Sermon at St John’s Cambridge on Trinity 6, 28th July 2019

Lord, what we know not teach us, what we have not give us, and what we are not make us, and all for your loves sake Amen

‘So I say to you, Ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.’ (Luke 11.9)

How do we pray and act in a world like this?

A world of multiple-overwhelming: a world of change & uncertainty, of loneliness & isolation, of seemingly ever increasing disparity between the haves and the have-nots/ the powerful and the powerless/ of winner and losers in terms of globalisation and its discontents?

There is a story about Karl Marx’s daughter, who once said to a friend that she hadn’t been brought up with any religion and therefore wasn’t religious. ‘But the other day’ she said, ‘I came across a beautiful little prayer which I very much wish could be true.’ And asked what the prayer was, slowly she begun repeating, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven…’

The problem is, of course, that it’s easy (in an age like this) not really to believe in prayer, let alone to really believe in the reality and power of God to change things. How much easier not to believe in God, to take one look at the world and to ask ‘why?’

But Jesus doesn’t let us off the hook so easily, and indeed when we look at his words - when we look at the Gospel - we find some tantalising things about prayer, which invite us into a very different way of seeing things... into glimpsing that prayer really does move mountains, changing the course of this world, and mysteriously lies at the heart of this fragile and mysterious existence, which we call Life.

It’s worth noticing that in Luke’s Gospel Jesus’ teaching about prayer comes at the apex of his ministry, in the midst of his active work of teaching and serving others.

After all, in the last chapter alone he’s sent out the 70 to proclaim the kingdom, he’s challenged towns which fail to repent, he’s visited Mary & Martha, and he’s inspired us with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point being that for Jesus prayer isn’t detached from the concerns & anxieties of daily life, rather the opposite; it’s situated within them, rooted in the here and now. Prayer isn’t a diversion from everyday living, a leisure time activity for those with time on their hands - Jesus is saying - no, the test of its genuineness is practical.

For as Christians the world over have discovered, whilst we need (regularly) to clear space to pray, to find a still centre within the hurly burly of life, as Jesus did, day-by-day, like fish coming up to breathe — prayer, in the end, is intimately bound up with action, worship with service, sacred with secular,
God our Creator and Lord ceaselessly at work in our lives, at the heart of everything, especially when things go wrong. As the German theologian Karl Barth once put it, ‘to claps the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.’

So if the prayer of Jesus, in Luke, is down to earth and practical, and therefore believable, what does he teach us and how might it help us to pray and act in a world like this? And we need to remember, in all of this, that the most important thing about prayer – like any human activity – is simply praying, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us, as we set sail on this great adventure of life in the Spirit.

So what does Jesus say here, in the Lord’s Prayer, as we have in it St Luke’s, probably the earliest version of the Prayer, as Jesus spoke it – and I’m not going to give it to you in the original Aramaic or Greek!

1. Firstly, he simply says ‘Father’, inviting us to address God intimately as a parent figure, one who knows us and love us. We easily forget here the power of this prayer, a prayer which addresses God as ‘Abba’, an intimate term of address and familiarity. And whereas the OT taught the Fatherhood of God as a religious concept, Jesus revolutionised prayer by introducing it as an intimate experience... But he doesn’t leave it here, he tells the story of a father not giving his son a snake, if he asks for fish. In other words if we can trust (at best) our human parents, how much more can we trust God, who truly loves us... And the experience of praying the Lord’s Prayer, of saying ‘Our Father’, is that as we learn to pray, and grow in trust – whatever particular way of praying we go for - God becomes more real and intimate, and our lived experience of God (over time) is transformed. So God as Father.

2. Secondly, Jesus reminds us of the big picture in prayer, the wider context of all our praying, and hoping and striving, when he prays simply ‘Your Kingdom come’. It’s so easy, isn’t it, either to get lots in our own personal concerns and worries – important that they may be – or to despair at the scale of violence and suffering in the world? But Jesus reminds us here that all prayer is about praying and longing and joining in with the work of bringing in God’s Kingdom. A kingdom of justice and peace and righteousness, of God’s reign of love and mercy: a Kingdom which Jesus came to proclaim, and to which the Church (with other people of peace and good will) bears witness. A kingdom at work, in simple acts of loving kindness, even when all seems lost...

3. And this praying and working for God’s Kingdom, for all people, puts in context the next two petitions of Jesus’ prayer: praying for our daily needs (‘Give us each day our daily bread’) and
putting right our relationships: with God and with other people (‘forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us’).

How wonderful to wipe the slate clean, to really know forgiveness and a fresh start, and for this to be replicated – however challenging – with our family, our friends and our neighbours, near and far. As St Paul reminds the Colossians, ‘God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.’ And thanks be to God for that.

4. And finally, Jesus, in the words that follow (in today’s Gospel) talks – in stark terms – about the value and need for persistence in prayer. Prayer, Jesus is reminding us, really works. It really changes things. It really makes a difference, and brings God closer to our world and our hearts.

But real change, like anything in life, doesn’t happen overnight. It takes time. And this doesn’t mean that somehow God isn’t on our side. Rather that the deep work of changing human hearts and minds, and transforming structures, is of the long haul.

And that’s why Jesus tells a story about persistence: about a friend asking, repeatedly, for bread, in order to look after a needy guest. For if even a friend, who is in bed, gets up late at night, how much more will God respond to those who seek him.

+ It reminds me of someone in my first parish, in Leicester, an older woman, who was ever so persistent in seeking help– and from our congregation. She was a lady that many had shunned, because she never gave up, she was shabby, and often a nuisance. And yet, as I discovered, for good reason, as she had been repeatedly abused as a child, had a disabled son, and had never been able to hold down a life-giving job. But what was amazing to me, as I spent time with her, and ultimately became her spiritual director, was the way God came to this wonderful woman, and transformed her from within, overcoming her fears, and blessing her with a faith and joyfulness, that no one could have anticipated a few years earlier. And it was all God’s work, and not our own; we were merely channels of his amazing and abundant grace, made perfect in human weakness.

As Jesus concludes, in those remarkable words of reassurance, ‘So I say to you, Ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you…’

Yes, prayer really does work. It changes us and helps re-shape the world around us, through our actions and through the mysterious work of God’s ever present Holy Spirit. For as we are discovering here, through initiatives like Prayer 48, and our Year of Prayer during 2018, prayer really changes things, healing and transforming us, connecting us to the needs of the struggling world
around us; and it leads to outcomes we could never have imagined before. ‘Find peace within yourself’ as the Orthodox St Seraphim once said, ‘and thousands round you will be saved...’

Ask, and you will receive; start searching and you will find; knock, and all kinds of new doors will open, which you had never dreamt of before.

For as St Paul and the prophet Hosea both remind us, God is and always will be enduring love and faithfulness – however unfaithful or faithless we can sometimes be. He is at work in us and in all situations, through the power of His resurrection. He is intimately part of our daily lives and hopes, our struggles and disappointments, whether we recognise it or not. If only we would open our eyes to God’s living power, through faith, prayer and His Holy Spirit, at work in all situations.

God never gives up on us, even when we get it wrong; he is always ready to refresh us, to heal and provide for us, and to bless our efforts to serve his Kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

For as St Paul says in Thessalonians, perhaps summarising Jesus’ entire approach to prayer: ‘Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ for you.’

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen