

THE SIMPLICITY OF PRAYER

Genesis 18. 20-32

Colossians 2. 6-15

Luke 11. 1-13

I speak to you in the name of ☩ the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Many people want to pray better. It seems to be an almost universal desire. We find that our prayers don't satisfy us, and that prayer fails to be what we think it ought to be. We wonder if there's a secret we don't know, or if there's some higher teaching that might help.

But as frustrating as it may be, the secret of prayer is just that *there is no secret*. Prayer is supremely simple. Yes, it runs deeper than the darkness at the bottom of the sea; yes, it reaches out further than the farthest galaxy; yes, it clutches at the core of our being. But we don't need diving gear in order to pray; we don't need to master any astronomical instrument; and we don't need psychotherapy. Prayer is simple. It is immediately available to us.

When we look at the gospel of St Luke, it reports that our Lord prayed frequently. We are told that the Spirit came upon Jesus whilst he was praying (3. 21-22) and that he periodically withdrew to desolate places to pray (5. 16). Christ also prayed before significant turning points in his ministry: when he called his disciples (6. 12-13); when he asked the disciples who people thought that he was, before Peter's confession (9. 18); and at the transfiguration (9. 28). Later, Luke will refer to our Lord's prayers at Gethsemane (22. 40-42), on the cross (23. 34, 46) and at table with his disciples (24. 30).

It is not surprising, therefore, that one of Jesus's disciples came to him and said, 'Lord, teach us to pray'.

Christ then provides a very short unit of instruction on prayer, which has come to be known as the Lord's Prayer, or the 'Our Father'. In Luke's version of this prayer,¹ we find only six lines: one invocation, two hopes and three requests. It goes like this: Father! May your Name be holy. May your kingdom come. Give us every day the bread we need. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have harmed us. And lead us not into temptation.² The short prayer is then followed by the parable of a shameless neighbour and further assurances that God hears our prayers.

In teaching the disciples about prayer, our Lord does not so much give them a series of magic words to say. Rather, he teaches them about the nature of the one *to whom* they pray. Our gospel passage begins and ends with the emphasis that disciples of Jesus can pray to God as a heavenly Father.

Christ, who is the unique Son of God Almighty, called to God with one word: Father. And when we pray, all we need to do is to say that one word, 'Father'. We, as Christians, have our Lord's permission to speak to God as Jesus himself did. We have permission to say 'Father' because God is in fact as close to us as that very word.

Once we say 'Father', we are immediately brought into intimacy with God. We get taken up into the dynamics of the Trinity, the love of the Son and the Father, which is the Holy Spirit. We say 'Father': and there we are, with God, closer to God than anything that is created or made.

¹ which derives from the *Didache*, an early Christian document that was written in the first century; and the *Didache* in turn derives from the Gospel of St Matthew.

² Cf. Ja 1. 13-16 and Rev 3. 10.

In a sense, it doesn't matter what we say after we say 'Father'. We can go on to ask for an egg; and God won't give us a scorpion. We can even ask for a scorpion; but God won't give it to us if it is to our harm. Our God gives good gifts.

But let me say a brief word about the two hopes in the Lord's Prayer: May your Name be holy; and may your kingdom come.

God has long promised to make his Name holy, which means for his Name to be recognised as holy by all people. Through the prophet Ezekiel (chapter 36), for instance, God promised that a day will come when he will vindicate his Name and write his law on people's hearts so that everyone will be holy, just as he, God, is holy. So to long for God to hallow his Name and bring about his kingdom is to long for that great Day to come; and that is, by implication, to beseech God to make us holy.

And concerning the three requests, the first is basic: we ask God to give us each day what is needed for our sustenance. 'Give us each day the bread we need' recognizes that we owe everything to God and ask that he continue to give us our basic necessities.

The second request is honest: even though we are Christians, we are still caught up with sin. We need forgiveness. And it's simply a fact that our souls can't take in forgiveness unless we also forgive others.

The third request concerns the integrity of our life as a whole. On our own, we cannot guarantee that we will be faithful to God to the end. We may succumb to temptation. 'Lead us not into temptation' could be paraphrased like this: 'Give us the grace and power to remain faithful to you, Father, all the days of our life.'

These are the three requests in the prayer that Jesus taught us. They summarise everything we need to ask of God: bread, forgiveness and persistence. And if we just asked God for those three things every day, it would be enough.

Yes, it is good to articulate the two hopes that God will vindicate his Name and consummate his kingdom; and it is good to ask God for bread, forgiveness and persistence. But to come back where we started, prayer is simple. All of our prayers begin with a single word: Father. And once that word is said, Christ is immediately beside us and the Holy Spirit is inside us. In prayer, we take up residence in the Trinity, and God takes care of our desires.

Prayer is as simple as that one word, 'Father'. Thank God that prayer is near at hand!
And thank God that we can say 'Father'!

Amen.