

SERMON – 28/7/19

Luke 11:1-13

“Give us day by day the food we need.” (Luke 11:3)

As a child and as a teenager, I used to sit in church on Sundays and feel my mind drifting as a seemingly interminable sea of words flowed over me. In those days all the hymns and all the prayers and all the Bible readings were littered with words like Thee and Thou and goest and believeth and whithersoever, yea and behold. I had certainly had a go at reading the Bible for myself but with the Authorised Version it was pretty hard-going just to understand what some sentences actually said never mind what they meant. When I attended church membership classes that same minister offered us all a copy of one of the Gospels and asked us to read it from cover to cover – it was the Good News Translation and it had a coloured cover and it had little line drawings in it, but most importantly of all it was in a language I could read and understand (just as the King James translation was for our 17th century forebears who had previously only had a Bible in Latin). It wasn't long before I had bought myself a copy of the whole Bible – it was the newly-published New International Version – and I began to devour it. Contemporary language certainly wasn't the only thing that made a difference to me in the realm of faith but it was pretty important.

Of course, things have moved on in all kinds of ways over the last 40 years – technological change, improvements in living standards, the way we dress, and for the most part (although not entirely) our church services are conducted in a similar language to the one we use during the rest of the week. Not everyone is happy that pews have been replaced by chairs or that there is a functioning heating system, and every so often someone asks that a reading at a funeral or a wedding be taken from the Authorised Version, even though the meaning and the poetry is more often than not lost on reader and hearer alike. Eighteen months ago I introduced a contemporary translation of the Lord's Prayer to our Sunday worship and, as expected, there have been as many people made their displeasure at the change known as there have been those who have found it helpful. Such is life. I don't ever expect that there will be unanimity in the congregation about anything we do – we are a mixed bunch after all – but since our Bible reading this morning included one of the two versions in the Gospels of the

prayer that Jesus taught His first disciples it seems an opportune time to consider the place of the Lord's Prayer and of prayer in general in life of our fellowship.

The version here in Luke's Gospel is much shorter than the one in Matthew's Gospel on which the various versions used in public worship across the world are based. "Father, may your holy name be honoured; may your Kingdom come. Give us day by day the food we need. Forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone who does us wrong. And do not bring us to hard testing."

The first question this morning is that if there are different forms of the Lord's Prayer even in the Bible, should we restrict ourselves to using only one of them? Jesus' native language was Aramaic, although he probably had a working knowledge of Greek and Latin too, and it is almost certain that He taught His disciples in Aramaic. That version of the Lord's prayer is completely lost because the Gospels were written down in Greek although it is possible that Aramaic-speaking Christians in parts of modern-day Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey use a version of the prayer that is as near as you could get to the words Jesus originally uttered.

Perhaps a bigger question is whether Jesus ever intended us to use a set and unchanging prayer at all or whether what He offered to His first followers was a pattern which would help them develop a prayer-life of their own. Again, it can probably be both. It is good to take patterns of prayer – the Psalms are another great resource – and make them our own by weaving our own experiences into the words of others and especially the Word of God. Sometimes it is useful to have words to pray when our own words run out – and whatever version of the Lord's Prayer you feel most comfortable using when you pray alone or with your family or friends is absolutely fine. But it's also good to introduce new ways of praying when we meet together and not to risk getting stuck in a rut.

In our reading this morning we heard the Lord Jesus painting two word pictures to illustrate this theme of prayer and to lead His disciples into a deeper understanding of the practice of prayer. Both stories actually have quite a humorous side to them and I can just imagine the disciples laughing out loud as He told them. I didn't hear anyone laughing at them when Jim read them for us a moment ago – we tend to listen reverently to the Bible being read, but perhaps I might persuade even some dour Presbyterians to

crack a smile over the idea of someone's neighbour ringing their doorbell in the middle of the night asking for a *loan* of three loaves of bread. A loan? How was he intending to return what he had borrowed, I wonder? Or did you see the surreal side of Jesus' description of how a father might answer his children's request for something to eat. Can we have eggs, Daddy? Yes, of course you can, son. Would there ever be a case where the little boy whips the egg cosy off to reveal not a boiled egg but a scorpion? Of course not. But there are serious messages in what Jesus says.

Of course it's a ridiculous situation – the householder refusing to get out of bed to provide his neighbour with bread not because he wasn't willing to help a friend in need but because it would mean clambering over the whole family and waking everyone up. But the message is clear – he *will* get up if the neighbour persists in asking for bread because the shouting is going to end up waking everyone up anyway. Message: when you pray, be persistent. As one commentator observes, if we don't want what we are asking for enough to persist in asking then we can't want it very much.

