

## **Year C Proper 12**

### **Luke 11:1-13**

Attendance at the weekly prayer meeting on Wednesday evenings was expected of all keen Christians. That was the way it was in one church I attended a good number of years ago. There were plenty of other things that were more attractive than the prayer meeting but other enjoyments tended to be spoiled a bit by the knowledge that one really should be with the faithful in the church hall on a Wednesday evening. Now despite my best intentions, I never was a regular at the

prayer meeting and one of the things that really put me off was the behaviour of two regular attenders. The minister would finish his wee talk and then he would call the meeting to prayer and immediately one of them started and he would pray and pray and pray and the hands of the clock would shift a quarter of an hour and upon his 'amen' the other would jump in, and off he would go in intense competition until he had outlasted the previous competitor. Of course, after his 'amen' silence reigned as no-one else had any energy left to contribute. Prayer sparring is not attractive and

thankfully I have never encountered it anywhere else. Also it wasn't just the length of the prayers in competition that made the heart sink it was the content as well. There was a tendency for one to try to outdo the other in a kind of grovelling which was very odd. The glories of God were expounded and the depravity of the human condition was highlighted and lamented but neither protagonist got much further than that. All in all attendance was a terribly depressing affair. Sometimes in churches the old timers will mourn the passing of the weekly prayer meeting but if the meetings were anything

like my experience, then their demise should be heralded. For we have in the passage in Luke's Gospel a very different model of praying offered to us as an example to follow.

You'll notice that the Lord's Prayer as recorded in Luke's Gospel is a little different from the version in Matthew's Gospel which we are used to reciting each time we gather for worship. The differences need not bother us however, as the gospel writers have no doubt shaped the prayer through a memory of Jesus' words to reflect their own particular theology and emphasis. This is one of the

delights of having four Gospels: four different perspectives on the life of Christ that reflect the needs and experiences of four different communities and we are the beneficiaries of that diversity.

So what does Luke's text teach us? What specific emphasis does he wish to bring out? Well, in common with Matthew's version, God is addressed as 'Father'. Despite the fact that God's name is hallowed and therefore quiet distinct from all others in terms of honour, and despite the fact that concern for the coming of God's kingdom has

precedence before all else; despite these facts, God is addressed in a familiar, intimate way, as Father. The foundation for prayer is not the otherness of God, remote from our situation and condition, but the relationship that the Christian has with God who is our Father. Note that here in Luke there is no mention of the Father in heaven. The otherness of God is trumped by the familiar relationship. It's this relationship that sets the tone for all that follows in the prayer. If the relationship was not like that; Father to child, then the prayer could proceed no further. It is sometimes

suggested that the use of the word 'Father' in relation to God is not helpful because for some people their relationship with their own father has not been a good one. And I think it is right we are sensitive to that and we also recognise that Luke is sensitive to it as well. In verse 13 he contrasts the often poor motives of human fathers with the exuberant love of the heavenly Father: in God there is a quality of fatherhood which far outstrips all other examples.

As the prayer progresses we are presented with another remarkable fact. Unlike the

long-winded, timorous prayers I mentioned earlier at the unfortunate prayer meetings, here we find a quite remarkable forwardness. ‘Give us’, ‘forgive us’, ‘do not bring us’. These are the list of imperatives, of requests, offered to God. There is no ‘please’ attached to any of them. There is no standing on ceremony, instead there is an open, honest declaration of need and its satisfaction in the love of God. What did Jesus say? “Ask, and it shall be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you”.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore it’s maybe not enough

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 11:9 NRSV



just to ask once. Jesus told the rather curious story of the man who visits his friend in the middle of the night to ask for bread and receives a short answer: go away! What time of the night is this to be bothering me? But no, he won't give up, he keeps asking and because of his persistence he gets what he needs. There was an obligation in the culture of the day to show hospitality. It would be shameful for a friend to retreat back to his bed when he knew his friend was in need and he could help. Of course, he will get up and answer the call for help. The honour of the sleeping friend required him to

respond. We are praying to a God whose name is hallowed. There is honour in his name and so he is going to answer the prayers of his needy friends, his dear children. There is no question about it.

We must note that Jesus' model prayer is about needs, not simply desires. It is about daily food; the necessities of daily living. It is about the forgiveness of sins, that we wouldn't be crushed by our own guilt and that we wouldn't be holding anyone else under our control by denying them forgiveness. It's about sparing us from the

time of trial. These are all explicit needs that every human being requires to be met. Now it may be that what we desire is what we need, but it isn't always the case. We can easily become obsessed with trivialities that can dominate our thinking and attention. It's not a big leap to ask for God's approval of these things as we bring him in on our plots and schemes. But none of that is consistent with the coming of his kingdom and that's where we fall down. Our true needs are kingdom concerns and as we learn to pray for them, so we learn to pray in God's will. C.S. Lewis sums this up very well in his

book, *Mere Christianity*: “It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind.”<sup>2</sup>

Boldness, persistence, shamelessness before our Father who desires to answer our

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, C.S. 1960 *Mere Christianity* Macmillan p168

prayers. I hope this morning that you feel better about your prayers and if you don't pray, or don't pray frequently, that you might be encouraged to change your practice. It's good to check back to the example that Jesus offered and to ignore in the first instance all the praying practice that we have encountered that might hinder us. We must never say, after listening to someone else's prayers, 'Well, I could never pray like that', but instead we must ask ourselves, 'could I ever pray like Jesus wants me to'? I hope the answer to that is 'yes' after all we have looked at together today.