



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Sixth Sunday after Trinity Proper 12 Year C

Colossians 2.6-15 [16-19]

Luke 11.1-13

The 25th of July is St. James's day. Our own Spital Chapel is dedicated to St. James, known as James the Great to distinguish him from James the less, another of Jesus' disciples, who was presumably younger. He was the brother of John, two of the Galilean fishermen called by Jesus. He, with his brother together with Peter, were present with Jesus on the Mount of the Transfiguration and in the garden of Gethsemane. James followed Jesus to death, he was the first of the disciples to be martyred; this was on the orders of Herod Agrippa who was persecuting the followers of Jesus. By killing the leaders he hoped to put a stop to the movement of Christ.

James is the patron saint of pilgrims and his emblem is the shell. A scallop shell is given to those who make the pilgrimage to St. Iago de Compostela in Spain, thought to hold his tomb. One such was gifted by a pilgrim to Spital Chapel. There will be a service for St. James on Sunday evening at 5.00pm. The readings set for St. James' day are Acts 11.27-12.2, 2 Corinthians 4. 7-15 and Matthew 20.20-28.

This Sunday is Proper 12 so I will be looking at those readings in this Reflection. The reading from Luke must be the most well known in the gospels, containing as it does what has come to be known as our Lord's Prayer. It is a particularly quiet setting. We have just had the domestic scene between Martha and Mary where Jesus was a visitor in the home of his friend Lazarus. Now Jesus is on his missionary journey. Luke makes it quite clear throughout his gospel that it was Jesus' regular habit to withdraw to pray quietly, to be alone with his Father. This is one of those times; there are no crowds, just the twelve who are following him on his journey. We are simply told, ^{11.1} 'He was praying in a certain place.' The place is not named, it does not matter, Jesus' life was prayer centred. It is good though to imagine this scene. Jesus finishes his prayers and is sitting among his disciples, maybe they are resting on the way, maybe this is the quiet of the evening and they are camping. It was the usual thing for a rabbi to teach his followers to pray and so as they sit at his feet he is asked,

'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' James is among them listening with rapt attention to see what his Lord would say.

It has always struck me how Jesus, when faced with a question which covers a huge topic or is deeply theological or philosophical, gets to the heart of the matter in very few words. Think of the young lawyer out to trap him. 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' The answer to that could go on and on but Jesus as always cuts to the chase, seeing straight through him and more or less saying, come on you a lawyer who knows the scriptures inside out. You tell me! Of course the answer is summed up. 'Love God and love your neighbour.' Jesus will of course add, 'as I have loved you, which adds a whole new dimension. It is a few words but it sums everything up.' Do that and you will live,' says Jesus. Now he is asked, 'Lord teach us to pray.' The answer comes straight away. Not a long diatribe about techniques (though they have their place) nor a long explanation. No, Jesus gets to the heart of prayer in a few words. This is what our Lord taught; this has become the centre for our worship both in services and in private prayer.

Having this prayer used so often as it is can be a bit of a two edged sword, carefully thought on it is the most wonderful prayer ever but it can become so familiar we patter it out and don't stop to think. Here Jesus voices that prayer for the first time. The prayer appears in Luke and a longer version in Matthew as part of the Sermon on the Mount. I admit I do love the sung version known as the 'Millennium Prayer.' I saw it performed with trumpets and children of many nationalities singing in unison and it was very very moving. I have used it when I have done services of light on All Hallows Eve.' It is a prayer of joyful triumph and worship and very appropriate for that evening. Now though, as Jesus sits with his disciples, it is very quiet and he is teaching them something which seems simple but which is hugely profound. It is a prayer for each day, but also a prayer for life; it is like a journey we take through life. God is at the centre and that is how it begins. When I am doing an assembly about All Hallows Eve and explaining its meaning I ask the youngsters to say that first line, 'Our Father who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name.' A hallow is a holy one, a saint so this is the eve of the holy ones of God, the saints.

God is the centre of all holiness, the focus is on him. His name is holy and he is to be worshipped, he is to be put at the centre of our lives. 'Love the lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.'

Jesus teaches them to pray for God's kingdom here on earth. This is God's promise and plan for the world. This is his renewed creation and it begins with Jesus Christ the Messiah. Jesus breaks the bonds of death and sin and the kingdom of God is born. It will come to fruition in God's time and his kingdom values will be established forever on earth. It is the job of every Christian to champion and live by those values and work for that Kingdom. It is a two way thing, God will establish it but as we say that prayer we promise to work for it. It is not just a simple petition.

Now the prayer turns to our needs, needs not wants.

'Give us each day our daily bread.'

This takes us back to the story of God's people, the people he loved faithfully and brought to freedom from Egypt. This takes us back to the exodus. It was God who led the people, through his servant Moses who was his instrument. When they were in want he prayed to God for help and God sent food. They received the manna in the wilderness. Jesus at the Last Supper blessed the bread and gave it to them with the words, 'This is my body given for you.' So the bread becomes the bread of heaven, a symbol of Christ's saving act at Calvary. This is not just bodily sustenance now; it is about salvation. Jesus gave his life that we might be reconciled to God and receive forgiveness of our

sins and have eternal life with him. Indeed it is a petition for our daily needs but it is so much more than this.

