

SERMON – 20/6/21
“The Answering Spirit”

Luke 11:1-13

“Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.” (Luke 11:13)

Today we continue our series on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. So far we have been thinking about the Spirit under a series of headings, all beginning with the letter A – as the *Advocate* who comes alongside us in our need, as the agent of our *adoption* into the family of God, as the One who *anoints* us for God's service and who *activates* our faith. This morning I want to reflect with you on the subject of prayer and on the Holy Spirit as the *answer* to our prayers.

I wonder if we were to do a survey, what would be the most common things that people pray about? Perhaps it would be for family or friends, maybe for guidance with personal problems, maybe for help with physical or material needs, health worries or emotional or spiritual struggles. My guess would be that most people turn to prayer when they have something *big* to deal with, something that they feel is beyond their own resources to deal with and yet Jesus' teaching on prayer teaches us to ask for the most basic thing of all – daily bread, the food we need day by day simply to survive.

I wonder why it is we are more likely to bring the *big* things before God? Is it because we actually find it *harder* to pray about the small things? What if we are asking a friend for help – most of us are going to feel much more comfortable asking someone for some loose change for the parking meter than we are tapping them for a loan of a large sum of money. Yet, in our praying it seems to be the other way round – we are much more likely to find ourselves praying for someone with a major health problem than for the person who has a scratch on their arm. Why is that?

In our reading this morning we find the Lord Jesus painting striking word pictures to illustrate this theme of prayer and to lead His disciples into a deeper understanding of the practice of prayer. The stories actually have quite a humorous side to them and I can just imagine the disciples laughing out loud as He told them. 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 to *borrow* 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 parent might answer their child's request for something to eat. Can we have eggs for tea, Mum? Yes, of course you can, son. Would there *ever* be a case where the child 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 noise is going to end up waking everyone 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 parents know what's good for their children, how much more does our heavenly parent.

What Jesus does here is to raise questions for us to think about on the subject of prayer, and to teach us something significant about the Holy Spirit in the process.

Firstly, *how* should we ask? *How* is it that we are to pray. Well, there's a clue in the story Jesus tells us about the 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 uses the words 'day by day' 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 answers 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 our daily tasks but something as natural and continuous as breathing. 'Pray without ceasing,' says Paul – with every breath let us be dependent upon God.

Secondly, '*When* should we ask?' As I've said, we should be praying without ceasing but when Jesus teaches us to pray *today* for our *daily* bread, He is teaching us something about timescales and trust. I don't know about you, but I 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!), 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, '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 you do 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 thirdly, *What* should we pray? Jesus teaches us to pray, 'Your Kingdom come,' and we tend to understand that in terms of the big picture of God's purpose not only for our lives but for the world and indeed the whole cosmos, but here, 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 on the Lord's Prayer 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 'There was a time, 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)
Give us today our daily bread.

But perhaps in the face of the big challenges and of the daily needs, we miss the most basic prayer of all – what Christ promises here is that the prayer the Father will always answer if we will take the step of asking is to give the Holy Spirit. That's huge – the Person of God coming to dwell in you and me and among us.

So, where does that leave us in our understanding of how to pray, when to pray, what to pray for? As a church, particularly at this time when we seek to meet the significant challenges of our time and to reshape our corporate life for the years to come, we need to pray for God's guidance about the big strategies and for God's provision in the smallest details but more than anything we need to pray: come, Holy Spirit. And one by one as individuals, we need to be as persistent in prayer as the neighbour at midnight, recognising our need and doggedly asking for that need to be met: give us today our daily bread. We are encouraged to pray continually, continuously conversing with our heavenly Father, boldly making it part of our everyday living rather than sporadically and hesitantly chapping at the door of some heavenly headmaster: be giving us day by day the food we need. And we are moved to pray about every least situation, even (perhaps especially) those things which we think we can manage fine with on our own thank you very much – for food on our tables, for shelter from the elements, for protection, for health, for friendship and companionship – because we never know when we might find ourselves with bigger requests to make about these situations. In the how, when and what of prayer, start here: “Give us today our daily bread” and God will soon take us on to pray about more and more.

But before even that simplest of prayers ask God first to give you the Holy Spirit, who is the answer to our deepest, unspoken longings. Because here is the promise of God: “Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.”