

Sermon 28 July 2019

Pentecost 7 C – Genesis 18:20-32, Psalm 138, Colossians 2:6-15, Luke 11:1-13

Jesus' Prayer

Jesus invites his followers to enter into dialogue with God, where we are aligned with God's purposes

What's the difference between a wish and prayer?

A wish might be granted by a powerful, near-divine being, who gives us what we want.

It's hard to know how many thousands of years ago the first human being imagined a God or gods, but it's likely that such belief was followed closely by prayer.

Our ancestors lifted their thoughts and voices to the lords of skies, seas, land, plants, and animals; the ones who ruled over weather, fisheries, crops, livestock and hunting.

They hoped that if they could address these gods using the right names and titles, with sufficient sincerity, accompanied with the right gifts or sacrifices, they could get what they wanted.

So if it was too dry they developed prayers and rituals to bring rain.

If the sea threatened fishing boats they sought calm.

If the soil yielded sparse crops they asked the gods for better growth at next spring's planting.

And if the tribe was hungry because too few animals could be found for food they prayed for skill in the hunt.

The ancient exchange between those who prayed and their gods continues today.

People want.

People ask.

And people expect to receive.

And if they don't they first conclude (or are told by others) they didn't ask correctly.

Over time requests become more and more desperate.

Rituals become more elaborate.

Our sense that there is a right way to get what we want, when we pray, becomes more and more entrenched.

Until, when one vital prayer goes unheeded, we finally blame God for failing to hear us, or giving us what we want.

Or else we wonder whether God exists at all.

History suggests that the ancient Mayans sacrificed their own children,
as their most precious possessions,
in the hopes of getting what they wanted -
crops, game, health, success in battle.
Until their whole system of sacrifice
and their trust in these types of prayer collapsed.

These kinds of prayer are more like wishes.

Jesus,
his disciples,
and most of the people in his audience
knew about this kind of prayer.

Which either makes God a vending machine in the sky,
or else reveals that God is indifferent to our needs,
or incapable of meeting them.

Jesus knew that many prayed to God in such a way
as to expect God to give them what they asked for.

They had developed specific words and rituals
which, they hoped,
would give them the results they desired.

And conversely concluded that those whose prayers were not answered -
those who were poor, or sick, or injured -
must not have asked correctly.

Those people had not been honest with God about their failings,
and therefore did not deserve God's help.

But as the disciples watched Jesus,
and they saw him go off by himself to pray,
perhaps overhearing some of the words he used,
they were introduced to a different way of praying.

Less asking of God,
and fewer attempts to manipulate the divine.

More listening,
and asking to be guided,
so that what is prayed for
is tempered by what God wants for us.

Some of them had noticed a similar thing in John the Baptist,
who taught his followers to communicate with God in a different way.

So they asked Jesus to teach them.

And he responded with what we now call the Lord's Prayer.

Father, he began.

Speak and listen to God as a loving parent;
one who already cares for you,
and wants what is best;
a God who does not have to be persuaded, or won over.

Hallowed or holy **be your name**.

As a faithful Jew, teaching Jews,
Jesus does not use the names Yaweh or Elohim,
or the title God.

Because the Lord is so holy, great, unique,
even the words we use to identify him
take on some of his majesty.

At the very start, then, Jesus challenges the old way of praying,
which leads us to think we can say the right words and then force God's hand.

Your kingdom come.

Not Rome, or Jerusalem, or Egypt.
Or a thousand other empires.

But God's kingdom come.

Where justice triumphs over privilege,
mercy is greater than might,
and love is more precious than gold.

Jesus tells those who would ask him to teach them to pray
to live as if God's reign has already begun.

Give us each day our daily bread.

The line recalls the Exodus,
when fresh drinking water streamed from a rock,
manna was provided to the Israelites each morning,
and quail each evening.

Never enough to gather up a week's supply at a time,
but enough to meet their need day by day,
to teach them to trust that God cared for them.

Which, as I pray this line of the prayer Jesus taught us,
leads me to consider the ways in which I use more than my fair share of the world's resources.

**And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.**

Can you see what a truly subversive prayer Jesus is teaching his followers?

The dominate view within ancient Judaism,
and within the Roman Empire,
was that only sinners and losers needed forgiveness.

And that only those with divine or worldly power could grant forgiveness,
to maintain their status over their subjects.

But here Jesus invites his disciples to practice mercy,
not to insist on their superiority over others
but to humbly express their own vulnerability and weakness.

Here our forgiveness from God
is tied to the forgiveness we give and receive from others;
not as cause and effect,
but as two parts of a single reality.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.

Luke's whole Gospel,
including this passage about prayer,
was written at least two generations after Jesus' trial.

The word can also be translated temptation or testing.

Unlike the stories of Greek mythology,
where virtuous human beings had to prove their deservedness,
Jesus instructs the disciples to put that picture of God out of their minds.

God is not your tester or tormentor -
opposed to or indifferent to your well-being –
but one who works daily on our behalf.

Not necessarily granting what we want or ask for,
but what we need.

It is through this lens that we read the rest of the passage.

As Jesus comments on the practice of asking God, in prayer,
for one thing or another,
it is best to set aside the flawed notion that if we are sincere,
and use the precise words and perform the right ceremony,
God will give us what we want.

But when we listen as we pray,
and are aligned to God's reign of peace and mercy
we will learn to seek those things that are best for us,
and deepen our trust in the One who loves us.

Amen.