

## **Sermon for Sunday 24 July 2022 – The Sixth Sunday after Trinity**

**Revd Graham Naylor, Curate**

***Genesis 18.20–32; Colossians 2.6–15; Luke 11.1–13***

Father, we pray that you come by your Holy Spirit and open your word to our minds and our hearts in Jesus' name. Amen. Please do be seated.

I didn't say at the beginning, but the reason that I'm doing a onehanded this morning is unfortunate - Pete Postle is unwell, and that's why we had David read the gospel so you don't have to put up with my voice for the whole of the morning, from the lectern; and you may have found that a little bit disorientating - it might have jarred on you in some ways; it did on me because I wondered, do I turn to the centre of the church where we normally read the gospel from, or do I turn to face the lectern? And I could see the choir, a couple of members of the choir doing the same, where do we look?

It may be the same with some of what I say to you this morning during the service. It may jar, it may be disorientating, but go with it, bear with me. So this morning's gospel; some of you who come to Think and Drink will just recognise that, because I tend to throw curveballs. The gospel is in three parts. It's one account, but in three parts - there's a request from the disciples, there's a parable and there's some positive encouragement.

'Lord, teach us to pray.' The request from the disciples, but not just teach us to pray, 'Lord teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.' There must have been something different about the way John taught his disciples to pray, because the Jewish people prayed. Praying would not be a strange thing for them, and yet the disciples ask Jesus, 'Teach us to pray how John taught his disciples to pray.' We don't know what was different, but it's a question to ponder.

And Jesus' response, 'When you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come; give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us, and do not bring us to the time of trial.' That shortened version that Luke gives us of what we know as the Lord's Prayer. Father, Father God, the Father of his people, Israel, isn't that the message that Moses delivered to Pharaoh on God's behalf? Israel is my firstborn son. Let my son go, I am their father.'

So to address God as Father in the Lord's Prayer, and at other times, is to acknowledge the God who, as with the first Exodus, liberates, sets people free, whose kingdom reign is coming, who feeds his children daily. Remember the manna in the wilderness that the people of Israel ate daily, who forgives the penitent sinner, who brings deliverance. And the Lord's Prayer in both its forms echoes that first Exodus and it looks to the new Exodus. We're in Luke's gospel at the moment. You may remember that a few chapters earlier we have the account of the transfiguration where Jesus, Moses and Elijah talk about the new Exodus that Jesus is going to accomplish through the cross.

Now, having taught his disciples what they should pray, Jesus then tells a story. He introduces it with, 'Suppose one of you has a friend,' he is asking the disciples to put themselves into the story. Okay, so I'm going to ask you to do the same this morning. But remember, we're putting ourselves into the story in the first century, not in the 21st.

So picture the scene. Someone has had a friend turn up unexpectedly late at night. How do we know it's unexpected? It wasn't just a rhetorical question. There's no food in the house - if they were expecting a guest, they'd hold food back - so this is an unexpected arrival of a friend. Now, in this context, the listeners, the hearers of Jesus would know that hospitality is important. There is an expectation that you provide for your guests, even if they turn up unexpectedly, and to not provide hospitality would be a matter of shame.

So friend has arrived late at night, nothing in the house, and it is shameful not to offer hospitality. What are you going to do? Well, you know that hospitality is not just an individual responsibility, it is a communal responsibility. So it will bring a shame on the community if I don't offer my friend hospitality, not just on me, but on the community. So I'm going to go to my friend in the community to ask for help, because he also is on a bound to help me.

So, again, picture the scene. This is likely a small peasant house, maybe a one room house, where the family sleep together on a raised platform. We hear that the man says, 'My children in bed with me.' Imagine he's got to clamber over them without waking them up to help his friend. And there would be the animals in the lower area, maybe for warmth - maybe we'll talk about that at Christmas.