‘And forgive us our sins,’

We are all sinful, we all make mistakes, go astray and try to get our own way when we should be going God’s way. We are all in need of forgiveness. Our God is a God of love, a God who loved us so much he came in person, walked with humanity and gave his life in love for us. Jesus, even at the last, forgives the repentant thief, he prays for those who hammered in the nails. Such is the love of our Father. So we turn to him in prayer acknowledging our faults and praying that, in his love, he will forgive us so that we can start again with the sheet swept clean and do our best.

As I have said before, great gifts come with great responsibilities. Jesus tells the parable of the unjust steward to illustrate that point.

‘for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.’

That tiny word ‘for’ is so important. If we expect forgiveness we must be forgiving. That does not mean we should condone what is wrong, it doesn’t mean we should not stand up against wrong doing. It does mean we need to have a forgiving heart. If we don’t it is self-destructive. How can we expect God to forgive us if we do not forgive others? Jesus is the mirror we need to look at as our guide. Look at the times he stands up against evil and hypocrisy. It wasn’t by being ‘meek and mild’ that took him to the cross. Jesus shows true love, true forgiveness embodying the love of God. He is our pattern.

‘And do not bring us to the time of trial.’

This is a petition for help. It is a plea that we do not have to face trials and temptations. Or at least it is a prayer for help when we do. Throughout life there are myriad temptations, so many times when we know there are two roads and we have to decide which to take, to do what we want or what Jesus wants. We made a promise when we turned to Jesus. ‘I renounce sin.’ Well we need help, it reminds me of those words, ‘Lord I believe, help my unbelief.’ We all face trials and temptations in this life. We need to resist them and say, ‘With the help of God I will.’

Now we move from the prayer itself to an illustration of relationship. Jesus is painting a picture for them of the nature of God. He does it in terms they can understand and so it isn’t complete but we get the picture.

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; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.”

We need to put ourselves in the position of those who are listening to this, the disciples, living in that culture. If someone came asking for hospitality you were duty bound to help them. It was the same in a monastery; the hospitaller was the brother responsible for hospitality, for guest provision. If anyone came in need of rest or food or help the monks were duty bound to provide it. The same would be true of wayside chapels. Think of the name of our own chapel of St. James, The word Spital, comes not only from hospital but hospitality because they would provide for pilgrims journeying to the shrine of St. Chad, for travellers and indeed any others in need. This was the religious vow. This is the way of our Lord and it is perfectly illustrated in our gospel reading. With this in mind Jesus says you would not turn a petitioner away.

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.” ⁸I 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.'

Of course in this instance the person who knocks is a pain. The houses would sleep everyone in the same room. To get up and start sorting food would disturb the household. He may not like it but he should do it because he is doing it for friendship and because it is important that hospitality is shown, it is what God would want him to do. Also the story illustrates the need to persevere to keep asking for what is needed.

Prayer is not necessarily easy, keep praying, keep asking. God loves you, have faith, he knows your needs and he will answer you. You will never be turned away by God. Even humans know what the right thing to do is. Now just imagine the love of God for his precious children, of course he longs to give what you need.

⁹ 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If 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!'

God is our Father and that relationship, as we understand it, touches the surface only. Fathers are human; they are fallible as we all are. Even the love of the best of us is a pale reflection of God's love for us. If then we try to do the best for those we love, how much more God, who is perfect love, wants the best for us. And of course within this is that question, whom do I love? Well, 'Love one another as I have loved you' is the answer. We cannot all like one another, that is a fact, but we can care for one another with Christian love. Compassion is a good word to use I think.

Prayer is a huge topic, we will each have our own preferred method and of course it is central to our worship. Prayer is communication with our father who loves us and whose face was seen by humanity in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, fully human, fully divine.

Note too that last line, prayer doesn't mean always getting what we want, what Jesus promises is that,

'the heavenly Father (will) give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

The Holy Spirit is God with us, enabling us to do so much more than we could alone, strengthening and sustaining us. God answers prayer in his own time and way, we do not always know best, but Jesus tells us to keep on praying to God who loves us more than we can know. Prayer does not always need words; it is resting in love and trust in God's presence. How often has something happened in our lives and we know that alone we simply can't deal with it? So we pray and the Holy Spirit of God is with us as we walk through that time, we know we are never alone. Ours is a wonderful and intimate relationship with God. It is worth reading George Herbert's magnificent poem, 'Prayer'; his definitions are well worth reflecting on carefully.

