

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138 (137); Colossians 2:12-14; Luke 11:1-13

Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples

Luke 11:1 Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” 2 He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. 3 Give us each day our daily bread. 4 And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

5 And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; 6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ 7 And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ 8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

9 “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

(i) From the first century AD, the Lord’s Prayer comes down to us in three forms. It appears in Luke, but also in Matthew and in the *Didache*, a Jewish Christian guide to discipleship in community. The prayer is not in Mark’s Gospel and is



only distantly echoed in John 17.

In Matthew’s *Sermon on the Mount*, it appears as an expansion of the classical Jewish triad of almsgiving, prayer and fasting: “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:7–15)

In the *Didache*, a very early Christian text, it is found within a general church “order” including instructions on prayer:

Nor should you pray like the hypocrites. Instead, “pray like this,” just as the Lord commanded in his Gospel: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be

Thought for the day

Although the Lord’s Prayer is clearly Christian in origin and, I would guess, exclusively Christian in usage, actually there is nothing in that could not be sincerely prayed by Jews. And yet, a closer look reveals just how Christian the prayer is. We call God “Father” because we his children *in the Son*. The coming kingdom is the one preached by Jesus. Our daily bread includes the bread of the *Eucharist*. Even “the time of trial” points to the travails of the end when Christ-believers might find themselves denying him. In this way, the prayer both enables and expresses our being “joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). Rather than a set of words, it is really a way of praying.

Prayer

God, teach us to be your children in Jesus both in name and in reality.

your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debt, as we also forgive our debtors; and do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one; for yours is the power and the glory forever.” (Didache 8:2)

Notice the additional doxology, traditional in Reformed versions (albeit in an adjusted form). In all three cases, the wording is different, and scholars, with careful examination of editing techniques and removing what seems typical of the writing or theology of each evangelist, have arrived at a probable form of the “original”, which may have read like this:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors and do not bring us to the time of trial.

It may worth be recalling that this way of praying is not so much a formula of prayer (like the Hail Mary) as precisely a way of praying, a sequence or series of steps to follow, when praying.

(ii) The parable of the friend at midnight is found only in Luke 11:5-8.

(iii) The teaching on intercession is found also in Matthew but with significant differences:

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11)

KIND OF WRITING

A teaching on prayer, with a parable to illustrate intercession. The extensive teaching on prayer in Luke-Acts may be summarised as follows:

- Prayer is hugely significant for Luke.
- Jesus himself prays frequently
- Many others pray
- Many prayers are given
- Three parables are devoted to prayer.
- There is an extended teaching on prayer in Luke 11:1-13 and 18:1-14.
- Prayer etc. remains vital in the Acts
- Heart of prayer: the Holy Spirit.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) Father: Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. (Psalms 68:5) He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!’ (Psalms 89:26)

(ii) Time of trial: The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. (Zephaniah 1:14-16)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations

to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ (Acts 17:24-28)

He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” (Mark 14:36)

ST PAUL

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:15) And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Luke frequently shows Jesus at prayer; the request of the disciples could well be the setting for the original teaching on prayer.

Verse 2 “Father”, common in all religions and in Judaism, has a special meaning for Jesus and for Christians. Kingdom points to God’s end-time justice.

Verse 3 Literally, the food we need every day.

Verse 4 Forgiveness is a gift we can receive only if we give it away immediately. The time of trial is not just any temptation but the temptation, under pressure of persecution or the like, to give up the faith altogether.

Verse 5 The parable teaches persistence in prayer. The need for persistence is in formal tension with the teaching on God’s readiness to give. Clearly, we are not dealing with persistence as persuasion!

Verse 9 The triad promotes confidence in the giver of every good gift. We ask, of course, for many things we do not receive, so the next verses go on to deal with the giver’s discernment of what we truly need.

Verse 11 This is an *a fortiori* argument: if humans can be kind and discerning, all the more so God. A fish and a snake superficially resemble each other. But no human father would make that mistake.

Verse 12 An egg and a small white scorpion also superficially (if briefly!) resemble each other.

