

The best-known prayer of God's family.

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Seventh Sunday after Pentecost 2022 Hosea 1:2-10, Psalm 85, Colossians 2:6 – 15, Luke 11:1 – 13

“The Lord said, ‘Go, take yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord’ ” (Hosea 1:2)

No, I am not going to get into the arguments concerning the legalization of Prostitution, and I don't think that the prophet Hosea had anything to say about it either. He was using that irregular expression of sexual urges as a picture of the way the people of Israel were practising religion in an irregular way. He went on to use the names of the children that he and his wife had as clear messages about the fate that was to befall Israel at the hands of the Assyrians – a fate that Hosea was quite clear was God's punishment for Israel's disloyalty. The children are named “Jezreel,” the valley where Israel's defeat will happen, “Not Pitied” (Lo-ruhamah), because the Lord will no longer pity his people, and finally “Not my People” (Lo-ammi), because the Lord has rejected them as his own.

These family relationships were to be seen as a picture of God's relationship with his people. In the final paragraph of the section we had read this morning, God promises to restore the fortunes of his people. Even there it is in terms of family relationships that this restoration is pictured: they will be “Children of the living God”.

It is no surprise, then, when Jesus is asked to teach his disciples to pray, that he begins with a familiar relationship, “Father”. For some people today this presents

difficulties, but it is important to recognize that the term is a *picture* of the disciples' relationship with God, not a theological statement of God's very nature. It is but one of any number of such pictures of God, and it is useful as it pictures our relationship with God in family terms.

I'd like us to spend a little time this morning with this best-known prayer of God's family.

There are two versions of the prayer in the Gospels, both of them rather shorter than the version that we use day by day. The version in Luke that was part of this morning's gospel is the shorter of the two. It addresses God: "Father". It goes on to express something of right relationship with God: "may your holy nature be recognized" – "hallowed be your name". It prays that God's purposes might be fulfilled, as God's rule is expressed in the life of the world – "your kingdom come". It prays that our daily needs might be met– not of course our accumulation of wealth, but what we need each day – "give us each day our daily bread". It asks that our fractured relationships with those around us might be restored – "forgive us our sins". It asks that we might be spared from "the time of Trial", usually thought of as an end-time, eschatological event rather than earthly trials and tribulations.

So, on which of these clauses do you focus as you pray the prayer?

Clearly Matthew and Luke had different ideas as to the heart of the prayer. Matthew places the prayer in the context of forgiveness. The prayer is introduced there with talk about not heaping up of empty phrases, expecting our prayer to be better heard because of the many words. Jesus assures his hearers that "your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Matthew adds to Luke's shorter version the request "your will be done on earth as in heaven", and at the end "rescue us from the evil one", but moves immediately from the

text of the prayer to unpack its content: “for if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you”. He clearly wants his readers to see the prayer giving attention to forgiveness.

Today’s Gospel reading makes it clear that Luke thinks that the focus of the pattern prayer is on “Give us each day our daily bread” – he follows the prayer with all that teaching about asking and receiving: “Friend lend me three loaves...” and even though the friend is reluctant, (who likes being disturbed from a warm bed these nights for *any* reason?) finally he gives what is requested. Then he gives the assurance that we *will be given* what we ask for, what we seek, where we need to enter – and that the gift will be what we really need, not some poor substitute. Did you like the way today’s Prayer of the day expressed it: “we ask, we seek, we knock at your door: help us so to seek that we may truly find, so to ask that we may joyfully receive, and so to knock that the door of mercy may be opened for us.”

So, we are to ask for the meeting of our daily needs – but somehow we have become conditioned to say “I shouldn’t ask for anything for myself”, but clearly this teaching of Jesus encourages us to ask. I sometimes wonder whether we forget this when it comes to praying for healing: somehow we think it is better to ask for healing for other people than to admit our own need for greater wholeness. “Ask, and you will receive”, Jesus assures us – even if we ask for ourselves!

Certainly, our prayer for forgiveness, and for the healing of human relationships is important also. And the prayer suggests that those who are unwilling or unable to forgive others may find it difficult to accept forgiveness for themselves. (It is interesting to compare the two gospel writers here, as well: Luke: “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” – does he have a rather rosy view of our willingness to forgive those who owe us something? Matthew: “forgive us our debts, as we have

forgiven our debtors”, rather giving the impression that our receiving of forgiveness will happen in the same way as we have offered it to others).

But our prayers for ourselves, whether in terms of daily needs, forgiveness, or in eternity, are always made in the context of God’s nature, God’s relationship with us, and the structure of the Prayer Book collects makes that clear. These beautifully-crafted prayers begin with an address to God, and then a remembering of some of God’s character. For example, the Prayer of the week for this week begins “O God, the protector of all that trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy” – and it prays all this before it goes on to pray “increase and multiply upon us your mercy”. Is this something that we need to remember as we come to God in prayer, or as we lead the prayers of the congregation? Certainly we are to place our requests, our needs, our concerns clearly before our loving Father, Mother. King, Lord, Provider,..., but it is good for us to recall something of the richness of God’s nature as we do so. “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come” comes always before “Give us” or “forgive us” or “save us”.

Thanks be to God for this wonderful prayer: may we use it not simply as a summary but also as a pattern of our prayer day by day, and Sunday by Sunday.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever.