

Title: We are bidden to pray

Readings: Genesis 18.20–32; Luke 11.1–13

‘We are bidden to pray’. So said Karl Barth, the great Swiss pastor, often described as the most important theologian, at least Protestant theologian, of the twentieth century. Barth went on to say that all our thinking about God, and about our relationship to him, needs to begin with prayer. Our Gospel reading today focuses on the importance of prayer – and actually our Old Testament reading too encourages us to explore something important about the nature of prayer - so this morning I want to share some reflections specifically about the prayer that for me lies at the heart of all Christian praying, that prayer which we commonly refer to as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’. -----

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Christians are formed by the way in which we pray, as Barth suggested, so as Anglicans we must be deeply formed by our regular praying of the Lord’s Prayer. I rarely, if ever, go to an Anglican service, in which the Lord’s Prayer is not used. I am what is called a cradle Anglican, baptized into the Church of England at the age of about 4 months, so I used to assume that this regular use of the Lord’s Prayer was the practice of all Christians, but that is not quite so. Some more Protestant churches don’t in principle like ‘set prayers’, so the Lord’s Prayer is not often used in their worship. I think that is their loss: Christian theologians from the days of the early Church down to the present day have reflected on the centrality of the Lord’s Prayer for Christian people. The second century figure Tertullian, stated simply ‘The Lord’s Prayer is a summary of the Gospel’ while Michael Ramsey, one of the great 20th century Archbishops of Canterbury, reflected that, ‘In the Lord’s Prayer, the whole meaning of prayer is summed up.’

In today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel Jesus teaches his disciples this prayer. There is an alternative and slightly longer version of the prayer given in the Gospel of Matthew as part of the Sermon on the Mount. According to the Gospel of Luke Jesus teaches his disciples this prayer at their own request because they want a way of marking out their distinctiveness as his disciples – the reason offered in the Gospel of Matthew seems on the surface to be

different, yet ultimately is making the same point. For Matthew, Jesus teaches his followers this prayer in reaction to the traditional belief and practice of the time that the longer and more intensely a person prayed the more likely it was that their prayer would be answered. 'Not so' says Jesus. There is no need to heap up lots of empty phrases – because our heavenly Father already knows what we need. And that then takes us back to Luke and his understanding of this prayer as marking out the distinctiveness of Jesus' followers: for that distinctiveness was made clear by their sharing in the deep trust that Jesus himself expressed – and indeed lived out – in God as his Father. The foundational principle of the Lord's Prayer is that we can trust in God.

Jesus of course would have taught the prayer to his first disciples using the Aramaic language, as that was the common language of Jewish people in Roman Palestine at the time. So the first word of the prayer, 'Father', as he taught it would have been the Aramaic word, 'Abba'. It is I think no accident that 'Abba' is one of the few words in the New Testament that we find at points actually preserved for us in Aramaic. It is saying to us that for Jesus, and for us, this understanding of God as 'Abba' is somehow fundamental and distinctive and something which marks out the followers of Jesus. It is interesting that of the three times when the actual Aramaic word 'Abba' appears in the New Testament, they are all in the context of prayer. Paul uses it twice, in his letters to the Romans and Galatians, to refer to the way that Christians pray. And it appears in the Gospel of Mark on the lips of Jesus himself, as he is praying in Gethsemane; a remarkable expression of trust as his passion and suffering is closing in on him.

It is of course intriguing that this prayer – so special for Christians – doesn't directly mention Jesus himself. It is not a prayer to Jesus, nor does it include the phrase that typically ends many formal Christian prayers, 'through Jesus Christ our Lord'. Sometimes people think that because of this it is an ideal prayer to use on civic or interfaith occasions, when groups of Christians find themselves involved in sharing formal prayers with people of other faiths, or with people who see themselves as representatives of secular society. I find myself torn about this, for in spite of the prayer not overtly saying anything about Jesus, the invitation to us to pray these words that Jesus himself prayed, is in reality a statement that we have been invited to have a share in Jesus' own

relationship of trust with God. We have become part of God's family which is bigger, infinitely bigger, than ourselves and our own private concerns. There is no singular 'my' in the prayer; it is always 'ours' – in which we identify ourselves as part of a community of faith. There's a verse I know which I don't think is great poetry – but makes this point rather well

You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer
And even once say 'I'
You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer
And even once say 'My'.
Nor can you say the Lord's Prayer
And not pray for another;
For when you ask for daily bread,
You can't miss out your brother.
For others are included
In each and every plea –
From beginning to the end of it,
It does not once say 'Me'. (*Charles Thompson*)

Indeed the words, 'Your Kingdom come' near the beginning of the prayer and the doxology we use at its end makes it clear that ultimately the prayer is about praying for the coming of God's reign or kingdom. Terms as 'Kingdom' – or indeed even 'Father' – can be problematic these days in some contexts, whether personal or communal – but to speak of God's Kingdom is a reminder that our Christian faith is not simply a matter of our private concern. A theologian from South America puts it starkly: The 'Our Father' compels us to recognise that we have a role in the world. To ask that his Kingdom may come while doing nothing to further the rule of love in the world is to mock God. (*R. Coste*).

In recent years there has been a realisation that the Lord's Prayer has intriguing links with the Old Testament story of the Exodus. Perhaps we can put it like this: as we pray the prayer we name ourselves as members of that community of people of the New Exodus which Jesus was calling into being through his life and ministry, and through his passion and death. In praying the prayer we are committing ourselves to participate in God's longing and striving for liberation and freedom for all people; and we are expressing our desire to be part of a

community that seeks to live lightly, to trust God when the way ahead seems unsure, and to accept his invitation to journey with him into the future. So quite a challenge – when we pray this prayer.

That doesn't incidentally necessarily mean a meek passivity. It is intriguing that the compilers of the lectionary should have decided to 'pair' this Gospel reading which focuses on the Lord's Prayer, with the story of Abraham in Genesis challenging God over the fate of the people of Sodom. Abraham insists that it would be unjust – indeed unworthy of God – if he were to deliberately destroy the innocent along with the guilty, and a bargaining match seems to take place. The word that Abraham throws at God during this challenge is extraordinarily stark: That repeated 'Far be it from you' is translating one sharp Hebrew word 'Haram', which somehow carries the implication that if God were to deliberately destroy the innocent then God is somehow less than God. And God listens to Abraham, as he will later listen to Moses, when Moses utters his challenges to God, and to the Psalmists, when they express their prayer and their faith in words of sharp lament which can sometimes shock us by their stark pain. Gerard Manley Hopkins once spoke of how 'battling with God is now my prayer'. In the Bible and for us today trust in God and wrestling with God sometimes find themselves paired together. Those over the centuries who have prayed that petition of the Lord's Prayer, 'Do not bring us to the time of trial' have known that to pray this prayer requires absolute honesty on our part.

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer that comes from what we call today the Middle East. That is certainly a region which at the moment which is not a comfortable and easy place to pray for or with. Nor is it presently an easy or comfortable homeland for the indigenous Christian communities who struggle to continue to live in this war torn region. But it is also a place where this Prayer of Jesus has been prayed by faithful communities of Christian people regularly, daily over the last two thousand years. Some of these communities still pray this prayer in a dialect of Aramaic – that language in which Jesus originally taught his followers to pray. When years ago Alan lived in a monastic community of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Lebanon, he too learned from them to pray the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic. He still prays this prayer every day using that Aramaic dialect which links us in a special way to that Middle Easterner Jesus who 2000

years ago taught a small group of people a prayer that marked them out as his friends and companions. I close by asking Alan to pray the Lord's Prayer for us now in Aramaic.