

Trinity 6, July 27th, 2025

8.00 Holy Communion at All Saints, Oakham;

**10.30 Holy Communion at St. Peter and St. Paul,
Langham**

Genesis 18.20-32, Luke 11.1-13

When Luke wrote his gospel, he set it in an overall chronological framework that went from Jesus's birth, through the ministry of John the Baptist, to his ministry in Galilee and his final trip to Jerusalem, and to his death and resurrection. But within that overall framework, he tends to group his subject matter thematically rather than chronologically. And that is the case with our gospel reading today, where he puts together three short sayings of Jesus on the subject of prayer. The first is of course Luke's version of the Lord's prayer, here in rather a terse form, with some of the usual lines missed out. Jesus, like any preacher, almost certainly reused his material on a number of occasions, and no doubt precisely what he said varied from time to time. But the main phrases are there, translated in this version in a more literal way than usual, to give a somewhat different emphasis to that we usually have. We forgive everyone indebted to us – not just because they have done something to harm us in some way, but with a wider meaning of cancelling debts of all sorts. And there is the line about not being brought to the time of trial. Again a perfectly good translation, but one that some don't like in the modern version of the Lord's prayer, and indeed it doesn't flow as well liturgically as asking not to be led into temptation. But the translation again widens the meaning – a request not just to be kept from temptation to do wrong, but to be kept safe and secure in all circumstances that might throw our lives into confusion and chaos.

The second passage is an illustration of Jesus's sense of humour, of someone battering on the door of his neighbour's house at night asking for help in satisfying the obligations of hospitality to others. I wonder if this was based on a memory of Jesus in Nazareth? And in the end it is better just to get out of bed, and to provide some help, than to try to ignore the knocking. As ever with stories like this, we shouldn't build too much on it – God does not have to be persuaded to get out of bed to answer our prayers. But it is an illustration of the need to be persistent in prayer – and indeed the modern translations often give this passage that heading.

The third passage is one of those memorable quotations of Jesus that stick in the mind.

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.

Again, a call to persistent prayer – to “search” implies something that is more than a casual request; and to knock at a door implies something more than untargeted and nebulous requests. The saying is followed by another of Jesus’s over the top mini-parables – who would give their child a snake instead of a fish, or a scorpion instead of an egg. Nobody of course who is not wholly demented. But God answers prayer requests with the good, the ultimate good of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This idea of persistence is prayer is also found in our Old Testament reading of course. It is part of the rather uncomfortable story that ultimately leads to the destruction of Sodom. Abraham is visited by three angelic figures, one of whom is identified with God. Here again the obligations of hospitality lead him to give them a place to stay and to set a meal before them, as we read in last week’s reading. A prophecy is given that Abraham’s wife Sara will become pregnant in her old age, and then the conversation turns to the state of what have been called the cities on the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah, known for their evil ways. The two accompanying angles are sent there to assess the situation, and then we have the account of Abraham’s pleading with God to save the lives of those who are righteous in the cities, set into a dialogue form, which, incidentally bears all the hallmarks of a story told orally and passed down the generations. Because of Abraham’s persistence, God agrees that nothing would be done if only ten righteous folk were found in the city. What follows however is uncomfortable reading – the two angels are met by Lot, Abraham’s nephew, a morally ambiguous character, who tries to protect them from the men of the city, who call for them to be produced that they might “know” them to use the biblical euphemism, breaching the obligations of hospitality in the ultimate way. The angels, unsurprisingly are not able to be captured and order Lot and his family out of the city – which is perhaps the answer to Abraham’s prayer – before its utter destruction.

So what does all this tell us? Over the centuries and millennia, many millions of sermons will have been preached on prayer, and to say that I am suffering from imposter syndrome in preaching another is putting it mildly. I am ever more conscious as the years go by that I only paddle in the shallows of prayer in comparison to others, both lay and ordained. But for me, there are two messages that come from these readings.

The first is that in some way prayer is primarily about aligning our thoughts, our ways of thinking and acting, with the will of God. This seems to me to be clear in the words of the Lord’s prayer, which begins by focusing on God, the Father, whose image we all bear to a greater or lesser extent, and on his holiness, his otherness, and we pray that his kingdom might come, and his will might be done. That the reign of God in our lives, in the world around us might become evermore real. That to me seems the primary aim of prayer. The requests that follow in the prayer are in a way requests that enable us to do God’s work in the coming of the kingdom – for our daily bread, which is a translation of words that seems to refer to ongoing physical needs; for forgiveness, so we might be released from all that binds and hinders us in the work of the kingdom; for the ability to forgive and to let others off obligations to us, so that they too might be freed for God’s work; and to be

keep safe in whatever circumstances we might find ourselves in. Very little there in terms of asking for things.

If we look at the sayings of Jesus that follow, the same point emerges. That when we ask, when we knock, what is given is the Holy Spirit – the Spirit that equips and transforms us for the work of mission, for bringing the good news in the world. Again there is little there in terms of seeking our own physical needs.

The second point that seems important to me, is that prayer is outward looking, looking to the needs of others. The Lord's prayer was delivered to the disciples, Jesus' followers, as a group and the Lord's prayer is all in the plural. OUR Father..., Give US... Forgive US.. Do not bring US to the time of trial. Prayer is about asking for the needs of all of Jesus' followers to be able to align themselves with God's will and purpose, whatever that might entail. And again we see that in dramatic form in the story of Abraham – his prayer was for others. He perhaps had a self interest in praying for his nephew Lot and his family, but his prayer was wider – for all potential followers of God in the cities of the plain.

So these readings perhaps suggest that our prayers should become more outward looking, and we should seek to align ourselves with the will and purpose of God. This applies I think to all sorts of prayer, ranging from the daily intercessory to the more meditative and contemplative. But it begs a bigger question, which I am going to leave with you without making any attempt to answer – indeed I am not sure I would be able to do so. Why, if God is all seeing and all knowing, is prayer required at all? God knows what is going to happen, so why bother praying? These are deep questions indeed, that would take more than a short sermon to even unpack. So it's something for you to take away and think about. But to think about such things does seem to me to show how much men and women, you and I, are valued in God's sight – that he allows us, through prayer, to be come an integral part of the outworking of his purposes in some mysterious way. To become involved in the Opus Dei, the work of God. Again, as I have done often enough before, I end with a quote from C S Lewis that says something about our status in God's eyes. Words of Aslan, the Christ figure in the Narnia stories to the Pevensiey children.

“You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve,” said Aslan. “And that is both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth. Be content.”