Our epistle reading follows on from the letter we looked at last week. Paul is writing to the church at Colossae. The chapter begins thus,

2.1 'For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. ²I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that

they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'

Paul has not been to the church at Colossae as we saw last week, others have acted as missionaries taking the good news out to that region and establishing fledgling churches. Paul is praying for them, suffering for them and he is teaching them by the letters he writes. The theology he imparts is the theology we accept two millennia later. Paul needs to reinforce the teaching they have already received with further instruction and guidance. It is not easy for these new Christians as we shall see. They are not shut away safely in some little microcosm, they are members of a cosmopolitan city with all its pressures and dangers, but they are something else too now, they are citizens who have inherited God's kingdom. They need to understand just what the faith is that they must hold firm to. You can't hold to the truth against all sorts of pressure unless that truth has been clearly expounded and stated. That is what Paul is doing, even though, imprisoned as he is, he can't come in person. This is the key to it all,

'that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'

Remember Paul is writing before the gospels, he is a contemporary of the disciples. He sees himself as one of them, an apostle. And because of his mission he calls himself an apostle to the Gentiles. Looking at Paul's writings then, we can see just how the theology of Jesus has been crystallised. Jesus is the Son of the living God. Look at that wonderful hymn from last week; some believe it is even earlier than Paul's writing. It sets out the reality of Christian belief, the nature of Christ as part of the Godhead. It is worth quoting it again here,

^{1.15} 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'

This then is the truth about Jesus Christ. He is one with the creator, God in three persons. He is fully human and divine. Hold fast to this, says Paul. His whole argument centres round this. This is what Paul says just prior to our reading,

⁴ 'I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. ⁵For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.'

As I said, these new Christians are living in a difficult time, there were all sorts of 'plausible arguments' with which people tried to deceive them. To steer them away from the truth to what they wanted so they had power over them. If this succeeded the church would be weakened and maybe damaged completely. Paul begins our reading by saying firmly, hold fast to the true teaching, and act in the way of Christ.

⁶ 'As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.'

Paul knows the dangers they are facing from other people who are trying to lure them from the truth though and he attacks that head on.

⁸ 'See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.'

There were all sorts of philosophies and false teachings which could subvert the church by watering down the truth and thereby altering it radically until it simply was not Christianity any longer. It

became known as the Colossian heresy. So Paul has begun with that great hymn stating categorically the nature of Jesus. Now he reiterates this,

⁹ 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.'

That is the point, Jesus is God and man, fully human, fully divine. He is the head, he is the cornerstone and on him the church is built. You are the church, everyone of you are members of his body here on earth. He is above and beyond all earthly rulers; Jesus Christ is king of the earth and the cosmos. The others pale into insignificance.

¹¹ 'In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹²when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

We talked about Jews who wanted to lure the Gentile Christians to Judaism, following the law to the letter, beginning with the badge of that, circumcision. Then there were Jewish converts to Christianity who thought for it to be complete, for the new Christians to be inheritors of Abraham they had to hold fast to the law of the Jews.

No way, says Paul, that is over and done with. Jesus was the fulfilling of the law. No one is bound by the fetters of that now or its rituals. The only badge you need is the cross of Christ. In baptism you went down into the water, symbolically dying with Christ. Sin was washed away by Jesus and you are raised with him to new life, you have a new restored relationship with the God who loves you. You are free in Jesus, why go back into bondage? From the image of baptism Paul goes to Calvary.

¹³ 'And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.'

They had been pagans, worshipping false gods, acting in sinful ways; all that was true says Paul. However, because you have turned to Jesus, I will explain clearly what he did for you. On the cross Jesus suffered the worst that evil could do. He suffered for our sins, your sins were crucified in Christ but he arose victorious and sin was defeated. You are therefore freed and forgiven and you have a relationship of love with the true God who is three in one. Jesus was made a public example by the powers of man. He was sentenced to a shameful humiliating death. What he did though was to turn that on its head, the shame was the authorities', the triumph was his, and the cross became a throne. There is reference here to Pilate's notice, it was meant to be mocking but Jesus turned it into a triumphant proclamation. Jesus Christ is king of the Jews but also of humanity and of the cosmos. Actually Jesus Christ is God!

So then this is the truth.

¹⁶ 'Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. ¹⁷ These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.'

So, do not let anyone mislead you, don't let anyone persuade you to keep Jewish festivals or rules or anyone else's for that matter. Ignore other philosophies; they are heresy. I have taught you the truth. Hold fast to that. Remember what I said before, Jesus is the head of the body, the church. You

are its members and part of his body. The church is not a building, it is each one of you and God's Holy Spirit dwells within you.

Jesus is the rock and cornerstone. He is the face of God humanity has seen. Keep to that truth. Walk in his way and that way his church on earth will grow and be strengthened. Remember what Jesus has done for you, you are forgiven and free, you have been washed clean in the waters of baptism. Be true to the teaching I have given you, be true to your Lord and God.

What was true for the church then is true of us. We may not have people trying to mislead us with heretical views or philosophies but there are many distracting temptations which weaken us. That takes us right back to our gospel reading and our Lord's Prayer. 'Lead us not to temptation, deliver us from evil.' We like the Colossians so long ago, must hold true to Jesus and live in his way.

'Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek and ye shall find; knock and the door shall be opened unto you. Alleluia.' Karen Lafferty.

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