

**24 July 2016**

I was in a toyshop the other day and I heard an exchange between a mother and her son. I nearly laughed out loud when I heard it. The boy was asking his mother to buy him something. She answered with a 'no' and then said, 'you don't get something bought for you every time we come into town.' The boy, not a little annoyed, 'then why do we come into town!?' The mother, momentarily stunned, quickly recovered and answered back, 'sometimes we just come into town, that's all.'

Children can be refreshingly direct with their demands can't they? I mean, what other purpose could there be for coming into town *other* than getting something from the toyshop. Reasonable or unreasonable, children ask for what they want and often keep on asking until they wear down their parents, grandparents, or whoever the responsible adult might be.

The theme of asking is prominent in this week's gospel reading. We have in this passage three sections: the Lord's prayer, a parable about a sleepy householder and a hungry visitor, and finally a teaching about the goodness of God in responding to prayer. If we take each of these three sections in turn, we find we find first a pattern for prayer, second, the attitude we should have towards prayer, and finally insight into the scope of our prayer.

The version of the Lord's prayer recorded in Luke is shorter than that of Matthew, which is probably more well-known to us and indeed is a regular part of our worship. I'll leave aside the scholarly debate about which exact phrasing is more authentic and who is dependent on whom. More importantly for us to note this morning is that Jesus' disciples have asked him how to pray and he responds. In the gospels we don't often read about the disciples asking Jesus to teach them something, but here they do and he gives them something that remains a foundational element in Christian spiritual practice to this day. He gives them this prayer. It is simple, but it is a profound summary of his overall teaching in regards to the life of discipleship.

To start there is a declaration of God's holiness. Then 'your kingdom come' expresses longing, intense desire to see the total fulfilment of God's will. There is next acknowledgement of the need for the reconciling power of God's forgiveness and a request for help in the face of trials and temptations that might come our way. We are given a good, basic pattern for our praying.

We could spend the whole day today just meditating on these topics of prayer, but we'll move on to the parable that follows. I imagine this set in a small town, and back in Jesus' day there was no 24-hour Tesco to pop down to late at night if you found yourself with an unexpected guest. The bread for the day was baked at home in the morning, and by the end of the day, it was most likely all gone. But if you had an unexpected guest, what would you do? The conventions of hospitality demanded that you welcome and provide for your guest, who would surely be hungry after a day on the road. Our host in this story identifies his best option: his neighbour. Now this neighbour already has the whole family tucked away in bed in their little one-room house. The last thing he needs is to have to upset the whole house by going to answer a knock at the door. Never mind about hospitality, he can't be bothered! However, the persistent host won't take no for an answer; he will get bread for his guest.

The point of this parable isn't that we must all go around asking for things till we are blue in the face but rather to contrast the nature of the sleepy neighbour and the nature of God. If the sleepy neighbour—who, after all, really should be ready to assist in showing hospitality—if that sleepy neighbour can be prevailed upon to respond to a call for help, then how much more will God, who is good, and perfect, and not worn out and sleepy at the end of the day, hear the prayers offered to him.

Does this give the impression that answers to prayer come as and when we like? That somehow prayer is a button we push and are automatically delivered the response we expect? Like one-click ordering on Amazon? Certainly not. The final section of this morning's passage helps us to gain a deeper understanding of prayer. Asking, searching, knocking, the triple combination used to describe prayer, reinforce the image of persistence that we got from the parable. Then we are given a comparison of our relationship in prayer with God, and that of a human parent and child. Even human parents who are ordinary, flawed people will give their children nourishing food when asked. How much more will God give his children that which nourishes and sustains life. How much more is God ready to give the Holy Spirit.

Wait a minute. That reorients us slightly. That gives us a clue about the focus of our prayer. Our prayer includes our daily needs, we can see that from the prayer for daily bread, for forgiveness and for deliverance from trials, but our prayer is bigger than daily needs too. Or rather, I should put it this way, our daily needs are part of something bigger. Our daily needs and prayers are part of God's kingdom, they are part of his kingdom coming. Therefore to receive the Holy Spirit, that is the gift that ultimately carries us through all our daily needs and our daily prayers. We need natural bread, but we also need spiritual bread. It is the broken body of Christ that paves the way for our reconciliation with God and one another. It is the power of God's Spirit that sustains us through the trials and temptations that we encounter in daily life. Prayer isn't just a vehicle for asking for whatever we feel we'd like best at the moment. Prayer is a channel for our relationship with our heavenly Father, that enables us to be infused and attuned to his kingdom and its purposes and to receive the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In the coming week and months, may we ask and keep on asking for the Holy Spirit as we are shaped and brought into the work of God's kingdom.