

Teach us to Pray Pentecost 9 - 25th July 2010

Readings:

Luke 11:1-13

Loving God, we thank you that you love us so much that you revealed yourself to us. You taught us, in the Lord's prayer, that prayer is about intimate relationship. Your Son Jesus asks us to say "Our Father..." when we do not know what to say to you. Help us to learn the lesson Jesus taught his disciples, that prayer is not outward mouthing of pious hopes but more about reaching out from the very depths of our souls to commune with you. AMEN

Anyone tell me - How does prayer work? Do you just ask and then you get? Is it about listing all the bad things that are happening in the world and asking God to fix them? As if God is not aware of them in the first place! Is it the words we say? Because if it is I'm not a very good pray-er. I never know the right words to say.

For a while, in my late teens and early 20's, I was a Baptist, and the Baptists were heavily into extempore prayer. In fact we used to look down on anyone who used written prayers. Somehow, if you took time to write the prayer down it was never as good. So I used to go to prayer meetings, dreading the time when it would be my turn and during the prayers of others thinking of all the good words I'd need to use if I were to pray well.

It was years later that I discover that true prayer had less to do with the words you utter and more to do with an attitude - opening to God and opening to the other.

It was about being fully in the presence of God. It was as much about listening, waiting on the God as it was about uttering words. It was about giving your whole life over to God so that in Paul's words, we pray without ceasing. It's what has been happening to me these past few mornings as I have woken in the early hours to hear a bird whistling outside our bedroom window and the words of a song come rushing into my mind "I owe my Lord a morning song." And prayer is also about those times when out of the blue someone comes to mind and you ring them to find out how they are. And sometimes there is no word, no conscious thought, like the times we sit with a dying loved one just holding their hand. Prayer is intimacy.

I've told you what I think prayer is - take a moment and discuss with a neighbour what prayer is to you, and perhaps share an occasion of prayer that has helped you at a time of great need.

In my time of great need - when I as full of worry, guilt, fear and concern over a Ward of State who had been abused by a foster father, it was the "Jesus prayer," prayed from the depths of my soul that helped me get through the long nights, so that I could help put things to right. At that time my simple prayer was a way of connecting with someone who understood, who cared and love me deeply and who was with me in my dark night of the soul. Prayer is about intimacy.

So is it any wonder that the disciples asked Jesus how to pray. It wasn't as if they did not know how to pray. All good Jews knew how to say their prayers. They would have had all the moves - prostrating themselves if the occasion required prostration, hand up in the air muttering centuries old prayer, even good old fashioned kneeling. But this was not the instruction they wanted. "Teach us how to pray" - they could see the truth - the truth that prayer was more about a relationship with the God of the Universe. They saw Jesus regularly stepping aside to be with not only the God of the Universe but his "Abba" and that is the kind of relationship they craved. One of intimacy, one that obviously was missing in their prayer life. "Teach us how to pray." Prayer is about intimacy.

And for once Jesus comes up with a straight answer.
"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us in the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever.
AMEN."

Just like our worship! Praise - Confession and forgiveness - intercessions. It's all there.

But sometimes our familiarity of the Lord's Prayer can get in the way of praying so I want you to look at the two prayers you were given as you came in. One is the Lord's Prayer, the other if you like a commentary on the Lord's prayer.

Listen as we pray the second prayer.

And finally a story about prayer, one designed to warn against the easy mouthing of formulaic prayers. It's one of Leo Tolstoy's mystical tales.

A bishop, travelling by ship, is told that three hermits are living on a nearby island. He concludes that they are within his episcopal jurisdiction and it is his duty to inspect their orthodoxy. He persuades the captain of the ship to change course and to put him ashore on the island. He finds the hermits and ask them if they are Christians and they wholeheartedly respond, "Yes!"

Then he inquires how they pray and they answer: "When we pray we say 'We are three, You are three. Have mercy on us.'

This unauthorized and perhaps heretical prayer horrifies the bishop. He quickly instruct them in the Lord's prayer, which he believes is the only proper way to pray if one is Christian, since this is the prayer Jesus taught. They do their best to learn the words but sadly they are not quick at their studies. Finally the bishop returns to the ship, satisfied that he has done his duty.

A year passes and the bishop finds himself once again on a ship sailing past the island of the three hermits. Looking at the island the bishop remembers with self satisfied pleasure his pastoral efforts at instructing them in prayer. But later that evening whilst strolling on deck, the bishops sees a ball of light coming out from the island and moving towards the ship. As the ball of light get closer to the ship the bishop sees the three hermits within the ball.

They speak from within the sphere of light and tell the bishop that they are sorry but they have forgotten some of the words to the Lord's Prayer. They ask for forgiveness and that the bishop instruct them further.

So the bishop is jolted into a new level of awareness and awakened to the holiness of the hermits, a holiness more profound than the correct recitation of words. The humbled bishop merely says, "Go home and when you pray say: 'We are three, You are three. Have mercy on us.'"

A wonderful story that for me tells that true prayer has everything to do with relationship, where our heart reaches out to God and is met by God and is transformed.

Such an event is possible simply by praying the Lord's Prayer, but it first needs a heart attuned to God. And sometimes it helps to hear the Lord's Prayer in its many different forms. Listen as I pray a version that is a translation from the original Aramaic:

**O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos,
focus your light within us - make us useful:
create your reign of unity now
your one desire then acts with ours,
as in all light, so in all forms.**

Grant what we need each day in bread and insight.

**Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,
but free us from what holds us back.**

**From you is born all ruling will,
the power and the life to do,
the song that beautifies all,
from age to age it renews.**

**Truly - power to these statements -
may they be the ground from which all my actions grow.
AMEN.**

*Rev Tony Duncan
25th July 2010
pilgrim.tony@tassie.net.au*