

“If you, being 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?”

We are challenged by today’s readings to think about how we pray, why we pray and what we expect and receive from our prayer. Should it be the persistent, demanding prayer of Abraham and the friend at midnight, or should we pray above all for God’s will to be done?

Like Luke’s first readers, we can get confused and disillusioned about prayer, particularly when it seems to go unanswered. We need guidance, just as they did. And the clearest guidance comes in the Lord’s Prayer. So let’s take a fresh look at that prayer – probably the only prayer that almost all Christians know by heart.

You might have noticed that Luke, in contrast to Matthew, omits “in Heaven” from the first line, and that might be all to the good for us nowadays. Because ever since Bishop John Robinson in his book “Honest to God” exploded the traditional idea of a three-decker universe – Heaven, Earth, and Hell – thoughtful Christians have not quite known what to do with the concept “Heaven”. Obviously it is illogical, even childishly primitive, to think of God as “above the bright blue sky” or “beyond the stars” in the 21st century; so what image comes to mind when we pray: “Our Father, who art in Heaven”?

And in what sense do we now think of God as our Father?

I remember the great Gabriel Daly, our lecturer in systematic theology in TCD back in the 1980s, remarking that despite the refreshing common sense thinking of recent theologians, it was simply not an option to pray to God, as “Dear Ground of our Being”. Advances in human knowledge don’t remove our need for metaphor, so our language when addressing God remains in the style of “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind”. Symbol, not science, is a necessary element in our attempt to relate to the Divine.

So we continue to pray the Lord's Prayer as Jesus taught us, as related in slightly different versions in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, though perhaps with a slightly more sophisticated understanding of our words. Well, that goes for the first phrase anyway, and for "Hallowed be thy Name" - the desire that God's name, God's Being, be universally honoured above all.

Looking to the next line, "Your kingdom come" is also clear enough, praying for a world in which justice and peace will prevail for all people, even though our actions continue to fall drastically short of our prayer. Clear enough, also, is the understanding that to receive forgiveness we need first to learn to forgive. For to receive we need open hands, not clenched fists.

But then, thanks to Pope Francis, we come up against a puzzle that is still unresolved.

"Lead us not into temptation", we have been praying down the centuries, only vaguely wondering, if we think about it at all, why a good and loving God might consider doing that. But now Pope Francis has approved a change of this phrase to "Do not let us fall into temptation", helpfully making God our protector, rather than the one who tests our faithfulness. So far, only the Italian, French and Spanish liturgies have made the change; but thanks to the huge newspaper headlines, revision is now high on the agenda for churches everywhere, whatever their language and their denomination.

Changing the wording of the prayer that is at the core of Christian identity is not to be taken lightly. Yet the Pope is deeply convinced of its importance, because, as he explains, "Leading us into temptation" is logically not something a loving God who wants all that is good for us *would* or *should* do - and Christians should not be encouraged to think of Him as other than loving.

The trouble is that if we check the original Greek, we find that the "do not lead us", or "carry us", is clear. And while the word "temptation" can also mean "testing" and has been translated "time of trial" in today's Bible translation and in

some newer prayer-books, we might feel that “Do not put us to the test” doesn’t quite suggest belief in a loving God either. So the dilemma remains.

Perhaps Pope Francis and his advisors have been influenced by the thinking of a mid-20th century scholar who contended that the Gospels were originally written in the Aramaic language of Jesus’ day, and that, given the underlying Aramaic idiom, the right translation of the problem phrase would be “Let us not yield to temptation”. Maybe. I’d love to be convinced.

In the meantime, whether we say “lead us not into temptation” or “do not let us fall into temptation”, or “do not bring us to the time of trial”, the prayer will continue to remind us to try to stay in the centre of God’s will for us at all times . St Paul’s advice to the Thessalonians - to “pray without ceasing” – comes to mind.

So much for now for the Lord’s Prayer itself, and the ideas of God it suggests. But what about the emphatic message that we should persevere with determination in our prayers of petition? In Abraham’s case, at least, this implacable perseverance is presented as a successful attempt to twist God’s arm. For Jesus, as reported by Luke in today’s Gospel, the message of the “friend at midnight” story seems to be that if we just bang on and on God will give us what we want. We may be meant to note, though, that the friend wants the bread not for himself but for an unexpected visitor – so it’s not really a selfish demand! The next pictures, of doors being opened to those who knock, of human fathers knowing what is good for their children, give God more scope for refusing our more childish demands! God will give us what we need, not something that will damage us, but his good gifts may not be always what we crave. He will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him; the Holy Spirit through whom we experience the Father’s love.

It’s deeply regrettable that too often Christians have failed to notice that the promise here is not of an unconditional “Yes” from God to our prayers, but a promise of the Holy Spirit. It has sometimes been understood, and taught, that if

we ask God persistently for what we want we will get it. We have seen this misunderstanding cause young Christians to fall away from faith. They feel God has let them down because, despite their determined prayers, even the prayers of the whole church, their father or their sister died, they failed their exams, or didn't get the job they wanted.

Yet it's a fact that encouragement to prayer in the Bible, taken at face value, **can** lead to false expectations and the disillusionment that follows. Perhaps the most striking example comes in St John's Gospel, where Jesus says to the disciples: "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it". (Jn.14.14) It sounds all too like a *carte blanche* offer that from beyond the grave he will arrange anything they want! The catch, of course, lies in the phrase "in my name", which in Hebrew thinking means "sharing in my identity" – the identity and understanding of the Son of God.

So persistence in prayer, looked at more closely, is designed not to bend God to do our will; it is to open our hearts and minds and incline our actions to do **God's** will. We can pray this wholeheartedly because God's will by definition leads to what is best in the final analysis, both for those who pray and for those around them. Even when evil seems to prevail, we trust that God will bring good out of that evil, if we open our hearts and minds to the Spirit – for "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8 28.)

All the same, we will all continue to struggle with the problem of unanswered prayer. Some one we love is dying: do we beg for a miracle or ask for a peaceful death as we commit our loved one to God's mercy? Maybe we do both in turn! A child is being led astray: do we ask for God's guidance as to the child's deepest needs, and what is required of us? Do we blame God if we get it wrong? There are constant dilemmas in our prayer life and how it relates to our needs and the needs of those around us. We have to lift all these up to God in prayer,

and God will work through our prayer and refine our prayer even as we pray.
And prompt our action too – often not as we expect.

Ultimately, we have to join in the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Not my will but yours be done.” May it be done in and through me, whatever the cost. God’s perfect will must exceed all that we conceive or imagine, however difficult the way. Whatever our disappointments, let us thank and praise God for that. His promises exceed all that we can desire, as today’s collect reminds us. May his Kingdom come. In Jesus name. Amen.