



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 20th July 2025

Reading: *Luke 11:1-13*

Trinity VI

I Preamble

To me, it is beyond remarkable that on this last Sunday of my stipendiary ministry the lectionary should offer us the Lord's Prayer to ponder. How gracious of God to require me to reflect upon something so well-known rather than to let myself down by trying to be clever with some innovative valedictory message.

I've been wondering how many times I'll have said The Lord's Prayer in public. Last week I recalled I've been ordained for the better part of 15000 days, and that no two of them had been quite the same. This week, I realise that means, 2134 Sundays, which, minus 246 weeks holidays comes to 1888 morning services, to which we should add evening services, weddings, funerals, meetings, midweek worship, pastoral visits. I imagine I'll have led people in the Lord's Prayer some three thousand times. Little wonder that it has been described as the '... most familiar piece of Christian literature ...'.¹

II Why pray?

But why do we pray at all? As one of the progenitors of what Reformed Christians hold to, John Calvin suggests that prayer is 'the chief exercise of faith'.² We pray because we believe. Calvin goes on to suggest that 'we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel and which our faith has gazed upon.' So we pray *in order* to believe. Like John Bunyan's Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, we're all on a journey, *with* God, *towards* God, *into* God. For Christian it was a tricky trek to the Celestial City via the Slough of Despond.³ And for us, our journeying with God -whether it is personal or together as the Church - can seem tricky, too, not least at such a time of transition for both people and pastor. Praying, as the chief exercise of faith, therefore seems so right.

And do we not pray to God because the Gospel inspires us to believe that God cares enough to make it worth our while praying to God? Writing in the midst of the First World War, Harry Emerson Fosdick⁴ suggests that: 'for prayer, at least, a God who does not care, does not count'. He goes on to speak of Ernst Haeckel,⁵ the German zoologist and evolutionist, who was antagonistic towards Christian faith. Fosdick suggests Haeckel 'has displaced [God the] Creator by a primal substance which he solemnly crowns 'Emperor of the universe' under the title, "Mobile Cosmic Ether".' Fosdick wonders, 'Can we imagine anyone finding vital and sustaining help in supplications addressed to such an object, or are ... congregations likely to be stirred in adoration, praying "O Mobile Cosmic Ether, hallowed be thy name"?'⁶ Just as we love because God first loved us,⁷ so we pray, because we trust God cares.

III How to pray

Of course, there are as many ways to pray as there are people praying. My way is no better than yours, but personally, and not least when I am in a public praying mode, I try to hold together prayers bequeathed to us from the Church's past, prayers that I write for a specific occasion, extemporary prayer that I have carefully thought about but not written down, so that the Spirit can guide and shape

¹ Patton, John 1985 *Is human forgiveness possible?: a pastoral care perspective* Nashville: Abingdon Press pages 155

² Calvin, John (1509-64) *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) 3.20 (heading) Philadelphia: The Westminster Press page 850

³ Bunyan, John 1678 *The Pilgrim's Progress* Part 1

⁴ Harry Emerson Fosdick, 1878-1969; one time minister of Riverside Church New York

⁵ Ernst Heinrich Philipp August Haeckel 1834-1919 - German zoologist and evolutionist

⁶ Fosdick, Harry Emerson 1915 *The Meaning of Prayer* London: Student Christian Movement page 41

⁷ 1 John 4.19

it in the moment; and, prayer that is entirely spontaneous, as the Spirit enables our worship to dance however she will.

And if we are asking how to pray, supremely there is the Lord's Prayer, as we have received it in today's reading from Luke Gospel, and in its longer form in Matthew's. Tradition has expanded it yet more than Matthew did, and, by as early as the second century, the Didache had added the doxological conclusion with which we are so familiar: 'for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever and ever.'⁸

I know from my personal prayers and from leading others' worship that the Lord's Prayer is unequalled: unequalled when there is no other prayer that will come; unequalled when any other prayer feels as if it would manipulatively tell God what God would be well advised to think if only God was canny enough to listen to us; unequalled when we want to be praying in unison with the Church of every age and place, murmuring not just 'Our Father', but Notre Père, Baba wethu, Padre nostro, Aboon, Ar n-Athair;⁹ unequalled when we want to be immersed in the spirituality that has shaped us from the cradle, and will accompany us into the grave.

At all these times, the Lord's Prayer suffices. Again, John Calvin, suggests why it is all sufficient:

'For [in the Lord's Prayer, Christ] prescribed a form for us in which he set forth as in a table all that he allows us to seek of him, all that is of benefit to us, all that we need ask.'¹⁰

IV 6 Ps

Its shape is careful. Some have summed up The Lord's Prayer as six Ps: Praise, Proclamation, Petition, Pardon, Protection, and Persistence. In a very real sense those Ps illustrate why Calvin implies that this prayer enables us to express all that needs saying.

