



Sermon preached by Revd Dr David Cornick on 24th July 2022

Readings: Gen 18:20-32; Col 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13

George Herbert came up to Trinity in 1609, and stayed for 15 years. In some senses, although born in Wales in an upper class if not quite aristocratic, but very artistic family, he was a Cambridge poet. He was an ambitious young man, filling the role of Public Orator in the university and serving in Parliament in the 1620s during the reign of James I. The gilded prizes seemed his for the taking, but disillusionment and anxiety set in, and he eventually sought ordination in the Church of England, becoming at the age of 36 Vicar of the two Wiltshire villages of Fugglestone and Bemerton, just outside Salisbury. Three years later he died of consumption. Just before he died, he sent a MS of his poems to his friend Nicholas Ferrar, telling him to publish them if he thought they might ‘...turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul.’ Mercifully Ferrar immediately realised their value, for they make up one of the most perceptive and beautiful accounts of the human relationship with God ever penned.

In one of his poems¹ Herbert sets out to explore the nature of prayer. He uses the form of the sonnet – 14 lines – and what is remarkable is that it is one sentence which contains no main verb. As he seeks to understand what prayer is, he unleashes a dazzling cascade of images and pictures. It is ‘...the Churches banquet’, and in the seventeenth century a banquet was, according to the OED, ‘...a slight repast between meals, a course of sweetmeats, fruit and wine’, so it is grounded in the sacrificial reality of the passion and our remembrance of it in Holy Communion. But if it is grounded in history and the weekly liturgical round it soars beyond such temporal limitations, for it also the ‘angels age’. Prayer is ‘...God’s breath in man returning to its birth’. It is worth staying with that picture a while. In the Biblical languages – Hebrew and Greek – one word means both ‘breath’ and ‘spirit’, so we call to mind God breathing life into humanity in one of the Genesis creation stories, a moment of extraordinary almost maternal tenderness, and here we see that circle completed. We remember too that John tells us that after Jesus had been raised he breathed on his disciples and they received the Holy Spirit. Prayer is the language of the tenth leper, the one who in Jesus’ story, returned to give thanks whilst the other nine went about their business. It is completing creation’s circle.

The disciples wanted to learn to pray as Jesus prayed. So often they had seen him absorbed in devotion, and they wanted to share in that absorption. ‘When you pray’, Jesus taught them, say, ‘Father, hallowed be your name...’ The first word, ‘abba’, takes us back into that circle of tenderness which Herbert relished, for it is the Aramaic word for ‘Daddy’. For those who find masculine language about God distracting, concentrate on the intimacy. As a dotting grandparent I’ve had many moments in the past year to watch the growth of intimacy between Mum, Dad and baby – gentleness, play, humour, fun, the gestures copied, the sounds forming as the being of the child is slowly, beautifully, naturally shaped, becoming a person. Hold that because that is the world that Jesus is teaching us to enter as he utters that little Aramaic word. We sometimes think that prayer is either a shopping list or pressure group. It isn’t. At its heart its relationship, living open to God, letting Godness shape who we are, just as parents help shape their children.

‘When you pray, say ‘Father, hallowed be your name’. That language is strange to us. ‘Hallow’ isn’t a verb we use much. We might speak of cathedral walls being ‘hallowed’ by age, but it would be a rare usage. Reverence the name of God, hold it as of greatest respect. God’s name and nature is love, and wherever we encounter love in the universe, we see the signature of God. The Anglican spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill mused on the ability of the saints to read the name of God – ‘...Francis read them on the face of the Crucified, in the marred features of the leper, and written in the air by the moving of the free birds.

These hear the utterance of the Name in the voices of creation, gruff and gentle, the mating call of the lions and the call of the plover to her straying children; for the saints are realists, centred on God, and understand life at every level in terms of worship.' (Abba p 19). Hallowing God's name is about sharing in God's purpose and plan – theologically this is huge stuff, written on the grandest of scales. That purpose has been revealed in Jesus' death and resurrection. It is none other than the reconciliation of all things to God in the redeeming work of Christ. That is why Paul warns the Colossians not to be deflected from the fact that they have come to '...fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority' by the allure of philosophy, tradition and what he calls '...the elemental spirits of the universe...' for which read astrology and spiritual and philosophical faddishness.

Being a prayerful person is about consciously living in God's plan and purpose, and as we live and pray we enter more and more fully into that reality. For the few amongst us who are mystics there will be soaring mountain tops, but for most of us this is an activity of rejoicing in life, in the gift of consciousness, and the sheer astonishment that there is something rather than nothing. That thanksgiving is the fuel of prayer, and its as ordinary as counting your blessings.

As we have hallowed God's name, we have glimpsed something of the wonder, the glory, the infinite and ultimately unknowable beauty of God which is holiness. The rest of the prayer is a way of asking that the hallowing of God's name might rub off on us, that we might grow and change and mature into the life of discipleship. 'Your kingdom come', Jesus instructs us to continue. When we turn from the beauty of God, our eyes fall on the world – war, hunger, deprivation, a scorching earth, grievous inequality, crippled lives – the whole creation groaning as Paul wrote. And so we pray, 'Your kingdom come'. It is not that we believe that the kingdom has not come – we know that it has in Christ, that God's governance of love is readily available as faith unfolds like a flower. We are, after all, Easter people.

Loving parents do not force their children, even if sometimes that means standing by in pain whilst they make mistakes. God is not in the business of coercion but of invitation. He invites us to live the kingdom, and we pray that it may come, in the world, and in us. God rarely does fireworks. The quiet sacrifice, the unnoticed act of love, the secret prayers, are more often the doors that let the kingdom in. There is always a danger in church life of confusing the kingdom with worthy programmes of social and political action. The kingdom is not that, although God's governance undoubtedly overlaps it. The kingdom is given from beyond – it is the transformation brought by the risen Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, the transformation of the natural with the wonder of the holy as death became life at Easter. Evelyn Underhill again – '...the kingdom is the Holy and not the moral; the Beautiful not the correct; the Perfect not the adequate; Charity not law.' (Abba p 30)

So we pray not just for programmes of peace and justice, important though they are, when we pray 'Your kingdom come'. We pray too for the total transformation of the world's experience with the wonder and majesty and limitlessness of God's love which we glimpse in all that is true, just, pure, commendable and excellent (Phil 4:8)

Hallowing God's name, living consciously to let the kingdom come, means both trusting God for our daily bread, and also letting his energy of love work itself out in our living. We are forgiven, set free from the bondage of sin by the love of God in Christ. So we must be forgiving people, sharing that liberation.

Praying, Jesus was teaching his disciples, is a relationship. Its not a shopping list of demands and needs, nor an attempt to remind God what he might have read in *The Times* or *The Guardian* earlier in the day. A relationship is two-way. In a relationship both parties are changed. That is why, to return to Herbert's sonnet, prayer can be siege engine against th'Almightie – think of Abraham pleading for Sodom. There are times when we want to unleash a barrage of anger and pain at God, and there are times when our pain is so great that it becomes a spear that pierces Christ's side just the centurion's did at the crucifixion. We are, after all, human, and our humanity changed God in Christ Jesus.

Yet it is prayer that makes us who we truly are, children of a God who loves each of us for who and what we are, and who loved the world enough to die for it. As we pray – hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, - we are caught up into that reality –

‘heaven in ordinarie’

‘Church-bells beyond the starres heard, the soul’s blood,
The land of spices; something understood.’

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ **George Herbert: Prayer**

Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.