

THE PRAYERS OF JESUS

The remarkable thing about the prayers of Jesus in the Gospels is not that there are so few of them, but that there are any at all. Very early on, Christians came to believe that Jesus was the Word of God Incarnate, God's creative and redemptive self-expression. There would then be no need for prayer in the ordinary sense, since the relationship of God Incarnate to God Transcendent was one of intimacy, uninterrupted vision and perfect alignment of the will. In what we conventionally call the High Priestly prayer of John 17, we can see the effect of these beliefs on the presentation of the narrative; this is not so much a prayer as an affirmation of communion: "Father, glorify me with the glory I had with thee before the foundation of the world." There is a similar tradition in Matthew 11, which begins "I thank thee Father Lord of Heaven and earth that thou hast kept these things from the wise and revealed them to babes" and continues with the doctrinal statement "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

However, elsewhere in the Gospels we find a different account of the prayers of Jesus. They record that he had, like us, to make time and space for prayer, by getting up early in the morning or going up into the hills to be alone. He, like us, approached God through the strait gate and the narrow door, the window that prayer affords into another world where God's purposes can be glimpsed but only faintly and fleetingly. He, like us, walked by faith not by sight. And the first of his two prayers that I am going to talk about tonight well illustrates this other presentation of Jesus at prayer.

It is the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before the Passion – the prayer which will be the focus of Christian devotion on Maundy Thursday in just three weeks time - how Lent is flying by! The curious sometimes ask, How, if all the disciples fell asleep, do we know what Jesus said that night? The answer to that question would depend on how quickly they fell asleep and whether they were within earshot. The rebuke "Could you not watch with me one hour?" implies that Jesus repeated this prayer many times over, and they could have heard the first few times before dropping off – but were they near enough to overhear? Luke says that Jesus moved away "the distance of a stone's throw" – but that doesn't help much. How big a stone? And How good a thrower? We can leave aside these curious questions, for one reliable witness did stay awake and heard it all. He is known technically in New Testament studies as the ubiquitous, omniscient narrator, and he obviously believed that Jesus prayed in the same way that we pray.

Abba Father, all things are possible to thee,

Remove this cup from me,

Yet not what I will but what thou wilt. (Mark 14.36)

The prayer begins by identifying the one addressed as all loving and all-powerful. Abba, dear Father. Greek speaking Christians preserved this Aramaic word in their own prayers as we can tell from its occurrence in Paul's letters (Gal 4.6; Rom 8.16). It was at the very moment when all the evidence of God's fatherly care were receding into the darkness, that Jesus dared to call God Abba: Father but also the Almighty One – "all things are possible to thee. "Prayer, even desperate prayer, necessarily begins with praise for the love and sovereignty of God. Then the anguished petition follows "Take this cup" from me" The cup of suffering which only an hour or so before Jesus had described as the cup of the new covenant poured out for many. The contrast in this symbolism is stark: the cup of blessing for us was a poisoned chalice

for him. He had finally realised the human cost of this divine exchange. The final limb of this prayer is resignation without question but without understanding. “Not my will but thine be done” - A prayer of uncertainty and fear; it is like the way we often have to pray.

The second prayer of Jesus that I want to talk about is of course the Lord’s Prayer. Can we doubt that Jesus prayed this prayer himself, before he taught others to pray it? One might object that Jesus could not have asked for trespasses to be forgiven, for he had none; but he prays in solidarity with sinners like us, just as baptised for our sake. This is the nearest we will ever get to Jesus own pattern of prayer; which is why we say it so often, to join our prayer with his.

It occurs in two different places in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew (6.9-13) it forms the centre-piece of the Sermon on the Mount and the Evangelist highlights two points: first (6.7) that it is a short prayer; it does not babble on like pagans do; and second, that it is prayed in the spirit of forgiveness for you cannot ask God to forgive you unless you are willing to forgive others (6.14f)

In Luke (11.1-13) the Lord’s Prayer appears in a different setting and is followed by two parables – the friend at midnight who persists until his petition is granted; and the father who readily responds to his children’s needs. Here is a nice paradox: we are to persevere in prayer, but our heavenly Father is quick to answer our prayers – so, logically, we should not need to persevere. Faith is full of paradoxes like this.

As to the substance of what Jesus taught his disciples, it is a non-sectarian, inclusive prayer, that anyone can say – Jew, Christian, Moslem, Hindu or even an agnostic who is at least open to the possibility of a transcendent God. It begins with praise spelt out in three was: hallowing God’s name, acceptance of his kingly rule, and submission to his will. And these are balanced by three petitions: for bread, forgiveness and deliverance.

There is a continuing debate among New Testament specialists as to the interpretation of certain details of the prayer which appear to be ambiguous. Is the Kingdom of God for whose coming we pray an inward and spiritual kingdom where God reigns in the heart? Or is it outward and material, the coming age when the dead are raised and the earth transformed? It could be either.

Similarly, should we translate the petition for bread “Go on giving us every day the bread on which our life depends.” – basic necessities. Or alternatively “Give us just once today the bread of tomorrow – the feast of the coming new age. It could be either.

Or again, “Lead us not into temptation” could mean “Save us from that inner lure towards wrong-doing that is born of selfishness.” Or “Do not bring us to the time of trial” – the persecution and suffering of God’s saints that are the birth pangs of the new age. It could be either.

But it could also be both in each case. It is both about day to day needs and also about God’s future. In other words, the ambiguities could be deliberate. “Multivalency”, as we like to call it in the trade, is a characteristic of Jesus’ teaching generally, and

especially in the parables where you don't quite know whether they are about how to live rightly in this world, or how to gain entry into the next, the new world.

I have given you this evening a potted commentary on two of Jesus' prayers – but commentary is not what you need. What you need is prayer itself. And to that end I will finish by quoting the last paragraph of a sermon by my beloved tutor, Fr Austin Farrer:

“We must pray, for prayer is neither more nor less than living with God. Shall I live today of myself and by myself, or shall I live it with God? Doubtless, whether or not I live it with God, God lives it with me – but that only makes it the more monstrous that I should not live it with him. Prayer is just living with God: looking at him, regarding his will, reaching out our hands for the blessings he is so eager to give, bringing our action into his. We must pray. If you cannot pray, come and ask for help. What could be more natural, than for a Christian to say to a priest, may I make a date to talk to you about my prayers? What else are we for?”