to those who ask. Christ calls us to share this unique relationship both of dependence and also of incredible intimacy. No one had ever addressed Almighty God in this way before. The Almighty God whose name is hallowed in heaven is the God who is with us far closer than even a parent is to their child.

This prayer begins with the primacy of a loving God and from that starting point shows us the way to being fully human. In Luke’s Gospel it has only five stark petitions but petitions, which will take a lifetime and beyond to be fully realised.

“Thy kingdom come” is like cry of longing of all that is from God. A cry which we feel in the guts: away from all that destroys and leaves our world ravaged, broken and desolate, a cry which rejects the paths of hatred and personal greed. It is a longing for the things of God which we have seen manifested in the life of his son. It is a petition which we can fill with our own hopes and desires but is a call for God’s kingdom rather than the kingdom of self. Reinhold Schneider expresses this powerfully “The life of Christ’s kingdom is Christ’s continuing life in those who are his own. In the heart that is no longer nourished by the vital power of Christ, the Kingdom ends; in the heart that is touched and transformed by it, the Kingdom begins... Christ is its life, its strength, its centre.”

Give us each day our daily bread. In our prayer we discern what is essential to our lives. We ask this with eyes open to the knowledge of a world dependent upon the miracle of God's creation. There are moments in our lives when we become acutely aware of our daily bread, When we are stripped as it were of all that is superfluous to life all that is part of our possessiveness and greed. Such moments- childbirth, rites of passage, moving on, journeys, facing illness or death, facing loss, facing danger, facing flood or war or disaster, facing love or the loss of it- we can see our priorities more clearly and learn what is the real meaning of our daily bread, our bread of life.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone who sins against us. Forgiveness pervades the Gospel. It is the centre of our faith: a sharing of the gift of resurrection and hope which cost Christ his life. This is the gift of love that today we will witness in the baptism of Anna Felicity as a sign of God's power to give us new life and that we who share this baptism are members of a family who have been called to share that same forgiveness and love. Without that forgiveness we could not be Christians

Lead us not into temptation- for "there but for the grace of God go I." Our prayer acknowledges we can not manage alone and recognises our deep need of God and the prayer that we will not be faced with more than we are strong enough to bare. In today's Gospel we are asked: "What father would give his son a serpent if he asks for a fish? If you then who are evil know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

The Lord's Prayer is God's gift to us- it is the gift of our relationship- beginning with God our loving father, through forgiveness to his gift of grace helping us overcome temptation in the desert. This prayer is also the story of our baptism, our lives redeemed by God's love. Fr. Peter Hans Kolvenbach the Superior General of the Jesuits tells the story of praying the Lord's prayer in both directions from God through forgiveness to God's spirit leading us through temptation in the wilderness and back again from the wilderness in the desert, through forgiveness, to the bread of life that sustains us, to the kingdom we long for, to the God who communicates to us the mystery of his name, "Our Father." If we begin Lord's prayer with the last words and finish at the beginning we discover that we are travelling the path of Easter the path of Christ, the constant path of our prayer –the journey into a God of love.

When the Egyptian woman had asked me to teach her about God and then had begun by asking "teach me to pray," it was, as often happens, her who was teaching me. For prayer, the prayer of Jesus is the story of our God and the way we enter into relationship with God. So I will end by praying that prayer for Anna Felicity who is the newest member of our Christian family and for all its other members going right back to our beginning, our beginning in the love of God.

Let us pray:

Lead us not into temptation

As we ourselves forgive others who sin against us

Forgive us our sins

Give us this day our daily bread

Thy kingdom come

Hallowed be thy name

Our Father

Amen.

Revd Richard Carter
Sunday 29th July 2007