

## Getting with God's Program

Isaiah 63: 7-16 & Matthew 6: 7-15

*Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 24<sup>th</sup> July 2005*

We say these words every week in worship at the end of the Prayer of Thanksgiving, Petition and Intercession. Many here remember learning these words as a child. You probably didn't know what they meant, but you knew they were important, worth memorizing (nothing unimportant is ever worth remembering). Others here learned these words later in life, after becoming a Christ-follower as adults. Some grew up saying 'trespasses,' others 'debtors,' others still, 'sins.' This prayer is like an old friend, a companion who has been with you through thick and thin. Even for people who are nominally Christian, who rarely attend worship, who are not part of a faith community, these words still speak volumes. At weddings, at funerals you'll hear these words, offering comfort and assurance. I'm always fascinated with the way our brains work, how memory functions. I can recall countless times in nursing homes, visiting people suffering with dementia or Alzheimer's, beginning to pray the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm or the Lord's Prayer and they come alive, the words trigger a memory embedded deep within the self, a sign, perhaps, that despite the ravages of ageing or disease there is still a self there that remembers. I've been watching the television series "Into the West." There was a scene in last night's episode set at the Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890. As the battle, the slaughter is raging director Steven Spielberg has children in a nearby school looking out the window with their teacher reciting the words of the Lord's Prayer. It was effective, moving, but I'm not sure what it means. When times are tough you need to pray and you can't find the words, people will turn to Jesus' prayer and find a sense of hope.

The prayer is so well-known by us and others, so familiar that I can't help but think that it has many layers of meaning. Whether we understand the meaning of the prayer or not, its poetic simplicity and beauty have a power all their own, and that might be enough. There's something about it that is beyond analysis. We don't often hear sermons on prayer texts, like the psalms, for example, or on this prayer. Sermons are designed to help interpret a text, but this prayer needs no interpreting, we think. We all have associations with this prayer, with our own individual meanings and probably don't want anyone playing around with it on us.

I can respect this, but this prayer is too important, to be left to our private meanings or to nostalgia. It is so central to Jesus' ministry that it is imperative for us to know why Matthew places the prayer right at the center of his so-called Sermon on the Mount. This was not only an important prayer for Matthew's community, but *Jesus'* prayer. So much of the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew's compilation of things Jesus said. But in this prayer, in these words we find ourselves very close, extremely close to the actual words of Jesus. It is important for us to know what we're really praying for when we utter these words week after week. Otherwise, it is easy for to utter empty phrases, empty speech, just going through the motions without being aware what we're praying for. Then we would be guilty of the hypocrisy against which Jesus warns in Matthew 6.<sup>1</sup> Here we come to the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. If we are disciples of Jesus, then the disciple has three foci: *total devotion to God and God's kingdom, bread, and forgiveness.*

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* Now, in many ways, Jesus' prayer is not unique. It has similarities with many Jewish prayers, such as the Kaddish. The focus is upon Yahweh, upon

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<sup>1</sup>The Greek, "hypocrites" literally means "stage actors," human grandstanding.

God, as the only one worthy of our devotion and praise. The hallowing of God's name is significant because a person's presence and identity were based upon the power of one's name; the name of God as Yahweh means: I WAS WHO I WAS, I AM WHO I AM, I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. This prayer is about putting God first and letting God be God. In other words, when we offer these words, "Hallowed be your name," we're saying: "Show the world who you are."<sup>2</sup> For Jesus to call God Father was not unique within Judaism, as we see in the Isaiah text. But what was unique was to call God, *Abba*, which is implied in this prayer. *Abba* is an Aramaic word that literally means "Daddy." It is a term of endearment and intimacy. This is what makes the prayer so special: Jesus is showing us the intimate personal relationship he has with God as Son. But because he's asked us to pray this way, Jesus wants us to see that such a prayer also calls us into a deep, intimate, personal relationship with God. It is possible to get close to God – probably so close it scares heaven out of us. What Jesus has he gives to his disciples: the privilege of getting really close to God. But it's more than that; it's the realization that our lives find their meaning and purpose only through our undivided devotion to God and God's kingdom. God must come first. Seek *first*, the kingdom of God and his righteousness and everything else will fall in place (Matthew 6:33).

Now, the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven is one of the most significant ideas offered in the New Testament and neglected by both the church and the world to their peril. It is not "up there," in heaven or a term for the afterlife. The kingdom of God is the world as it is meant to be – a place of healing and wholeness, a place of mercy and forgiveness, where justice abounds. God's justice does not mean "getting even," but the biblical view of justice is God making things right, just. Jesus came preaching about the good news of the kingdom because that's what it is: *the good news of God*. God wants the kingdom to be fully realized – *that's God's will*. So that it will be on earth as it is in heaven.

Now we have to be honest here that some of this sounds completely ludicrous. Just look at the world. Look at the fear that controls our lives today; or the dangerous polarization spreading like a cancer throughout our society. Think of the bombs in London or in Sharm-al-Sheik. Closer to home, look at the crime in our streets, Baltimore's ongoing problem with drug trafficking, for the way drugs continue to ravage families and neighborhoods. This is not the way the world is supposed to be. It is not God's will. Karl Barth (1886-1968) said the Christian is to live with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Just read through the newspaper and look at the world. Indeed, have you ever read the newspaper devotionally, praying through the stories on each page? To be honest, we usually don't care about everything written in the paper. But to pray the paper is a way for us to engage with the world, knowing things as they are is not the way God intends.

