

Prayer & Holy Spirit: Divine Spark

Luke 11:1-13

Colossians 2:6-15

How long do I have to go on praying about it? I asked my spiritual director. I was faced with a peculiarly intractable problem and there seemed no obvious way out. I had prayed about it already for quite some time and there seemed to be no change. "You can never tell," he replied with a gentle smile. "Perhaps every day for a month or two. Or it might be a year or two. The timing isn't our business; that's up to God. Our task is to go on praying and trust that God will do what he will do in his own time."

That was really frustrating advice, but it turned out to be right. It was another two or three more months before anything happened, but when it did it was like a dam busting. Now I have no idea why God answers on the 1000th time a prayer he seemed to have ignored for the previous 999 times. One might imagine that it would work more steadily and gradually. But no: from our point of view at least, prayer is like chopping at a tree. For 99 strokes of the axe, the main trunk seems to stand firm. Then on the 100th stroke, suddenly it keels over. Of course we know that the previous strokes of the axe were weakening the trunk, even though we couldn't see it. And that's what prayer is like - not that God needs 'weakening' but that, for all sorts of other reasons that we can't see, things have to take the time they have to take.

And that leads us to the shape of the prayer Jesus gave his disciples. However you pray it, the Lord's prayer starts precisely with the note that says, "God's way and God's time is best." To say the Lord's Prayer demands that you pay primary attention to God himself. It is His name and His Kingdom that we care about above all, not our particular problems. But, having said that, the three requests that follow - for bread, forgiveness, and safety from being tested to destruction - all place our concerns *within* that name and kingdom. That's the clue. To pray the Lord's Prayer, then, requires an odd combination: complete humility and complete boldness. Once we

get the first right, the second can follow cheerfully. Once God's name and Kingdom are the framework of all we do and think, we are free to knock on his door as late at night as we want.

The larger picture, though, is the more familiar one of God as Father. This isn't just an illustration drawn from family life, though of course it is that at its heart, and Jesus' illustration about giving a child real food rather than poisonous snakes make their point. If we were ever tempted to imagine God as a tyrant who would take delight in giving us things that weren't good for us, we should remember these pictures and think again. But the illustration is bigger than that as well. The idea of God as father goes right back to the time when Israel was in slavery and needed rescuing. "Israel is my son, my firstborn," declared God to Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron; "so let my people go!" From then on, to call on God as 'Father' was to invoke the God of the Exodus, the liberating God, the God whose Kingdom was coming, bringing bread for the hungry, forgiveness for the sinner, and deliverance for the powers of darkness - all themes, we may observe, that Luke has drawn to our attention in his gospel.

The "Lord's Prayer" is therefore not just a loosely connected string of petitions. It is a prayer for people, disciples, who are following Jesus on the kingdom-journey. Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, to act on behalf of God's name, which had been dragged in the mud as his people had turned away from him in rebellion. He was on the way to accomplish the "Exodus" in which the long-awaited kingdom of God would become a reality. He had provided bread for the journey, and 'the breaking of bread' was to become a sign of His presence in the church, and the bond between His followers. He was already offering forgiveness, and would accomplish it completely in His death - and He was already demanding from His followers that they imitate the graciousness of their God in forgiving their enemies, let alone one another. And as we have already seen He was waging war against the powers of evil, a war that would reach its decisive battle on Calvary, beautifully summarised by

Paul to the Colossians: "*He Forgave all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against and that stood opposed to us; He took it away nailing it to the cross. And having, disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*" Later in our sharing of the Eucharist we will celebrate that truth!

You see, this is a prayer, which grows out of the mission of Jesus himself. It has been ideally suited, both as it stands and as a frame work for wider praying, for his followers ever since. For those of you who are parents, you get to the point with your children where they are becoming adults and you need to treat them as such: even though you never stop being their dad, there comes a point where fatherhood ends and friendship begins.

Friendship and Fatherhood together teach us something about God and prayer. Actually, the learning can be a two-way street. It isn't just a matter of thinking about earthly friends and fathers and then learning that God is like that. There are times when a father needs to take a long hard look at what God's fatherhood is all about, and start changing his own fatherly behaviour to be more like it. And most of our friendships, I suspect, could do with the improvement that some reflection about God as a friend might provide.

