

Prayer for All

Matthew 6:9-15

I'm pretty sure my dad taught me to pray - I have a memory of being a small girl in our first house, settling down in bed and saying my prayers, encouraged by dad - you know the one that goes "gentle Jesus meek and mild, look upon a little child, bless mummy and daddy and Jonathan and David and make Catherine a good girl tomorrow, Amen." I'm sure that's a standard one and wasn't carefully crafted by dad to fulfil all the needs of the household! Prayer is pretty much like this - we take what we know, from the traditions of the prayers we have learned, the hymns and songs we know - pieces of the psalms and other scriptures and weave them into a conversation with God. Sometimes these prayers take the form of love-notes as we whisper to God our adoration of him and tell him our secrets, the things that we only want him to know and that only he can and will forgive.

As Jesus teaches his disciples, so we learn to pray. We approach God, confident in our right to be in his presence as children. God never turns his children away - Jesus himself modelled that as he told off those who would send the children away, rather asserting "Let them come". As children, many of us came to prayer, taught by Sunday school teachers, parents or even dinner ladies: "hands together, eyes closed, elbows from the table". We folded our hands together to point to heaven and closed our eyes so that we couldn't see Steven and David C messing about on the back row. Our focus would be on talking to God. So that's what we did - and those of you who have been taught to pray be ultra-cool youth leaders and no doubt call God 'daddy God', or say "yeah Lord" a lot - bless your hearts! Jesus loves you!

Today, is Father's day. And we thank God for all Good, Good Fathers. Those still with us, those we have loved and lost and those who have offered a father's love where we have needed it as youth leaders, mentors and family members. Fatherhood is more than a quick act of procreation - it is about help and nurture, provision, gifts, teaching and encouragement. The passage of scripture we are looking at in Matthew's gospel is called 'The Lord's Prayer' - or 'The Prayer that Jesus Taught us' - or 'The Our Father'. It is in this prayer that Jesus shapes for his disciples a view of the world in which our needs and requirements are met each day in a loving Father God of holiness and goodness.

In teaching us the Lord's prayer, Jesus also teaches us a way of life - one where prayer is not merely words, but an attitude of life and a response of commitment - to look to God to shape us and transform us in the whole of our being so that our attitude is one that also reflects the faith in Father God that Jesus had and also the desire that Jesus had on earth to see the Kingdom of God brought near to those who need him.

The first phrase declares our relationship with God - it acknowledges that we are part of God's adopted family - little brothers and sisters together with Jesus in God's family - belonging to God's household and also to one another. In your home, right now, saying these words - God is our Father - say it with me - OUR FATHER. So as we say that, just that, we are declaring our kinship with one another. We belong together - whether reading this go on, speak it aloud, listening on the telephone service - say it now OUR FATHER. It is our declaration of faith. It is our place of belonging. It is our connection with one another. You are not alone. Jesus invites his disciples into that relationship with God that he has as he invites people to call God - Father.

Now, as we approach father God, he's not out at work, busy in the office, on a call, engrossed in fortnite on the X-Box or down the pub. We are safe to call on him because he is in

Heaven. Where he promised he would be, so even in this little prayer, there is Covenant promise shining through. He is God if we will be his people. In that first phrase we make that affirmation - we align ourselves with God. He is Our Father. So in essence, the Catholic term of The Our Father makes a lot of sense - it is the place where we may acknowledge and state our intention of faith on a regular basis - every day, even...

We may have good, bad or indifferent models of Father here on earth - but this Father is the one in whose image Good Fathering is patterned. Choosing to be like him in character and attitude, we see God's approachability and his desire to bless - as Fathers say the Lord's prayer, there is an acknowledgement given of the way of Fatherhood. One who has his eyes fixed on God at the start of each day and who seeks the way of God in dealing with his children, business and in all relationships. God's fatherhood has taught me that I must never be out of reach to my children - to make sure that even on the hardest days, I am present - unless I'm asleep! I think God has the advantage here in never sleeping!! Children however, have that persistence in nature to make their presence and requests heard and shouldn't be brushed aside.

So Jesus teaches us to go to Father God. To fix his covenant love in our sights and to remind ourselves of his generosity and kindness: We are reminded of the 10 Commandments as we pray "your will be done, your kingdom come." We are reminded of his faithfulness in all he provides as the Hebrew People were granted their 'daily bread' as manna in the wilderness. Where we are in need - God is trustworthy and true.

The prayer Jesus teaches us is one which tells us of God's grace, so freely given. We are not simply recipients of Jesus' teaching as he taught the disciples in that moment, but we live in the post-cross and resurrection period. As Jesus talks about forgiveness, it is not merely a reference to Old Testament ways of achieving forgiveness, but they direct our thinking to the Cross. How Jesus Transforms even the Covenant as he offers us forgiveness of all our sins. We are transformed by the grace of God at the Cross of Christ. And in that grace-filled transformation, we are enabled to be more Christ-like in our forgiving and in our loving of all the world. Now, more than ever, that beautiful verse of John 3:16 comes to the fore:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life

The love of God is for the whole world and we are ambassadors for that love. Speaking the truth of God's fatherhood over all people, all cultures, all ethnicities, all of creation. God loves all that he has made. Now is the time when the expression of the love of God is needed by God's children and should be given by us as we live out our faith... As we make the claim that God is our Father, we claim the DNA of the Godhead running through us. We make a declaration to the world of our intent to love as God loves. This is a missional imperative - as the Father kept watch over his Children, Israel, so we in claiming relationship seek to love in his image. To stand with those who are in pain. To stand with those who are suffering under racism. To stand with those discriminated against for any reason. God in Jesus shown grace and mercy where he could have exercised judgement and condemnation.

All our capability to do what we must in loving the world again is the gift of the hand of Father God. We are released by our bonds of guilt and fear, of sin by his forgiveness - we help others to do likewise.

Sometimes the prayers we pray, we do in the face of impossible situations. We trust that God will help us when no one can. There will come a time when the disciples will see that it is only Jesus' death and resurrection that will land them safely into the Promised Land of God's New Covenant. We pray the prayer that Jesus taught us to teach us to come to God. To approach him through Jesus' death and resurrection. To know that God will always have time and room and interest in our issues_ whether it is our need for a school place or our fear for our health. We wake up each day and instead of making an idol out of our issue, we keep our eyes on God. He will set us in the right direction.

I've seen some wonderful models of Fatherhood on earth in my dad, father-in-law and husband. And as I've watched many of you too. Father God is always on our side. He never gives up on us. We are under his protection and we are co-heirs of his kingdom with Jesus. God is a generous and loving Father. Look to him every day and make this statement of faith, knowing that he will lead you through whatever wilderness you find yourself in at the moment and into the joy of his promise.

We pray the Lord's prayer such a lot in our churches. We pray it so often that we might forget to think of its content. It is a rallying cry and a mission statement. It is full of love and full of hope. It defies the boundaries and difficulties of our current situation and lifts us into the rules of God's kingdom. Lets shout it out now as we make it our declaration of faith on this Father's Day, we make some noise as we pray:

Our Father
Who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy Name.
Thy Kingdom Come
Thy Will be done
On Earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil
For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory
For ever and ever. Amen.