

## **Jesus Teaching on Prayer Luke 11:1-13**

**By Heather Cowie**

**July 25, 2010**

**All rights reserved**

Generally, I love to talk about prayer but several weeks ago when I considered preaching on the Lord's Prayer, I thought, No way, that is too hard to preach on – it is a difficult enough prayer to pray without having to talk about it! So I looked for another passage, maybe a miracle or a parable of Jesus. Nothing seemed right so I decided to read the lectionary readings and choose one of the passages from there. The gospel passage for today is Luke 11:1-13 where Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer. When I read it I knew this was what I needed to speak about; I still feel like I am not really qualified but perhaps that is how it needs to be.

Thomas Merton wrote in his book *Contemplative Prayer*, "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all of our life!" (Merton, p. 37)

Today I am speaking as one beginner to others and I pray that as we listen to Jesus' teaching we may all learn a bit more about how to pray, but more importantly about how to love and follow Jesus.

**Luke 11:1-13 says,**

**One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."**

**He said to them, "When you pray, say:**

**" 'Father,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come.**

**Give us each day our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins,**

**for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.**

**And lead us not into temptation. ' "**

**Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much**

**as you need.**

**"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened.**

**"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"**

When I think about 'learning' how to pray it is a bit of a strange thing. It is true that we will never be anything but beginners and yet in another sense we all know how to pray; some way of prayer comes naturally to us even if we lose touch with that way.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray even though they came from a spiritual tradition rich in prayer. They were experienced pray-ers so why did they ask Jesus to teach them more about prayer? I think they must have seen that Jesus' prayers were somehow 'more' than the prayers they typically heard and from the prayers they were used to saying.

**" He said to them, "When you pray, say:**

**" 'Father,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come.**

**Give us each day our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins,**

**for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.**

**And lead us not into temptation. ' "**

This version of the Lord's prayer is a shorter one than we find in Matthew and that we may be more familiar with. The core of Jesus prayer is starkly communicated with no embellishment here.

Many of us have said the Lord's Prayer or the Our Father many times in our life. Perhaps we are from a tradition that says it every Sunday, or every day or even several times a day. A few weeks ago as I was praying the Lord's prayer I was struck by how often I pray it without really paying attention.

The intent of Jesus teaching us this prayer is not that we would memorize the words and say them by rote but that we would understand the essence of it.

Carroll Simcox, writes, "We often hear it said that the Lord's Prayer is one prayer which everybody can offer. This is an amiable statement, but a complete fallacy. The only persons who can *pray* it, as distinguished from merely *saying* it, are extraordinarily devout Christians who deeply fear and love God. It is the most spiritually demanding of all prayer. Jesus did not teach it to everybody and he did not commend it to everybody." (Carroll Simcox, *Living the Lord's Prayer*)

When we take time to reflect on this prayer; to really pray it and not just say it, it should make us pause to consider whether we really want what Jesus is telling us to ask for. Many times in the gospels Jesus talks about the cost of following him and this is a prayer that takes those words seriously.

Anthony de Mello says of this price that we must be willing to pay, "The redemption of the world is achieved on the cross, not in activity, but rather in suffering. Do we want to follow Christ? Then we must enter into the Incarnation in its fullness! We have to identify with the saving act of Christ, which was not his preaching and his miracles, but his cross and resurrection. The moment we live out this doctrine we begin to taste the suffering that it brings and its blessedness at the same time." (de Mello, p. 58)

This morning we will be thinking about what Jesus is really asking us to pray for. He invites us to address God as **Father**. Father is a rather formal word in our time but the sense of the word that Jesus uses communicates that God is a loving parent, close and caring. Although in this version of the prayer Luke excludes the word *Our*, it is still a communal prayer. We do not just pray for 'my needs' we pray for 'our needs'.

At the same time that we are invited to address God in a familiar way we also are to remember that He is other than we are – he is eternal and great. One of the phrases I always stumble over in this prayer is "**Hallowed be your name.**" What in the world does hallowed mean anyway?

When we ask that God's name be hallowed we are asking that his name will be honoured, that He will be known as Holy and set apart; that his name will be revered and respected. If we ask this, it must begin with us. How can we ask for God's name to be hallowed by others if it is not in my own life?

**Your kingdom come** is a simple phrase but again I need to reflect on what am I really asking for when I say these words. What is the kingdom like that we are asking to come? James Mulholland writes in "Praying Like Jesus, "In this upside-down kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first, the exalted will be humbled and the humbled will be exalted, sinners are forgiven and welcomed while the self-righteous are chastised, the poor are blessed and the rich are condemned, the lost are found and the dead are made alive, the lion lays down with the lamb and spears are beaten into pruning hooks. This is the language of the kingdom." (p. 55)

The kingdom is not a political reality as some propose, but a spiritual reality that impacts our world in tangible, concrete ways. When we really want God's Kingdom to come we live it out in our own lives and choices. We ask God to help us to be more generous, more loving, less self-centered, less bent on consuming. If I say the words, "your kingdom come" and never think about how I spend my money or my time, I am not really praying an authentic prayer. Do I really care if justice prospers, or the hungry are fed? Am I willing to be misunderstood, judged for my choices, to experience persecution? Am I willing to embrace the suffering of Jesus and follow him, or do I just want to blithely repeat words that have no meaning or relevance in my day to day life?

