

“Contemplatio” Lent 5, 2020

A reflection on prayer

Matthew 6:5-13 [revisiting the gospel reading for Ash Wednesday – the first day of Lent]

29<sup>th</sup> March 2020

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Today is the Fifth Sunday in Lent. But I decided today to revisit the Gospel reading for the first day of Lent. The relevance of this text to the situation in which we all find ourselves seems to cry out to be heard again. And I hope we can find some encouragement in these words from Jesus – which are taken from what is commonly referred to as the ‘Sermon on the Mount’.

Last week my family and I arrived back in Perth from a trip to the East Coast. We made it back just a day before the two-week required quarantine period for interstate arrivals. And even though we have not legally needed to quarantine it was immediately obvious that we needed to start to make this transition to living and working from home and starting to break the automatic assumption that we can just go wherever we like, whenever we like....to start to adjust to the notion of limitation....of constraint.

There was a very insightful meme floating around in social media last week and it went something like this: ‘Our grandparents went to war for the sake of their nation. All we are being asked to do is to stay on the couch’.

Christian preachers like to point out that the Season of Lent is an invitation to a period of more focussed prayer, and fasting and self discipline. But it seems that now we have little choice. We’re being forced into this situation...being forced to go inwards....inwards to our own homes and inwards to our own souls as we experience real fear, real anxiety and real uncertainty.

Which brings me back to this gospel reading, where Jesus is saying something about prayer.

***“when you pray, enter into your private room, and having closed your door, pray to your Father who is in secret...and when praying do not babble repetitious phrases...for your Father knows what you need before you ask him”***

Br Laurence Freeman, who is the leader of the World Community for Christian Meditation is fond of pointing out that Jesus teaching can be read it two ways. In prayer we go into a place of literal isolation. For the monk, that meant his or her room or cave. For us we are being constrained by Covid 19 to the cave of our own homes. But Br Laurence also reminds us that the private room can be thought of as the private inner room – the deep place of our inner life – our souls. And that accessing this room is by way of grace, the leading of God’s Spirit, to which we respond with a simple word of repeated prayer – probably the most ancient Christian prayer of all – the Aramaic spoken by Jesus himself, “Ma-ra-na-tha” – which means Come Lord.

As we steadily and repeatedly bring our attention back to this prayer, we notice how anxious and troubled the surface of our minds are – filled with the things we need to do, or are worried about – like turbulent waves on a stormy sea. But as we listen to that quiet word of prayer which the Spirit is speaking within us, deep down, we may start to notice a deeper and even more powerful current or underlying presence. Ma-ra-na-tha. Come Lord.

Or as Jesus elaborates in this gospel reading:

***Our Father, who are in the heavens, let your name be held holy. Let your Kingdom come;  
Let your will come to pass, as in heaven, so also on earth"***

I wonder if we've noticed God's kingdom **coming on** earth this week? – God's reign of love, compassion, mercy. Where have we noticed random acts of human kindness this week? Of selflessness, in our health systems, in the shop keepers who keep us supplied with food, in pharmacies, public servants, utilities workers, truck drivers?

Jesus teaches us to pray, **"Give us today bread for the day ahead"**. Here is an invitation to trust. We only need one packet of pasta for the day ahead. We don't need six. How many rolls of toilet paper do we REALLY need for the next 24 hours? It's hard isn't it – this learning to trust?

Jesus teaches us to pray, **"and excuse us our debts, just as we have excused our debtors"**. This week I got a very nice letter from our bank, laying out some possibilities for debt relief for the next few months. In an economic system which is constructed on vast amounts of debt, our trust will be tested...will debt be forgiven by landlords? Will the debt of landlords be supported by banks? Will the debt of banks be supported by governments? Will governments all back each other?

When we look at the practicalities it's quite obvious why Jesus would then teach us to pray: **"Do not bring us to trial, but rescue us from him who is wicked"**. We pray that our sorry arses will not be dragged into a court-trial by people that would like to sue us for the shirts on our backs AND we pray that we would rather give the shirts off our own backs than drag someone else's sorry arse into court. We pray to be saved from the vortex of mimetic rivalry swirling around us – from any temptation to treat our neighbour as a competitor rather than friend.

Why would we pray in this kind of way? Because Jesus himself prays in us. The Spirit of Christ who prays, "Come Lord" – who prays, "Let your kingdom come" is the same God who forgives US all our debts – who became the victim of our violence and our selfishness and greed and who returned only love, only forgiveness, only compassion. IT is the pattern of HIS life which we've been given as the pattern of our response to the challenge of this time.

**Ma-ra-na-tha. Come Lord Jesus.**

Biblical translation: David Bentley Hart, 'The New Testament' (2017)