Verse 13 Here is the conclusion to the *a fortiori* argument. However, Luke has adjusted Matthew’s saying and replaced “good things” with the Holy Spirit. This might seem a dodge, but there is no greater gift in Luke’s religious worldview (the statistics speak for themselves: Luke 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-26; 3:16, 22; 4:1; 10:21; 11:13; 12:10, 12; Acts 1:2, 5, 8, 16; 2:4, 33, 38; 4:8, 25, 31; 5:3, 32; 6:5; 7:51, 55; 8:15, 17, 19; 9:17, 31; 10:38, 44-45, 47; 11:15-16, 24; 13:2, 4, 9, 52; 15:8, 28; 16:6; 19:2, 6; 20:23, 28; 21:11; 28:25).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In the prayer Jesus gave us as a model, the focus is not on getting God to do what we want but on trying to be open to what God wants: “Your kingdom come”. That openness implies a trust that what God wants for us, is our good. When have you found that you benefited when you were open to whatever happened and trusted that the Spirit was with you no matter what happened?

2. One of the points in the parable of the friend knocking at the door is that in the case of true friendship it will not be necessary to browbeat the friend into giving what you seek. Recall times when you had a friend who gave willingly and readily. What was it like to have such a generous and willing response? Perhaps you can also recall when you have been that kind of a friend to others.

3. In the culture of the Middle East hospitality is a priority. It would be unimaginable not to help a friend. Just so, it is unimaginable that God will ignore our prayer. When you think of the reliability of God what are the images that you find helpful and that encourage you to persist in prayer?

PRAYER

Provident Father, with the prayer your Son taught us always on our lips, we ask, we seek, we knock at your door.

In our every need, grant us the first and best of all your gifts, the Spirit who makes us your children.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

God made you alive with him

Col 2:8 *Be careful not to allow anyone to captivate you through an empty, deceitful philosophy that is according to human traditions and the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.* 9 *For in him all the fullness of deity lives in bodily form,* 10 *and you have been filled in him, who is the head over every ruler and authority.* 11 *In him you also were circumcised—not, however, with a circumcision performed by human hands, but by the removal of the fleshly body, that is, through the circumcision done by Christ.*

Col 2:12 Having been buried with him in baptism, you also have been raised with him through your faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead. 13 And even though you were dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he nevertheless made you alive with him, having forgiven all your transgressions. 14 He has destroyed what was against us, a certificate of indebtedness expressed in decrees opposed to us. He has taken it away by nailing it to the cross.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading from Colossians is important because it deals with both salvation and its effects. The “great events that gave us new life if Christ” are communicated and celebrated through baptism.

KIND OF WRITING

The writing is both persuasive and dissuasive. The author hopes to detach the Colossians from either deviant teaching or no longer valid practices. In verses 9-12 the language, while not exactly hymnic or poetic, is certainly elevated prose, with a rich, sometimes dissonant sequence of metaphors.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

A few preceding verses have been added because they give something of the context of the writing, which can otherwise be hard to discern. The commentary will explore this in more detail.

RELATED PASSAGES

What shall we say then? Are we to remain in sin so that grace may increase? Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that as many as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from

the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may live a new life.

For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united in the likeness of his resurrection. We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (For someone who has died has been freed from sin.)

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that since Christ has been raised from the dead, he is never going to die again; death no longer has mastery over him. For the death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you too consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:1-11 NET)

Although they fully know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:32 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 8 The tone is that of warning. Captivate comes close to meaning kidnap. This is the only occurrence of the Greek word *philosophia* in the Greek bible. As such, it is not at all disparaging and can refer to any teaching about life. However, the writer has in mind some debased form of it, mere human tradition unauthenticated by God. The word “tradition” suggests perhaps specifically *Jewish* tradition or teaching. The elemental spirits are a bit of a mystery but may refer to astral speculations as represented by the zodiac. This is found also in Jewish speculation and even in synagogue mosaics and perhaps was used by Jewish teachers to appeal to the citizenry of Colossae. All this has nothing to do with Christ.

Verse 9 This verse builds on the rich teaching in Col 1:15-20, with the addition of two words unique in the Greek bible: divinity (*theotēs*) and bodily (*sōmatikōs*).

Verse 10 The fullness, which is properly and primarily that of Christ, is now shared with all believers. In context, the letter writer is telling the Colossians that they need to extra regulations or esoteric teaching because everything is already

give graciously in Christ. This pre-eminence of Christ is indicated by the use of head and ruler (already frequent in the letter).

Verse 11 Although the writing is a bit clumsy here, the message is clear enough: our initiation into Christ is perfect and complete.