Margaret Magdalen in her book, "Jesus, Man of Prayer" writes, "It may seem that the forces of evil are now winning – dragging the whole world with them in a cosmic tug-of-war, but the kingdom has already broken through, the victory already been won. To pray, 'Thy kingdom come' is not the expression of a vague wish, a rather forlorn hope unlikely ever to be fulfilled. It is to affirm the work of Christ; to unite ourselves to it in fervent longing and desire for the consummation of the reign of peace and love and truth which Jesus inaugurated...." (p. 179)

The next phrase is in a sense the easiest to pray, '**Give us our daily bread**' is the one part of this prayer that is a petition for our needs. But again when I take some time to reflect it is important for me to think about the fact that all I am asking for is the essentials.

Give us our daily bread – give us what we need today. This reminds me of God providing the manna in the desert. Every day enough for that day; no more, no less. Perhaps we could learn to be more content with enough, instead of always looking for more if we pray this phrase with our hearts.

**Forgive us as we forgive others.** This is a hard phrase to come to terms with. Have we forgiven others? Can we really forgive those who have hurt us? What if we can't, will we still be forgiven? When I pray this prayer I pray, "Forgive me my sins, and help me to forgive those who have wronged me."

I need to pray that I will be able to open my heart to God, so that I can become more forgiving, so that I can let go of the resentments that I hold onto. I cannot do so without God's help.

**Lead us not into temptation.** What temptations do I need to be protected from? The temptation to independence, to value what is not of God's kingdom, to indulge my selfish desires, to hold onto resentment and bitterness, to think and talk about others in unloving ways, to live in pride and to develop resistance to the Holy Spirit. These are a few of the temptations I need to be protected from. I suspect some of them might be quite common, but we each have our own 'besetting' sins that we need to be honest with God about and seek God's deliverance from.

Jesus continues his teaching on prayer,

**Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.**

After Jesus teaches his disciples this prayer to pray he follows up with a parable about persistence – the one who is knocking on the door has "shameless audacity".

**"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened.**

Jesus tells us that if we persist, if we persevere God will answer our prayers. Is this our experience of prayer – When we ask, do we receive? When we seek, do we find what we are looking for? When we knock, is the door answered?

How do our longings intersect with our prayer? Do we dare to ask God for what we truly yearn for or do we keep our requests on the surface? It is easier to ask God for the material things we want in life than to expose our deepest desires and risk God not responding.

I believe God's desire is not to answer all our prayers by just giving us what we ask for, but to meet us in our need: to encounter us in the longings that we have. For him to have the opportunity to say to us, "Yes, I know you want that, and it is good to want it, it is what I have made you for. Give that longing to me and have hope that it will be filled." Then, we keep asking with 'shameless audacity' for what we know God wants. Perhaps it is the restoration of a relationship, perhaps it is that our children will learn to love God, that the hungry will be fed, that the innocent will be rescued from suffering, that those who are sick will be healed, that wars will cease.

Magdalen says about persistence, "It is not badgering that God honours but perseverance.... A steady pursuit of God that acknowledges our constant state of helplessness and our need for total dependence on him who has the power to change things. We are unlikely to continue day after day asking for those things which do not really matter to us."

"So behind this persevering, assiduous prayer there must lie a sense of urgent need, a quickened compassion, a desperate longing, a righteous anger, a sensitive conscience. There is a compulsion about this prayer. The Holy Spirit has touched our hearts and laid a burden upon them. He asks us to accept the responsibility for carrying that burden to God faithfully, of becoming prayer for others, of continuing in prayer even when we cannot see the point for there are no apparent results."(p. 163)

**"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"**

What is God's attitude to us when we ask? He is a generous parent. If we know how to give good gifts to our children will He not give us what we need? In this passage Jesus makes it clear that what we need is the Holy Spirit, what God promises to give us is Himself.

Prayer requires faith and a small measure of hope. We may not have assurance, we may have doubt and questions, but we must have hope

and just a little bit of faith, even if it is as small as a mustard seed. I love the cry of the person who says to Jesus in Mark 9:24, **"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"**

It seems to me there is always and should always be a tension in our life of faith between confidence that can become arrogance and humility that can become unbelief if they are taken too far. Jesus says to us, "Ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened" but we do need to be thoughtful about what we ask, what we seek, where we knock. The prayer that Jesus taught us we can pray with total confidence because he is the one that tells us to have shameless audacity.

It matters what we ask for – not that we have to get the words just right or that our attitudes have to be perfect but we can only have complete confidence that our prayers will be answered when we ask for what will truly bring God's kingdom. When we ask for the Holy Spirit, when we ask for bread for our friend. Even then, there may be unexplained delay – we must have shameless audacity to keep asking and keep asking and keep asking for what we know God wants.

Hebrews 11:1 says, **"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."** Faith means that even when we do not see the fullness of it yet, we continue to believe that God is at work.

Prayer is a strange and mysterious thing – we don't know how it 'works'. There are many that say prayer is about God being able to change us rather than about God answering our prayers. I think this is true to some extent but it is more than that, it is about God asking us to participate in how he does change the world. It is not primarily about us, it is about God's Spirit being free to work in the world, in and through us. As Magdalen puts it, "By becoming prayer for others" somehow our prayers have impact beyond ourselves.

Faith is a gift that we need to exercise in order for it to grow. "I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief."

Jesus, help us to pray as you taught us to pray.

**"Father,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come.  
Give us each day our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,**

**for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.  
And lead us not into temptation.  
Amen."**