

Teach Us How to Pray

a sermon preached on the

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Lections: Hosea 1:1-11; Luke 11:1-13

It's been said, 'Show me a person's prayer, and I'll tell you what their god is like.' Perhaps this is why one of Jesus' disciples asks: "Lord, teach us to pray..."¹ They have been travelling with him, sent out by him, and observed that he was a person of prayer. But what did he pray for? What's the God he prays to like?

The question prompts us to consider our prayer – what is our God like? The small child prays that someone they don't like will get what's coming to them, or that Santa will deliver the toy or baby sister they want, because their god is the omnipotent deity who can manipulate the cosmos to suit the ego needs of the self-centered individual. The great tragedy of mission and evangelism is not that churches are small but that so many adults pray as children. We pray for fine weather, for success in business ventures or exams, for parking spaces, for triumph in the tribe or nation's sports cathedrals, to be freed from the ordinariness of human frailty. I guess it feels more righteous when we pray for the miracle for someone else – yet our prayers for miracles are scandalously particular, self-centredly forgetful of the unquenched suffering of millions. Show me a person's prayer, and I'll tell you what their god is like.

This week a promotional pamphlet called "30 Days: Loving Muslims Through Prayer" landed on my desk.² On the back page there is this warning: "This prayer booklet is not designed to be given to Muslims. They generally will not understand your motivation to intercede for them." Nonsense! They'll understand only too well what the motivation is! They'll be in no doubt that 'prayer' means nothing other than conscripting the deity for a scalp-hunting expedition, that this god is a crusader hell-bent on conquest. It's perfectly clear that the god to whom enthusiasts for the booklet and its cause will be praying is an omnipotent and imperialist deity, as the Editors' Introduction explains their purpose: "to call upon God's sovereign intervention in the lives of Muslims." This is nothing other than the conquistador 'christian' god, probably not much different from the jihad Muslim god, and every other tyrannical deity. Show me a person's prayer, and I'll tell you what their god is like.

Well it's evident from the Hebrew Scriptures that Israel's God was the jealous, interventionist, imperialist deity, the one who could both order and delight in the destruction of Pharaoh's horsemen as well as countless tens of thousands of Canaanites, Ammonites, Jebusites, and so many other 'ites' deemed to be the god's enemies. This is the god whom the prophet Hosea rightly fears, the deity whose jealousy is such that children the prophet and his promiscuous wife bear this God says should be called 'Not pitied' and 'Not my people'.³ For Israel has been unfaithful to their God, having affairs with Baal and the other local deities of Canaan whom they were meant to have rejected completely. "For I the LORD your God am a jealous God."⁴ The call to exclusive faithfulness to YHWH⁵ is witnessed in the long and painful struggle of the ancestors, the judges, the kings, and finally the prophets, and without doubt the great Hebrew breakthrough was the revolutionary leap from polytheism to monotheism. Both Christianity and Islam are inheritors of this momentous epoch-making religious paradigm shift. And so the prayers of the prophets naturally reflect both the jealousy of their deity as well as this god's omnipotence, fierce anger, and capacity to intervene in the affairs of humans as well as in the natural order. Show me a person's prayer, and I'll tell you what their god is like.

But the question obviously arises, when Jesus prays, does *his* prayer reveal this kind of deity, who will imperialistically take over other peoples lands and cultures, change weather patterns, secure parking spaces,

¹ Luke 11:1

² '30 Days of Prayer for the Muslim World', www.30-days.net

³ Hosea 1:6, 9

⁴ Exodus 20:5

⁵ Hosea invokes the name of יהוה YHWH, the Tetragrammaton, the four Hebrew letters of the unpronounceable Name, inappropriately rendered into English as 'Yahweh', but always vocalised by the faithful Jew as 'Adonai', Lord. The Tetragrammaton is rendered in sensitive modern English translations as 'LORD'.

spare the life of one sick child? On all those occasions when Jesus has moved away from both the crowds and the disciples to pray, has he been asking God to destroy his enemies, to smooth out the difficulties of his work, to whip up an enthusiastic band of unswervingly-faithful followers who will take over at Jerusalem, to protect his friends from personal harm, to finance a budget for an international corporate takeover-machine? So many manuals on prayer would seem to suggest that such were Jesus' 'prayer points'.