Verse 12 The link with Romans 6 is evident. Already in the present moment, Christ-believers share not only in Christ’s death but also in his resurrection. Although mostly likely not by the apostle himself, the sentiment here is thoroughly Pauline. Faith in this context is the believer’s faith *in* Jesus.

Verse 13 The metaphors are mixed: believers, who sacramentally died in Christ, were already metaphorically dead through sin. The God “who gives life” is grounded fully in Israelite faith in God in the Old Testament, even though at this point, Gentiles are being addressed.

Verse 14 Again the metaphor has shifted this time to forensic / legal language. It was the practice to affix to the cross the charges against the person. Human transgressions are treated as a kind of official indictment. We are not far from Romans 1:23 (see above). Clearly, however, it is not the mere nailing of such charges which brings about redemption. After all, it was Christ who was nailed, not the charges as such. His death—God’s expression of compassion and forgiveness—set aside all such mortal charges against us.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. All of us were baptised and it is worth reflecting again on that. These days, much of the traditional focus on sin makes less sense...what should we put in its place?
2. Being set free—being forgiven, loved even—stands at very heart of what happened for us in Jesus’ death and resurrection. How does such loving forgiveness speak to you today?

PRAYER

God, in you the fullness of life and forgiveness dwell. Help us embrace and make our own all that you have done for us in Christ. From his fullness we have all received: let us, in our turn, show the same gracious love to others. Amen.

Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked!

Gen 18:20 Then the LORD said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! 21 I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.”

Gen 18:22 So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. 23 Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” 26 And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” 27 Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the LORD, I who am but dust and ashes. 28 Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” 29 Again he spoke to him, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” 30 Then he said, “Oh do not let the LORD be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” 31 He said, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the LORD. Suppose twenty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” 32 Then he said, “Oh do not let the LORD be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Prayer of intercession presents particular theological and philosophical challenges for the contemporary believer. Aware of the complexities, St Augustine once wrote:

God does not want our wishes to be made known to Himself, since He cannot be ignorant of them; but He wants our desire to be exercised in prayer, thus enabling us to grasp what He is pre-

paring to give. That is something very great indeed; but we are small and limited vessels for the receiving of it.

Yet we know that sometimes all we can do is ask, and ask from the heart.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a deal. There is something marvellous about the combination of the politeness and persistence.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

As noted for last Sunday, chapters 18 and 19 of Genesis are meant to be read together. In particular, the stories of (in)hospitality are to be compared: Abraham receiving the three angels so graciously and Lot having to protect his guests so shockingly. In between stands the intercession Abraham.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Initially, God considered concealing his intentions from Abraham.

Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” (Genesis 18:16–19)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 20-21 In a very anthropomorphic way, God is pictured as hearing rumours and needing to check them out. The outcry is not so clear in Hebrew: is it the noise they are making or is it the complaints against their sin? In an ominous way, the opening soliloquy of God echoes the start of universal flood: *The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.* (Genesis 6:5–6)

Verse 23 Abraham is portrayed here as

a prophet, who stands bravely between God and the people and, like Moses, he intercedes for the people. The question raised by Abraham is one all people of faith have had to face.

Verse 24 Fifty—not much in large city—but still fifty good people. Should they too be punished and destroyed? Notice, however, that Abraham goes beyond sparing the innocent and requests the forgiveness of the wicked! The request is granted in principles in v. 26.

Verse 25 Abraham recalls God to God’s better self, so to speak and reminds God of the requirement of proper justice.

Verse 26 The Lord makes a generous response.

Verse 27 In the style of a subject before a monarch, Abraham is aware of his insignificance.

Verse 28 Having established the general principle that for the sake of a number of innocent people punishment should be withheld, Abraham sets about negotiating the minimum required. Cf. Jer 5:1.

Verses 29-30 At this point, the give and take becomes already a little formulaic.

Verses 31-32 Abraham persists with great respect and even humility—and thereby gains his request. Unlike Jer 5:1 above, the negotiation stops at ten.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. This is the first time in the Bible that a human initiates a conversation with God. Of course, the wider background in the case of Abraham is God’s gracious initiative. Because God chooses us as his children, we can speak frankly with him, from the heart, as Abraham does here.

2. It can be hard to see the point of persistence in prayer of petition. Here St Augustine can help a good deal (see above). In a way, the only prayer is, “may your kingdom come.”

