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Introduction

The Lukan reading of the Lord's Prayer differs in several ways from Matthew's version. The first dramatic difference is in the absence of the first person plural possessive pronoun. Could this possibly be because the request for a lesson on praying comes from an unnamed disciple who wants Jesus to give his disciples what John's disciples already have. If so, then it may indicate an intention to deny disciples the right to possess God.

Text

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

'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. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Comment

It's a truism that different traditions within the Christian church use different composite versions of the prayer in our Gospel text for this week. We even have different names for the prayer; the Lord's Prayer or the Our Father. In the light of

this it may be instructive to note in the text that the Lukan form of the prayer comes in response to a request from an unnamed disciples that Jesus would teach them to pray in a similar way to John's disciples. It makes me wonder whether there was some form of rivalry between the two sets of disciples, or whether Jesus disciples felt he was in some way failing them because he hadn't taught them a particular way of praying.

Is Luke hinting at this religious competitiveness therefore, when he leaves out the word 'Our' at the beginning of the prayer (compare with Matt 6:9)? In teaching them to pray like this Jesus is telling them straight away that God will not be owned by any particular brand of piety. The same goes for us. However much we may be committed to our particular stream of tradition, however shaped by it and however comfortable within it, it is never ours and we should never claim to have an access to God denied to those of a different tradition.

Such proprietorial ownership of God has led to all manner of conflicts. In Northern Ireland at this time of the year we see the toxic remainder of competing ownerships of God. The legacy of ancient religious animosities continues to stir the blood of rival communities which each lay claim to entitlement of the land even as their assumption of privileged access to the one true faith is continually eroding.

And so, Jesus reminds us in this prayer that God will not share God's glory with any individual or human institution. God will not be exclusively claimed by Ulster, Ireland, Britain, the EU, nor any other political or religious body. God's name is to be honoured before any denomination or affiliation. Furthermore, it is exclusively 'the dream of God' for creation, to use Brian McLaren's phrase, that we must work to see realised, rather than any human aspiration, political agenda or militaristic endeavour.

One aspect of that 'dream' of God for the world is one where forgiveness of debts is preferred over any form of coercive control. It intrigues me that in this version of the prayer sin and debt are connected.

Debt was one of the ways that the Roman empire exercised control of conquered lands. One day you owned your farm which had been in your family for generations, the next, following conquest by the Roman legions, the whole land was owned by the empire, and you paid rent to work the land you once owned. Small wonder then that over time, a people became conditioned to debt used by the empire as a tool of oppression, and in turn used debt to control their neighbours where possible.

In the big 'dream' of God outlined by Jesus in his prayer, he called his followers to the practice of forgiving debt as a letting go of the power of coercion.

Forgiveness is a radical way of intersecting the endlessly repeating circle of violence and thereby ending it. Forgiveness exhausts the power of evil and oppression by breaking the cycle of revenge.

And forgiveness can begin when we realise that our understanding of God and of God's big 'dream' for the world is not my exclusive property and that God is not somehow diminished if I don't exact retribution from those who have slighted God (or me), or condemn those whose understanding of God doesn't quite align with mine.

God is not 'my' God, not even 'our' God.

God is simply and profoundly.....God.

Response

Take the Lukan version of this prayer and rewrite it without 'ownership' language, or gendered language. How does this freshen the ideas in the prayer or bring new insights for your consideration?

Prayer

You are the Holy God.
Utterly Other.
And I marvel
That you are also intimate.
That you came
In the presence
Of a human being
Of flesh and blood.

Forgive me for those times
When I chose private
Over personal.
When I prefer 'mine'
Over 'ours'.

Measure to me forgiveness
With the measure I extend
To those I could be tempted
To gauge as my enemy.

Amen