PRAISE

There's that opening expression of adoration and worship, 'Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name'. At once it takes us to the holy place of wonder and yet also to the warmth of speaking to our Daddy, for here is the first time we are invited to refer to God as Abba, Father - even more intimate than the Hebrew Scriptures' 'shepherd'.¹¹ At once, this divine one is as distant as the farthest star and as near to us as breathing.

PROCLAMATION

Then, in the Lord's Prayer, we proclaim, 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. This is what God in Jesus is all about. Reconciling and renewing all things, as they are turned back up the right way, restored to being a community with God and with each other that lives according to God's reign and rules. In this clause, 'thy kingdom come', we also have the vehicle for pouring out our yearning for healing of the nations: 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. This is no throwaway line. In prayer, God is not so much needing us to speak of what is wrong with the world - God is all too well aware of that - as to express our passionate commitment to being part of putting it right. So, for example, in praying 'thy will be done', we are articulating our longing for justice and peace, for freedom and food in Gaza, or safety for asylum seekers in Epping.

PETITION

As we pray 'give us this day our daily bread', we have opportunity to seek neither more nor less than we need. And in a world of such plenty marred by such poverty, grasping that distinction 'twixt 'enough' and 'too much' is so vital. As Daniel Migliore, a wise Princeton theologian who celebrated his ninetieth birthday this week, has it:

⁸ See chapter 8 of the 1st or 2nd century Didache - *The Lord's teaching through the twelve apostles to the nations*.

⁹ 'Our Father', in French, Zulu, Italian, Aramaic, and Scots Gaelic

¹⁰ Calvin, 3.20.48

¹¹ Inter alia Psalm 23.1; Ezekiel 34; Isaiah 40.11

‘Maturing in prayer means being ready to learn, in the presence of the God of costly grace, the difference between what we want and what we need.’¹²

‘Give us ... bread.’

PARDON

The Lord’s Prayer also inspires us to penitence. We pray, ‘forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us, or do you prefer ‘forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors’? Now, in truth, we might hear that as being conditional: forgive us *as and when* we forgive others; a sort of spiritual *quid pro quo*. I will admit that I don’t find that very helpful. Is God’s forgiveness of me really dependent upon my forgiveness of you? Might it rather be possible that this bit of the Lord’s Prayer is actually a simple statement of fact: God is forgiving, just as are we capable of being, and because God is forgiving we can confess with confidence that the grace of God, epitomised in Jesus, and so often found in you, will find us ‘ransomed, healed, restored and forgiven’?¹³ As John Patton suggests, this part of the Lord’s Prayer is not about what *ought to be*; it is about what *is*.¹⁴ St Paul puts it so well in the Colossians, ‘forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you.’¹⁵

PROTECTION

We come to this pleading line: ‘lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.’ In a world so capable of stirring our desires, our lusts, our greed, not to mention our vengefulness, this is an essential for our praying. By asking to be led not into temptation, we open ourselves to the strength and capacity to choose the better way, the way which comes from God as we make ourselves pliable to the Holy Spirit. Joshua models it for us. ‘As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord’.¹⁶

PERSISTENCE

And finally, persistence, there is that doxology which the Didache added - for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory. - added by the early church, perhaps to remind us of our dependence upon and trust in the One whose reign, power and glory are revealed by the cross where we’re shown true love, and by that empty tomb which shows that love’s resilience and reliability are for ever and ever.

IV Conclusion

As we go our separate ways, you into being the next chapter of Downing Place Church, and me into whatever pilgrim’s progress is granted to me, what other prayer need we?

Living by faith, may we be blessed by this prayer undergirding all that we give, and all that we are given. As Bunyan has Christian say on the tricky path to the celestial city,

“To go *back* is nothing but death; to go *forward* is fear of death, and life everlasting beyond it.’

Christian says as do I,

‘I will yet go forward.’¹⁷

Let’s do so together, Amen.

N. P. Uden

27th July 2025

¹² Migliore, Daniel L. 1991 *Faith Seeking Understanding: an introduction to Christian Theology* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company page 179

¹³ Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847) from the hymn, *Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven*, RS 104.1.3

¹⁴ Patton, John 1985 *Is human forgiveness possible?: a pastoral care perspective* Nashville: Abingdon Press pages 155

¹⁵ Colossians 3.13

¹⁶ Joshua 24.15

¹⁷ Bunyan, John 1678 *The Pilgrim’s Progress* – Christian, in Stage 3