And of course no human parent would put a live snake or scorpion on the table for their children's tea instead of the wholesome food they crave – that's ridiculous. But the message is clear: if human fathers know what's good for their children, how much more does our heavenly Father.

What Jesus does in this teaching is to raise questions for us to think about on the subject of prayer, and it's those questions that I would like to highlight this morning.

My first question this morning is this: *How* should we pray? Well, the clue is in the story Jesus tells us about the man who has his neighbour at the door at midnight. “I tell you that even if he will not get up and give you the bread because you are his friend, yet he will get up and give you everything you need because you are not ashamed to *keep on asking*.” When Jesus teaches us to pray 'Give us today our daily bread' He is using a continuous form of the verb – 'be giving us' – and the fact that he adds the word 'today' emphasises the fact that this praying business can never be a one-off thing, it's something that needs to be done continually.

We can take that over into the teaching that Jesus gave His disciples in between the two stories that He told: 'Be asking, and you will receive; be seeking and you will find; be knocking and the door will be opened to you.' If you want to be sure someone comes to the door you can't just tap once

and then go away again; you have to persevere. If you want to be sure of finding what you are looking for you can't take a cursory glance and expect to turn up what is lost, you need to keep searching. So *how* should we pray? If we are serious about prayer we will make it not just an emergency call, nor even just one of your daily tasks but something as natural and continuous as breathing. 'Pray without ceasing,' says Paul – with every breath let us be dependent upon God.

The second question that Jesus' teaching prompts me to pose is this: '*When* should we pray?' This very much follows on from what I have been saying about continuous prayer – we should be praying without ceasing but when Jesus teaches us to pray *day by day* for the food we need, He is teaching us something about timescales and trust. I don't know about you, but I like to have an idea about what lies ahead for me; I do like to plan so that I can be organised and ready for things (although it may not seem that way to some of you as I scramble to get things done at the last minute!) and it really doesn't sit comfortably with me if plans are thrown awry at the eleventh hour, but here the Lord Jesus is calling us to slow right down and to lay each day before God with an openness to His leading and His providing. As He says elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.' And as the apostle James says in his letter: 'Now listen, you who say "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why do you not even know what will happen tomorrow.' (James 4:13) So *when* should we pray? One step at a time, without concerning ourselves too much with the long term but with a contentment to leave the next step in God's hands.

And the third question is this: *What* should we pray? Well, we have already looked at what Jesus teaches about asking – 'Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.' And, yes, there are some very big things that we need to be praying about – the big picture of God's purpose not only for our lives but for the church, for our country, for the world and indeed the whole cosmos. The final words of our reading this morning speak of the Father giving the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him – that's pretty big, the Person of God Himself making His dwelling in you and me. But alongside that, Jesus takes us from the heights and from the vastness of the universe and of His own divine nature and teaches us to pray for the most ordinary of things. 'Give us day by day the food we need.' In the

series of sermons that Helmut Thielicke preached in Stuttgart during the Second World War during which the church where he was ministering was destroyed in the almost constant air raids of that time, he observes that when the crunch comes, the big things, the lofty things are not so important: 'There was a time, he writes, when it would have been a sign of triviality or of lack of taste if a person had ventured to compare the priority of a woollen sweater with that of a volume of poetry. Today, we are not infrequently confronted with the hard and inelegant question of deciding which of the two to take with us into an air-raid shelter, and in these cold winter days it need betray no lack of 'culture' when a person decides in favour of the sweater.' (*The Prayer that Spans the World* p.79).

In presenting her report to this year's General Assembly, Sally Bonnar, the Convenor of the Assembly Council of the Church of Scotland and an elder at the North Church in Perth, called the whole church to move forward in uncertain times in what she called "a total reliance on the living God." She said, "When Jesus said 'Follow Me', those who responded did not know what they were being called to. They were called to leave behind the familiar and give up their way of life to follow a man whom they scarcely knew into a new and different future. It took them to a place of sacrifice but also of love and forgiveness. That is why we are asking the church to commit to a season of prayer from September to the start of Advent focusing on the implementation of radical change across the Church. Prayer is the bedrock of our work for the Kingdom; our opportunity to converse with our God, the church at work. It is how we learn to follow Jesus and become more like Him. Praying is far and away the most important thing in which we engage and I commend these initiatives to you." (Speeches to the General Assembly 18/5 and 21/5/19)

We have big things to pray about in our time – for the world, for our country and for the national church – and we all need to learn afresh how to pray. Take the Lord's Prayer – whichever version of it is most helpful to you at any given time – and start there. But don't stop there. Start today but don't stop there. Be persistent, ask, seek, knock and then do it all over again. Let's devote ourselves together as a congregation in the coming months to new discoveries in the way of prayer that will astonish us, and let us see what God will do among us and through us in the coming years.