

The revolutionary prayer of Jesus

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 28 July, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 7 C

**Psalm 138; Luke 11:1-13; Contemporary Reading:
Mary Oliver, “Prayer” in *Thirst***

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbCRKqRw17Y>

The Lord’s Prayer, the ‘our father’, the Jesus prayer - in many languages and more recently in paraphrases or re-workings – this prayer is part of the shared heritage of Christian faith across time, across geography, across culture.

Here in Luke’s gospel we have a smaller, shorter version of the prayer that comes to fullest expression in Matthew’s gospel. You have probably heard the traditional version “*our father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done*” rattled off by congregations from memory. The words are so familiar that many people do not really seem to think about what they are saying. They are also quite strange words, which is why I choose to use contemporary paraphrases like the one in today’s liturgy by Andrew Collis. Beyond rote repetition, paraphrases, or re-workings, draw us back to reflection on the revolutionary message in Jesus’ prayer.

The prayer of Jesus is a Jewish prayer. It is grounded in the two threads of Hebrew Scriptures. In the Psalms the prayers of the people are marked by complaints and requests to God, and almost in the same breath by expressions of gratitude and trust. The prophets on the other hand speak for God, rather than to God. They have no time for ritual that is not intrinsically bound up with justice and righteousness.

Distributive justice, where everyone has enough, is the nature of God as perceived by the prophets.

When I was a Presbyterian Minister in Aotearoa New Zealand, and going to annual Assemblies of the church where they fighting about gay and lesbian people being in ministry, I used to really relish the word of the prophet Amos: *I hate your solemn assemblies* – because I hated them too. I hated them when they were joyful, too, in the face of suffering and exclusion. The prophets tell us that distributive justice, where everyone is included, where everyone has enough, is the nature of God.

John Dominic Crossan sees Jesus bringing the fervent prayer of the psalmists back into balance with the passion of the prophets: justice and prayer, prayer and justice.

Crossan offers us the metaphor of heads and tails on a coin. You can distinguish the heads from the tails, but you cannot separate them and still have a coin.

Crossan says, “*We pray to the God of justice to be empowered by that God for justice.*”ⁱ He also points out that the apostle Paul says we are empowered by God to pray. It is the gift of God’s Spirit that “*cries out in us, with us, from us, through us*” - Abba, God!

The prayer that Jesus taught his friends is a hymn of hope for justice on earth; for justice on earth as it is in the heart of God. Crossan suggests, following the Apostle Paul, that the prayer is prayed by God’s Spirit within and through us. So rather than praying for God’s intervention, in the Jesus’ prayer God is praying for our collaboration in the work of justice.

In writing about addressing God as ‘father’ (which is problematic for many reasons, but particularly for the patriarchal associations of the maleness of God), Crossan points out that a father in the ancient near East was much more than the parent of biological children. The father was the householder, with responsibilities for creation, protection and provision. So God is the Householder of the World; Householder of a World in which everyone should have enough. We are not hallowing, or making holy, or honouring God or God’s name when a few have so much more than is needed for life, and so many have less than enough.

In speaking of forgiveness, scholars generally agree that Luke changed the original “debts” to sins, (forgive us our debts became forgive us our sins) and in the process of doing that, lost the real-world impact of speaking of debt, which in Jesus’ time was a direct pathway into slavery.

The heart of Jesus prayer is people having enough. Enough will vary, but that’s the goal—enough to meet our daily needs and to avoid the crushing debt of tomorrow that might lead to loss of liberty or even loss of life.

‘*Your kingdom come*’ does not seek an escape to a heavenly realm, but in this world it seeks an economy such as would be constructed by a God whose very being is justice and righteousness.

Like the two sides of the coin, our life is not reducible to either justice or praying. Praying is a spiritual experience. When justice and prayer come together, God’s Spirit prays in us, with us and from us.

Prayer is not about outcomes.

I get irritated by politicians and sportspeople who thank God for their victories, and by those who have recovered from an illness or not died in accidents. They have a view of God as an intervening, as a superior being who is susceptible to human petitions and who will favour some at the expense of others, including favouring some with prosperity.

So I am really clear about what prayer is not. But this is not sufficient.

Progressive Christians are engaged in two related but distinct processes. One is a process of deconstruction and elimination.

