

Readings for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

24th July 2022

First Reading: Hosea 1:2-10

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of prostitution and have children of prostitution, for the land commits great prostitution by forsaking the LORD." So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

And the LORD said to him, "Name him Jezreel, for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel."

She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the LORD said to him, "Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God; I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen."

When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God." Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered, and in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God."

Second Reading: Colossians 2:6-15

Brothers and sisters, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

Gospel: St Luke 11:1-13

Jesus 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!'

A Reflection for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

'Lord, teach us to pray'

The words of Jesus disciples at the beginning of today's Gospel: 'teach us to pray'. Why did the disciples ask this?

Self-help is popular today. You can buy books or find articles on the internet through which you can teach yourself any number of different things and they can be extremely useful. But when we want to learn to do something well, it's usually a good idea to get someone who knows to teach us the rudiments at least. So the disciples asked to be taught to pray. And yet, it's a somewhat surprising request in some ways. The theologian William Barclay, in his book about the Lord's Prayer, describes the Jews as 'characteristically and pre-eminently a praying people' – they did not doubt the power of prayer. The rabbis taught and wrote about it extensively. Barclay describes them as having a 'priceless heritage of prayer'. The disciples already had this prayerful tradition – and yet they felt they needed to know more. Perhaps they had noticed Jesus' own spiritual discipline of prayer – in many places in the Gospels, we are told that Jesus withdrew by himself to a quiet place to pray. Indeed, at the very start of today's Gospel we are told that 'Jesus was praying'. Perhaps they saw how those times of prayer sustained Jesus in his ministry. Maybe what they saw in Jesus was different to their own traditional practice.

Whatever the reason, they asked to be taught, and Jesus' response was to teach them a prayer; the prayer we now call 'The Lord's Prayer'. The version here in Luke is more succinct than that in Matthew's Gospel, but it contains the same elements. It's a model prayer that we can – and do – use almost exactly as it was given to us, but it also tells us much more about prayer in general and is something to build on. To go into it in the detail it deserves is far beyond the scope of one sermon, so here I'm just going to look at some of the key points it tells us about prayer.

It starts 'Father'. It would have been astonishing to use such a term of familiarity to address God in the 1st Century. In using this form of address, Jesus is showing that God is not distant or unapproachable but close, attentive and concerned about our lives in the way we would expect a loving parent to be.

'Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come'. We should honour the name and nature of God in the way we live our lives. We should desire the coming of his kingdom and do all we are able to live according to its values. To live in ways consistent with our faith we need to seek God's help and power, we can't do it in our own strength.

'Give us each day our daily bread' reminds us that we are dependent on God, not only for what we eat, but for everything.

'Forgive us our sins as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.' Our reliance on God should shape our relationships with others. Just as we receive mercy from God in the forgiveness of our sins, so in thankfulness and trust we should show mercy to others. What a different place the world would be if everyone did that!

'And do not bring us to the time of trial.' This is not to say that we will not face difficulties in our lives – that is patently not the case. Nor does it mean that God will attempt to test us or deceive us in some way. But, just as Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted, so we pray for God to be present with us and to sustain us in the challenges we face.

Five petitions that encompass all our prayers. It's important to note that all these requests are in the plural: teach us, give us, forgive us. We cannot and should not pray for these things individually, just for ourselves personally; we pray for everyone, for all people.

'Lord, teach us to pray' said the disciples. God wants us to pray. He wants us to build a relationship with him, for us to recognise that he is concerned with our well-being, in spite of our imperfections and some of the things we do.

All our readings today tell us that God's desire is to be merciful to and bless his people. In the passage from Hosea, we hear this story of his wife and children that may seem rather odd to us; the wife that is a prostitute, the names of the children that reflect God's punishment on Israel. And yet, despite the severity, this will not last for ever. At the end, there is the promise that, ultimately, the relationship will be renewed; God will be merciful and bless them; that they will be called 'Children of the living God'.

In the passage from Colossians, Paul urges his audience to be rooted and built up in Christ, established in faith just as they were taught and abounding in thanksgiving. He doesn't want them to be led astray, but to receive God's forgiveness and mercy. Prayer is one way in which we can be rooted and built up in our faith, through which we can receive God's forgiveness and mercy.

God's mercy and blessing also characterise the last part of the Gospel reading: 'Ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.' When we do so in accordance with God's will, God will give us good gifts.

'Lord, teach us to pray.' In the Lord's prayer, Jesus provides both a model prayer and a context for prayer that encompasses everything from our basic need for bread to the coming of God's kingdom. We can - and should - listen to our teacher. But we can only learn so much about how to do something by reading about it, or even by watching or listening. We need to do it for ourselves. When I was young, I was taught to play the piano. Whilst my teacher could tell me how to do something and even show me, I really only learned when I tried it for myself. And, even then, I didn't often get it right the first time, I had to practice to improve. Probably I should have practised more than I did. Well, definitely I should have practised more!

So too with prayer. We need to do it and we need to persist. But, unlike playing the piano, prayer is less technique and more an attitude of mind. Through persistence in prayer, by bringing all that concerns us, all the situations we

face to God, we gradually learn to align our own minds and wills with the will of God, build our relationship with God and experience his mercy and blessing.

'Lord, teach us to pray.' Few people will say that they find prayer easy ... other thoughts keep getting in the way, they can't find the words ... although the actual words used are not that important. A while ago, I read an article I was sent from the Financial Times, an interview with the writer Karen Armstrong, with the title 'We're just not good at religion'. She said that in the premodern world, religion was not primarily something that people thought but something they did. So perhaps with prayer, we should spend less time over-thinking it and more time simply getting on with doing it, as best we are able.