

Matthew 6:1-18 The Lord's Prayer

Here is a story from the desert fathers

One day the devil, disguised as an angel of light, appeared to one of the holy Desert Fathers. "I am the Angel Gabriel and I have been sent to you by the Almighty." The monk replied, "Think again. I have done nothing to deserve the visit of an angel." With that the devil vanished and never again dared come anywhere near the monk

It is a story about temptation, rather a clever story about temptation. We dress temptation up, we make it look like a chef carrying plates of chocolate pudding, a sommelier offering a second bottle of chateau *ducru beacailou*; we dress temptation up as a salesman offering quick profit; we dress temptation up in eye-catching underwear. We do this to reinforce our sense that temptation is obvious and has to do with things that we think of as wicked. Temptation, real temptation, is of course not obvious at all, if it were it would hardly be temptation. More problematically, temptation does not ask us to be bad. The temptation in the story from the desert fathers, "*I am the Angel Gabriel and I have been sent to you by the Almighty*" was an invitation to a monk to think himself *good*. It was a prompt to stand on the stage in the lights and be the centre of the drama. "*I am the Angel Gabriel and I have been sent to you by the Almighty.*"

One of the things I have learnt, only slowly, is that most of us need to take more trouble to get out of one another's way. It is a besetting sin of the Christian church that it is full of people who mean really well, who want to help, and yet who end up standing just between you and God. Most of these people, it has to be said, are clergy. We are too quick to get in the way, too free with opinions and advice. The business of getting out of the way is a lesson that takes some learning. Beyond it though, there is another lesson and that, I think, is even tougher.

The second lesson is the business of learning to get out of your own way, the slow realization that the story might not be about me. Years ago, revising for an exam, I was studying Luther. Luther's theological breakthrough, the conviction that you must rely on grace alone, came out of a personal crisis. Luther was haunted by his own sinfulness. He could not shed himself of the sense that his sins were piling up. He wore out his confessor, returning again and again with more. On one level it was deep piety, Luther took sin seriously, took his own sin seriously. There is nothing wrong with seriousness about sin. Luther's difficulty was that he took himself even more seriously. All his attention was focused on his own insights and his own effort. The very learned historian that I was reading, as I revised Luther's life, suddenly quoted a bit of doggerel to make the point. It sat very oddly in pages of pages of dense prose about grace, works and penance, but it made the point and helped me understand Luther:

ONCE in a saintly passion
I cried with desperate grief,
"O Lord, my heart is black with guile,

Of sinners I am chief."

Then stooped my guardian angel
And whispered from behind,
"Vanity, my little man,
You're nothing of the kind.

* * *

All this by way of introduction to the Lord's Prayer, which we just heard in our reading from Matthew's gospel.

It is of course just so familiar; translated again and again. By Wycliff 'forgive to us our dettes'; by Tyndale 'thy will be fulfilled'. It was altered subtly, in the Prayer Book, over the years, the doxology, 'For thine is the kingdom...' crept in in 1662. It is been translated into every other language and even a few that do not exist. Tolkien wrote it in one of the languages of middle earth.

We need this variation, we need to hear the Lord's Prayer differently sometimes, because it is so bred in the bone. It has become hard for us to hear. We know it, or we think we know it. We know, for example, that originally it began *Abba, Father*, we are told over and over again that it has an affectionate, even an intimate tone. We like the reassurance of a prayer addressed, some have argued, to a *Daddy*.

The trouble is that reading this prayer like that and lingering too long over that *our Father*, that intimate reassurance, we are back in the business of thinking too much of ourselves. We start thinking about how I fit in, what is my relationship with the Almighty. And that is not, it is really not, the first thing that should strike you about this prayer.

Listen again:

hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

This prayer is not about us and what we will do. This prayer is about God and what God will do. This prayer is about the Kingdom. *Your kingdom come*. This is the first lesson in prayer. We do not bring anything to it. It is not our enterprise, it is God's. We make prayer so difficult by trying so hard. But, prayer is not our activity. We don't pray to persuade God, or charm him, or catch God's ear. We pray to launch a boat into the tumbling current of his loving grace. Prayer is what God does and we join in. Prayer leads to the fulfilment of God's promises it aims at salvation, the coming of the Kingdom, the completion of his will.

So the first thing about the Lord's Prayer is that it really is the Lord's and not mine. There's a second point to grasp. The later petitions of the Lord's Prayer are simple

Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

These petitions are actually staggeringly simple – feed me, forgive, help me live in relationship, save me, keep me safe. Christian prayer started here in that simplicity and quickly lost the gift. Christians soon got worthy and then we stopped asking for things and started writing essays. Christians got long-winded. That is a shame because our prayers in church occasionally drown in the soup of their own worthiness. But, more than that, we succumbed to the temptation of dishonesty.

We pray for refugees, for politicians, for sick people we do not know. Now, of course it is quite right that we should do that. If prayer is joining in with God's prayer and expressing our longing for his Kingdom, then part of what we do is to imagine what the Kingdom might be like. In church we must continue to pray for refugees, for politicians, and for sick people we do not know. We should do that as part of our prayer for the Kingdom.

But, and it is an important but, we should remember that our private prayer must be honest, it should be our own prayer, coming out of our own heart. We should remember, in other words, that prayer begins with the simple things, asking for the things I really need and want. It begins in that honesty. As Victor White pointed out we get distracted in prayer because we are often not praying for what we want. The prayers of people on sinking ships are rarely distracted. If you want a holiday pray for a holiday, if you are struggling with feelings of love or resentment pray through that, your relationship with God will not be helped if you pray for the upcoming church fete instead.

God's prayer, not mine, and prayed in honesty - when we have learnt that then we will indeed be are praying as our Lord taught us.