*Jesus wants the kingdom to come. Jesus wants his disciples to want the kingdom to come. Jesus wants his disciples to be open to the way the kingdom has come in him.*

For Jesus not only announces its coming, but he embodies it with his love, his teachings, his resurrection. In Jesus the earth gets to experience what heaven is like. Jesus wants us to be praying for this kingdom. In other words, now that we know your name, then let's put a face on this name.<sup>3</sup> That face is Jesus; that face is the world and its people transformed by Jesus. This is the will of God. This means there is work to do.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Long, p. 70.

*Give us this day our daily bread.* Now, it's tough to relate to this petition, especially if you're on the Atkins diet and carbs are like poison. It's tough to relate to these words when we have refrigerators and basement freezers jammed with more than our daily bread – days, maybe months of food for us, just in case there's an emergency. There's a certain security that comes knowing the frig is well-stocked and there's plenty of Ben and Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk ice cream nearby, just in case. We place our security in other things, such as a full freezer or a “full” stock portfolio with plenty of reserves, for then we really don't have to trust in God that much. Most of us in this congregation don't live from day to day, paycheck to paycheck, from meal to meal. Many Americans do, however, more than we probably know or care to admit. But most of the world lives that way – going from day to day, meal to meal. There was a time when a majority of people did not know when their next meal might be. I can't help but think of the people, especially the children I met in the Congo last July who lived this way. Bread was almost a delicacy. People lived on one, inadequate meal a day.

The actual Greek word translated here as “daily,” (*epiousios*) is an untranslatable word. It is found only in the NT. We're not exactly sure what it means. It could mean “necessary,” “continual,” or “for today.” It probably means to be like the day laborer who is praying for the next day's labor and food (Not unlike the immigrant workers who gather in certain locations nearby early in the morning to see if they will be chosen for work that day to build our shopping malls or help manicure our lawns. They live from day to day.).

Jesus wants us to pray with hope, without anxiety. This petition means to trust God to provide for our every need. But bread is also *kingdom code* for a world where everyone's basic needs are met and provided for.<sup>4</sup> The needs of the individual have to be united with the needs of the whole world. We cannot be satisfied with our daily bread knowing that others have none. That's not the kingdom, that's not the way the world is supposed to be. And for this, we need a lot of mercy.

*And forgive our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.* Debts is a synonym for sins. Forgive us our sins. It is assumed by Jesus that sinfulness is universal. Sin is a debt owed to God, a debt we cannot repay, a sin that alienates us from ourselves, each other and God. Sin is an old archery term that means to miss the mark, hence sin is failing to miss the kingdom's goal. We have played a part in the formation of our present world. But this is not the way God intended the world. The only way to change this is to forgive, and to provide mercy. The way of the kingdom is forgiveness; that is God's will. The forgiveness comes to us first, unconditionally from God; it precedes human forgiveness. And when we know – really know – God's mercy – then it can be offered to others. If you accept the unmerited, unconditional forgiveness of God, then it's possible to forgive others – and forgiveness is the goal of God's kingdom in good time. I say ‘in good time’ because people can only forgive when they are ready. Some Christians forgive too soon before working through all their pain and hurt, only to discover weeks, months, years later that they are still resentful and angry; others nurse their grudges for a lifetime and reap their own reward.<sup>5</sup> Forgiveness is always the goal towards which God moves us. In the kingdom of God forgiveness is the way, which means we are called to *forgive people over and over again so that the world will know through our lives that we serve a*

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<sup>4</sup> M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Math: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter's Bible, VIII* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 204. “Since the prayer as a whole is eschatological, and since in a hungry world bread is a widespread symbol of eschatological blessedness (Matthew 22:16; Luke 14:15), the prayer is for the eschatological bread of the final coming of the kingdom of God.”

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn, *Don't Forgive Too Soon: Extending the Two Hands That Heal* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

*forgiving God.*<sup>6</sup> But if we do not practice forgiveness, we are rejecting our identity as children of God. To not practice forgiveness is another way of saying to God, “I no longer want to be a citizen of the kingdom.”<sup>7</sup> Do we really want to be part of the kingdom? Do we really have the faith to live this way?

*And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.* Jesus knew that following him would not be easy. This verse does not mean that God is waiting to tempt us or wants to put us into a time of trial to test us. There was the view in the first century that just before the final victory of God the power of the evil one will be intensified. I’ve been told the darkest time of the night is just before the dawn (so I’m told, not being a morning person!). Jesus is acknowledging that there will be times of persecution and tribulation for the one who really follows Jesus, because he will put you at odds with the prevailing view of the times. If we’re doing our job as Christians, then we should expect resistance. This petition, which is not to be taken lightly, hopes the testing, when it comes, will not be so great as to take away their faith.<sup>8</sup>

The theologian Karl Barth prophetically said, "To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." That’s what Jesus is doing when he prays this. This is what a Jesus follower hopes. The heart of following Jesus is living in the kingdom, grounded in this radical prayer – a prayer that shapes us and our world, so that it will be on earth as it is in heaven. Do we realize what we’re really praying for week after week? Jesus calls the church to get with God’s program:

to will what God wills,  
to hope for what God hopes,  
to provide as God provides,  
to forgive – even as we have been forgiven by God.

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<sup>6</sup> Boring, pp. 202ff.

<sup>7</sup> Long, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> The doxology often associated with the prayer is not included in the New Revised Standard Version because the earliest Greek manuscripts did not include it. It is found in the King James Version because the translators were only familiar with older manuscripts, which included it.