Well, let us turn to Jesus' prayer. In Luke's version, which is leaner than the more familiar Matthean version of the prayer, Jesus gives them just five prayers: "Abba, Father, holy be your name." "Your kingdom come." "Give us day-by-day bread today." "Forgive us our sin, for we are forgiving others who are indebted to us." "May you not lead us into the time of trial." Show me a person's prayer, and I'll tell you what their God is like!

What does Jesus' prayer tell us about the God to whom he prays? God is both holy, the unnameable Other, the *Mysterium Tremendum*, and yet at the same time intimate, close and fleshy Father/Mother - a great paradox which continues to perplex us! God comes toward us from the future, the Kingdom, that fullness and unity which the evangelist elsewhere describes as the great wedding feast, the banquet.⁶ God is the one who forgives, that is, reconciling all that is severed and disintegrated, and whose capacity to do so is mysteriously dependent on our willingness to do likewise. God is the one who will be with us *not* as conquistador but as companion and in the inescapable labours of the groaning creation which is evolving in travail towards completion. The parable which follows this instruction offers a realistic assessment of human frailty in order to draw a stark comparison between the limited love we can muster and the limitless love of this God.⁷ The teaching which concludes today's gospel fragment can only seem like a return to the child's manipulative and interventionist deity if we forget what Jesus himself has prayed, and, more especially, if we forget the heart of the gospel, the story of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. The well-known, but much misunderstood, words "for everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened"⁸ can only support the child's interventionist Santa-god if one is willing to sever these words from the Jesus who prays in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."⁹ Show me a person's prayer, and I'll tell you what their god is like.

Now all of us have, I suppose, at some time desperately desired to return to the childish state, to have at our disposal the interventionist deity, the wand-waving cosmic Watchmaker, to rescue us from one trouble or another, to spare us, or some one we love, from suffering of one kind or another. I am talking here about something I know only too well in myself. But disciples of Jesus gather around a Table to participate in the bread of life and the cup of suffering. At the Eucharistic feast we are formed in the prayer of Jesus: "When we pray we are in the presence of the Christlike God, a God whose hands are tied by love for us and the world. To make our recognition of this concrete the truest image we can have in mind of the God to whom we pray is that of the crucified Jesus. That must make a difference to our prayers. It is bound to inhibit us from making many of the petitions we might have put to the former image of omnipotence, but it will certainly bring us closer to the Father to whom Jesus prayed. The true meaning of prayer is communion."¹⁰ Show me a person's prayer, and I'll tell you what their god is like.

So at this Eucharistic Table we enter into communion with the God is wholly Other and yet simultaneously as close as our breath and blood. At Eucharist we are welcomed by the God who comes to us from the future we cannot yet see, the eschatological banquet of the Lamb, the Kingdom. At Eucharist this God offers not a private filling station to fuel personal 'spirituality' but bread for all humankind, for all the lost, the least and the last. At Eucharist God fashions a cosmos founded on forgiveness and reconciliation – our enemies belong at this Table. At Eucharist we and the whole human mass are broken open, with Christ in his trials, for the life of the world – this is the Table of both sustenance *and* suffering. This is why at Eucharist our hands and our eyes are open in prayer – open to ourselves, to each other, to all human suffering and joy, to the Christlike God. Show me a person's prayer, and I'll tell you what their god is like.

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⁶ Luke 14:15-24

⁷ Luke 11:5-8

⁸ Luke 11:10

⁹ Luke 22:42

¹⁰ Taylor J V, *The Christlike God*, London: SCM Press, 1992, pp273, 275