

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 6th Sunday after Trinity – 24th July 2022

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As we progress through the liturgical year, some Sundays are given special themes, dedications or commemorations. A couple of weeks ago we had Sea Sunday, of course very appropriate for our chaplaincy based in the sea port of Marseille. Early in September there is Education Sunday as the new academic year begins in schools, colleges and universities. Today's Gospel reading begins: ***He was praying in a certain place.*** This prompts me to think of today as Prayer Sunday.

Forty years ago the Alternative Service Book introduced a theme with an introductory sentence for each Sunday. These were dropped with the advent of Common Worship in 2000. However, they've been retained in the Roman Catholic version of the Common Ecumenical Lectionary.

Today prayer crops up in every one of our readings: the Gospel begins with Jesus in prayer; in Genesis we have Abraham's persistent prayer to God not to destroy the city of Sodom. Five times he pleads with God: ***'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I just speak once more. Suppose ten are found there.'*** God finally relents: ***He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it. Genesis 18.32.***

Today's psalm is a prayerful hymn of praise, beginning with, ***I give thanks with my whole heart: before the gods I sing your praise.*** St Paul exhorts the Colossians, and ourselves today, ***As you therefore have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him. Colossians 2.6.*** It's through prayer that we receive Christ as the Lord of our lives, and prayer sustains us in that life.

But perhaps what attracts and intrigues us most in today's readings is Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer: so succinct and unfamiliar compared with the words we know and love. For the form we treasure so much we have to turn to Matthew's gospel, (6. 9-13) the only other record of Jesus' prayer in the gospels. As it's not

included in next year's readings, perhaps we should use today's account to consider this gift and jewel that he gave us in the Lord's Prayer.

It might seem that Luke's shorter version is the original, especially given its context. After seeing Jesus at prayer, the disciples ask how they should pray. Matthew takes this and extends it to our more familiar version. Although textual scholars have had a field day debating and doubting this, I don't think that need trouble us this morning. Perhaps we can just reflect on several key things his words show about prayer in general.

Jesus addresses God simply as Father. Any devout Jew could sincerely pray, '**Our Father, who art in heaven...**' using the formal Hebrew and exclusively religious **Abinu**. But Jesus uses the intimate and personal word **Abba**. We find him using the same word three times later when he prays. On the night before his crucifixion Jesus prays, **Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but your be done.** Luke 22.42. Then from the cross we have the words, **Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.** And later **Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.** Luke 23. 34 & 46. For Jesus, **Father** is a word a child would use for a caring and loving parent. It is a word of loving intimacy. That is the relationship God calls us to have with him: one of personal closeness. To quote the American Christian writer, Robin Jones Gunn, we have to ask, **If you feel far from God, guess who moved?**

In the familiar Matthew version, God is **Our Father** and pushed away to **heaven**. But, of course heaven is not some distant place or experience we hope to aspire to at some point. Heaven is the very presence of God here with us all the time. He is present in all the positive, good and loving things of creation and life, and even in the darkest times. Through the Cross came resurrection, new life from unspeakable evil.

For He is **Our Father**. The Lord's Prayer is not just a personal devotion, but a corporate act of worship. Throughout the prayer we use the possessive adjectives and pronouns **our and us**, to underline that we pray as a whole community. When we pray for our daily bread, we are not just praying for our own food, but that all people will have the food and nourishment they need. Daily bread can mean all we need for our wellbeing and welfare.

Again, when we come to the forgiveness of sins, this is not just a personal confession, but a prayer for forgiveness, reconciliation and peace among all people, and in all relationships. It may be a personal thing, but I worry that when people prefer the *trespasses* version that they might have some hesitancy about their own particular sins, faults or failings. But there is no need to be hesitant: because of the love of God our sins are forgiven. We can and should face up to their reality, because they are forgivable. The only thing that hinders their forgiveness is our unwillingness to forgive. This is the depth of the meaning in today's reading: ***forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*** In praying for forgiveness, we must be prepared to forgive. This is emphasised elsewhere when Jesus says, ***Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.*** Mark 11.25. Perhaps *trespasses* is ok after all.

Many books have been written on the Lord's Prayer with line by line and word by word reflections. But this morning let's just consider one more line which sometimes causes confusion. Various modern translations often struggle around the traditional familiar, ***Lead us not into temptation.*** This can have the implication that God might be involved in or a force behind our temptations. But by the modern translation, as found in both Luke and Matthew's version, ***And do not bring us to the time of trial,*** is based on an original Aramaic phrase, ***Cause us not to enter*** a time of trial, testing or temptation.

If St Luke's version is the nearest we have to the original words of Jesus, some may say they are what we should use in our liturgy and own private devotions. But this would seem to give a limited view of what Jesus meant. In some ways he is giving us a foundation for prayer. In the traditional Book of Common Prayer the Lord's Prayer appears towards the beginning and again near the end of daily Morning and Evening Prayer. This sets the whole service in the context of Jesus' teaching about prayer. Many spiritual guides recommend that we open and close our personal times of prayer with his words. Someone once told me that they said the Lord's Prayer for each person or cause they were praying for.

Finally as we look at both Luke and Matthew's versions, we may ask how the familiar doxology came to be included. Among early texts this was first found added to Lord's Prayer in the late first or early second century, in a liturgical document called the *Didache*. It's based on the Old Testament 1 Chronicles 29.11

Yours, O Lord , are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all.

In the time of Jesus a Jewish prayer would normally end with a doxology. No doubt Jesus grew up with that tradition. So perhaps we have good reason to conclude our reflection on the Lord's Prayer with, ***For kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.***