The man here is shouting; he recognises his friend's voice, 'Help! My mate's turned up unexpectedly, didn't send a Twitter message or a WhatsApp message that he was coming. I need to borrow three loaves of bread.' These would have been small rolls, enough for one person. 'I've got to feed him, and the pantry's empty.' Now, remember, Jesus has asked the disciples, and I'm asking you this morning, to put yourselves into the story. The man who's been woken up will be thinking, 'I've got a responsibility here.' Notice he doesn't say, 'I haven't got any food to give you.' He's just a bit sleepy.

The idea that somebody who has food, that can help their friend offer hospitality to **their** friend, would be the norm. There is an absurdity in the question that Jesus asks, which we often miss. He says, 'Suppose you have a friend and this happens.' A response that the person wouldn't get up and would say, 'I've locked the door, my children in bed with me, I'm not getting up,' would be an absurdity. It just wouldn't happen. Sometimes we miss the humour in the parables.

Jesus is asking that question of the disciples, he's asking the question of us, 'Can you imagine that friend not getting up.' The answer is no. I can't. The expectation is, though it might be inconvenient, the friend will get up and the man's persistence in shouting out gets a response. Now, we have to be careful with this word persistence.

So much teaching on this gives us a wrong view of God. It's a very tricky word to translate, and we can think of persistence in English as badgering, wearing down, repetitive in order to get a person to respond. And there's then a danger that we import our understanding of the English word 'persistence' into our explanation of the parable, and on to the next section of the reading, which is 'Ask, seek and knock.' A closer word is 'shameless', but even then it's a bit ambiguous. It possibly means that the man who is coming to us is shameless in coming to us because he knows the answer is going to be 'Yes, I'll help you.' It's not that he's doing it shamefully because he's disturbing his friend at midnight.

And we have to be careful with parables, who the characters are. And I'll put this question to you, does this parable **compare** God to the sleepy friend or does it **contrast** God with the sleepy friend? The important thing to understand is it doesn't compare God to the sleepy friend, who needs waking up with repeated demands; it's contrasting God with the sleepy friend, because what does the psalm say about God? This is Psalm 121 - 'God will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will not slumber nor sleep.' I've got news for you this morning, friends. God is awake and waiting for you to come and ask for help.

What Jesus is saying in this parable is you can't imagine your friend wouldn't help you out feeding your friend who's turned up. So why on earth do you think God wouldn't help you and respond when you need him to?

And then Jesus goes on. He again asks a question that expects the answer to be 'No. That's absolutely absurd.' He asks which of you would give a snake instead of fish or a scorpion instead of an egg? The response of the disciples was, 'That just wouldn't happen. No father would be that stupid.' We have here this argument that Luke uses of moving from the lesser to the greater. He moves from human fathers to our Heavenly Father. He moves from the good gifts that human parents can give their children to the greater gift that God the Father can give to his children - the Holy Spirit.

Because God, as I've said repeatedly this morning, because I want to drive the point home, God isn't like the sleepy friend; we can have confidence when we come in prayer; we can ask our Heavenly Father to be to us what he was to Israel - a liberator, a Father who provides our daily needs, a Father who forgives, a Father who delivers. It will be the same for us and more in his giving of the Holy Spirit.

Now, what might liberation, provision of daily needs, forgiveness, deliverance look like for us? What might it look like for me and for you? What is it that we need freeing from? What is it that we need providing? What is it we need forgiveness for? I'm not going to prescribe that. What might it look like for us to be given the Holy Spirit? Again, I'm not going to prescribe it.

What I am going to do is encourage us all to ask that God would be our Father in our daily prayer and in our corporate prayer together, and just see what happens. One thing I can promise is God is not like that sleepy friend; he doesn't need waking up and whatever he gives in response to our request, how simple, how mangled they might be.

I don't know about you, but sometimes my prayers seem to start, 'Father'. They end with 'Amen', and the bit in the middle is just a jumble. But somehow God sorts that out and he will give good gifts to his children, including the Holy Spirit. So can I suggest that we can be shameless in coming to Father God and asking. Amen.