It is that picture - of God as a friend, in bed and asleep, with his children around him - which probably strikes us as the more peculiar. (We are used to saying that God is our Father, though we may not always ask what exactly that means; but God as our friend is less obvious) In the sort of house Jesus has in mind, the family would all sleep side by side on the floor, so that if the father got up at midnight the whole family would be woken up. Yet the friend outside has a real problem, and the sleeping friend can and will help. The laws of hospitality in the ancient Middle East were strict, and if a traveller arrived needing food and shelter one was under an obligation to provide it. The friend in the street knows that the friend in bed will understand; he would do the same if the roles were reversed.

What counts is persistence. There are all sorts of ways in which God isn't like a sleepy friend, but Jesus is focusing on one point of comparison only: he is encouraging a kind of holy boldness, a sharp knocking on the door, an intense asking, and a search that refuses to give up. That's what our prayer should be like. This isn't just a routine or formal praying, going through the motions as a daily or weekly task. There is a battle on, a fight with the powers of darkness that Paul mentions, and those who have glimpsed the light are called to struggle in prayer - for peace, for reconciliation, for wisdom, for a thousand things for the world and the church, perhaps a hundred or two for one's own family, friends and neighbours, and perhaps a dozen or two for oneself.

There are of course too many things to pray about. That's why it's important to be disciplined and regular. If you leave it to the whim of the moment you'll never be a true intercessor, someone through whose prayers God's love is poured into the world. But because these things are urgent, important and complex there has to be more to prayer than simply discipline and regularity. Formal prayers, including official liturgies for services in church, are vital for most people for their spiritual health, but they are like the metal shell of a car. To be effective it needs fuel for its engine, and to be effective prayers need energy, too: in this case, the kind of dogged and even funny determination that you'd use with a sleepy friend who you hoped would help you out of a tight spot.

But if we leave it at this point we miss I think the huge insight that Jesus is giving us in this passage: if the fuel for the engine is just our dogged determination then it relies on our flesh and most if not all of us will fall at the first hurdle but right at the end of our reading is a spiritual gem, a faith unlocking clue about how our prayer life can not only be made more effective but be taken to a completely different level. "How much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" Prayer without Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit without prayer, are impossible. This is not just an add-on verse for preaching on at Pentecost and given as a postscript to

Jesus' teaching on prayer but the essential fire that lights our passion to pray!! The Holy Spirit is described by Jesus Himself as a 'good gift' - please hear that, all you who fear surrendering to Him: don't let the enemy of your soul dupe you into thinking otherwise. The Bible teaches that prayer is to the Father, in the Name of the Son, and through the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 2:18 says that through Jesus we have access to the Father through the one Spirit. Romans 8:26 says that 'in the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.'

His Disciples have asked Jesus to 'teach us to pray': not just the mechanics (the how) but the intimacy that they saw Jesus shared with the Father. That's what they covet and it happens when the Dove of the Holy Spirit is at home in your life. Jesus responds: When you pray (not if!!) as He could not imagine a relationship with God without communication in prayer. Again it's the Holy Spirit which combined with Prayer is the Divine Spark, the hearts strangely warmed experience, which is the peculiarly Christian experience of prayer which is for all active followers of the Master.

Exhortation: bringing God's word and truth to others, having firstly encouraged them in their spiritual journey is a huge privilege and a crucial one in us making disciples. But someone said to me the other day that they just could not remember scripture and so this seemed impossible: in the flesh that's true but in the power of the Holy Spirit it's not only possible but also normative. The Holy Spirit makes all the difference in the world but He doesn't force His way into your life. He awaits your invitation. As disciples of Jesus we must choose to invite him and He will surely come. If we don't or simply do nothing and continue to complain how difficult the Christian life is we will grieve Him by our fleshy religion.

How Much More says Jesus will the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him: so ask away and receive the biggest blessing of your life. For to the measure you do will be the measure your prayer life starts to fly and spark, as will your

worship and your love for Jesus and His Word. So you will not only pray those many prayers but the work of grace in you will prove to be part of the answer for those for whom you have prayed.

Pastor David

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