PRAYER

God, you have made us for yourself: give us a deep hunger for your presence and action in our lives.

In our need, help us to recognise the gifts you want to give us. In our helplessness, send us your Spirit that our prayer be according to the mind of the Spirit.

THE LITURGY

Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138 (137); Colossians 2:12-14; Luke 11:1-13

READINGS 1 AND 3

The portrait of petition prepares well for some aspects of the Gospel. It might be good to remember that there is much more to the Lord's Prayer than petition.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 138 (137) is indeed a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving after petition. The response captures the spirit of it: On the day I called, you answered me, O Lord.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Genesis 18:20-32

Some people like haggling, others find it just embarrassing. In any case, in our first reading Abraham haggles—successfully—with God.

Second reading

Colossians 2:12-14

Each one of us is baptised, a reality we probably do not reflect on sufficiently. What does it mean? The reading from Colossians is short but profound.

Gospel

Luke 11:1-13

Christians of every stripe all over the world pray the Lord's Prayer every day, often more frequently. Luke presents the context of the teaching and goes on to insist on the power of asking.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 25 July

St James the Apostle

2 Corinthians 4:7-15

The reading is special for the feast. The Corinthians blew cold and hot when it came to St Paul. Once more, in this reading he defends himself, and reveals something of the inner motivation, the inner person, his sense of apostleship.

Matthew 20:20-28

Again especially chosen for the feast, this reading tells a familiar and instructive tale with one interesting difference. In Mark, it is James and John who make

the blunder. In Matthew, to spare the blushes of the emerging leadership, this "role" is assigned to their mother! In any case, the message is untouched: leadership in the faith community is costly service, modelled on Jesus' own service.

Tuesday 26 July

Sts Joachim and Anne, parents of the BVM

Jeremiah 14:17-22

In the face of tragedy, today we hear a heart felt prayer, true at almost any time in human history. The person praying shows tremendous faith in God: O our God, you are our hope, since it is you who do all this.

Matthew 13:36-43

The parable of the darnel teaches patience and a certain non-interfering tolerance. In case this might lead to complacency (not much of risk these days!), the community developed this rather threatening interpretation.

Wednesday 27 July

Jeremiah 15:10, 16-21

Jeremiah really did suffer for his calling as prophet. Not only had he difficult things to proclaim but he was personally treated very badly. In this passage, he brings his pain before the Lord.

John 11:19-27

The moving observation of Martha is something we have all felt. It is that very combination of love and faith which leads Martha to one of the great affirmations of faith in John's Gospel.

Thursday 28 July

Jeremiah 18:1-6

Again, we have a prophetic gesture with a very clear message: Yes, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so you are in mine, House of Israel.

Matthew 13:47-53

The gospel of Matthew can be uncomfortable and today he does teach that there will be a judgment and a sorting at the end. It is, of course, not a literal description but an invitation not to lose the potential of the present moment.

Friday 29 July

Sts Mary, Martha and Lazarus

Jeremiah 26:1-9

The Lord entrusts a message to the people, to be proclaimed in the holiest place the Temple. Will people pay attention? The reaction is forthright.

Matthew 13:54-58

As we say, familiarity breeds contempt. Because they *think* they are utterly familiar with this neighbour of theirs, their minds are blinded. This can happen to us too in our piety—we may think we know this Jesus, but do we really?

1 John 4:7-16

This is a very suitable reading for the memorial, underlining love.

John 11:19-27

The story of Mary, Martha and Lazarus (unique to John) portrays in a very human way our consternation in the face of death and our hope in Jesus, the Risen Lord.

Saturday 30 July

St Peter Chrysologus, bishop and doctor

Jeremiah 26:11-16, 24

Continuing from yesterday, we hear the divided reaction to Jeremiah's proclamation. Fortunately for him, he has a supporter and a protector.

Matthew 14:1-12

The death of John the Baptist is a sad, even absurd ending to a fiery career. It is reported Mark and Matthew, both of whom use it a warning about the cost of discipleship. It is omitted in Luke and John, probably to avoid any comparisons with the unique death of Jesus. We know a little more about it from Josephus, who writes:

Accordingly John was sent as a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Machaerus, the castle I already mentioned, and was put to death. Now the Jews thought that the destruction of his army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure with him. (Jewish Antiquities 18).