The other process is refocusing. Here the question is "*Where is the centre of our faith?*" Our answers take different forms, but, eventually, they come back to the way that Jesus united, in both his life and his teaching, the two commandments to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

The process of deconstruction is a whole lot easier than the search for the centre. But deconstruction does not inspire hope or love or delight - or even intellectual coherence.

The reason that progressive Christianity exists is not to prune away archaic forms. It exists to be an authentic gospel voice, to proclaim the good news of Jesus' life and teaching: a vision of humanity united to the sacred and to one another - and to the whole earth - in love and justice

For progressive Christians, the future lies with our willingness to own up to the depth of our own convictions, to proclaim the good news without fear, to live as people deeply touched by the Spirit's power. Progressive Christianity is about the rediscovery and the re-naming of the centre, that in Jesus' teaching and practice of love, humanity is called to a love affair with the divine - and to a new kind of community with each another.

This is a faith, a way of living that needs nurture, and the tradition, about which we find so much to reject, has within it the wisdom of generations about learning to live faithfully. In the chaotic world in which we live, we desperately need this wisdom. We need to be taught how to pray.

Spirituality is concerned with how to live a full life, not an empty one. The fact is that all we have in life - is life. Things come and go. The gift of life, however, must be developed from the inside out, from what we bring to it from within ourselves, not from what we collect or consume as we go through it.

Spirituality is about consciousness of the sacred in the secular. I think that's what the poet, Mary Oliver, calls people to again and again. It is in that consciousness, in that paying attention, that perspective comes and changes, that peace comes. It is in that consciousness that a person comes to wholeness.

It is a busy world in which we live. It consumes us, drains our souls, dries out our hearts, damps our spirits, and too often makes living more of a to-do list than a joyful mystery. We find ourselves spending life too tired to be creative, too distracted - perhaps by social media - to read a book. Too busy to talk or listen; too plagued by demands and deadlines to reflect on our futures, or even appreciate our present. We simply go on, day after day.

So, what does it mean to be spiritual in the midst of the private chaos that clutters our lives? The reflective life is a summons to us. It invites us to go inside ourselves to clear out the debris of the heart, rather than trying to control the environment and situations around us.

We live and breathe and grow in the womb of God. And yet we are forever seeking God elsewhere—in defined places, in special ways, on mountaintops or in caves, on specific days and special ceremonies. But the life lived in the light knows that God is not over there, God is here, like a breath; like the air we breathe, available to us. The question is: how do we encounter that. And part of the answer is prayer.

Traditionally “prayer” has been defined by Christian teaching as "*the raising of our hearts and minds to God*" - as if God were some regal, distant judge outside ourselves. But God is not out there on a cloud somewhere, imperious, judging.

God is the very energy that animates us. God is the spirit that leads us on. God is the voice within us calling us to life. God is the reality trying to come to fullness within us, both individually and in community. It is to that cosmic God, that inner, enkindling God that we pray. It is with that God that our justice-seeking prayers of solidarity join.

We pray. We yearn with the sacred for wholeness, well-being, justice and peace, for a world where there is enough. And just the process of praying – however we do it (and there are multiple ways) – just the process of praying will change us - and through us, change our world.

Prayer is a way of looking and listening that results in a new way: life-giving, nourishing, human life.

The theological term for this is grace: you can see reality as gracious – not as hostile, not as indifferent, but as gracious. We know that terrible things are done by humans to each other. We know that horrible things might happen to us. We do not need to deny that for a moment.

But, living in grace means that we are saying that even in the midst of that, we see reality as gracious, life-giving in some way that we do not understand, it makes possible a different response to life, a response of gratitude. But also a response of not needing to be primarily concerned with defending the self - either against an indifferent or a hostile universe. Not being primarily concerned about building up what little systems of security we can. It makes possible the kind of life that we see in Jesus.

This is faith as a way of seeing the whole. It has nothing to do with believing that, in addition to reality, there is a supernatural being out there. It has nothing to do with believing Christian doctrines to be true in some kind of absolute sense. It has nothing to do with believing in the Bible as the infallible word of God.

It's relationship. It's mystical. It's transformative. It's taking Jesus seriously as what a life filled with spirit looks like. Prayer is not magical. Prayer is simply the moments that we take to be still, to be transformed in our relationship with one another, and the world, and with God.

Prayer is our joining with, connecting to, relating with, Spirit...

...in yearning for the transformation of all, in all and for justice and for love.

ⁱ John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer*. Harper One, 2010, p. 24.