



Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 24 July 2022

READINGS

Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19); Luke 11:1-13

Ask, seek, knock

Good morning to our online worshippers. Thank you for being part of our service this morning, and may your prayers unite with ours, we listen to God is trying to tell us through this act of worship.

All of our readings this morning feature, to some extent, shortcomings of those who would follow God, and various attempts to lead people back to God. The most fearful one is the prophet Hosea, whose obedience to God leads to a miserable life with an unfaithful wife, with children, only one of whom is definitely his if we read between the lines, and whose names illustrate God's great displeasure at the broken, corrupt society of the people of Israel. However in the midst of this, Hosea does promise forgiveness and restoration and God seems to exclude Judah from the promised destruction at this point. The Colossians are allowing all sorts of either fashionable or scary teachings to affect their relationship with Christ, and Paul reminds them very strongly of their membership of Christ's body and what that means. It doesn't need any extras to make it better. In the Gospel passages Jesus is responding to the request of the disciples, who are wanting him to be "like John" who taught his disciples to pray. Again, what is going on around them is affecting their attitude to Jesus, but Jesus' reply implies that their relationship to God is a close one.

All three of these passages illustrate how close God is to God's people, and how important this closeness is. The metaphor from the prophet Hosea – that of an unfaithful wife who represents Israel, and whose children's names reflect how God sees the betrayal and disobedience of the people of Israel, show what happens when people stray from who they were supposed to be and what they were supposed to do. How often do we see this. Most people who do prison ministry say that most of the inmates are people from dysfunctional and abusive homes. Rot anywhere, in a government, in an institution, in a business, a church or a school, leads to dysfunctionality at all levels, and those who try to keep the thing going in an honest or ethical manner end up burnt out and disillusioned. We see throughout this prophecy, Hosea could not save his wife and restore his family anymore than God could bring the kingdom of Israel back into relationship with Godself.

The Colossians were either being harassed by those who insisted they become Jewish first and then Christian, hence the need for circumcision, or else they were living in a Greek environment with all the different Gods that Hellenistic culture had. They were doing what a lot of us do. We believe in Jesus, but we sneak a peek at our horoscope, or we do those personality tests that are all over social media, and if we are honest, we have an idea of where we would like to be in life, and Christianity is one of many "add-ons" which we use to get to the magazine-perfect life. Paul reminds us that Christ is where we

begin and end. If we are fully in Christ, then we begin and end in Christ, and if Christ chooses to use magazine articles and personality tests and punishing gym routines and whatever to bring us closer to him, that becomes part of our relationship to him, not the means by which we get there. Paul emphasizes the fact that our identity is in Christ, and we are initiated into his body. We don't need anything else.

For the Gospel, I would like to look first at the second part. Jesus compares our prayers to God by letting us see ourselves as "God" and other people's requests as prayers. A neighbour who has nothing to give unexpected guests asks a neighbour for food to feed them. In those days, houses were one roomed places on two levels. The upper level was where the family slept on mats on the floor, and their food was stored along the edged and on shelves built into the sides. The lower level was where the animals slept. If a man was to open his door in the middle of the night, it would be completely dark, he would have to extricate himself and step over the family on the floor, would have to find the spare food, and then, hoping not to wake the animals as well, would have to go to the door and open it. Hopefully the neighbour would have a light. We need to understand too, that this area was like parts of the Free State and the karoo. Hot and dry in the day, and cold and dry at night. That means that desert creatures like snakes and scorpions would crawl into the only warm places they could find, which was in the houses of the people living there. Now if a child woke in the night and wanted something to eat, the parent would get up and give him or her either a dried fish, a little black fish which was long and thin, and could be mistaken for a small desert snake sheltering in a corner of the house, or the parent would give the child an egg, which he or she would make sure was not a round, egg-sized curled up scorpion. The darkness would have made it challenging, and the parent would be very careful that the child got what would nourish it, and not what would kill.

The point Jesus is making is, that if we, who in both these scenarios, the neighbour or the child, would be grumpy and annoyed, but we do what is asked anyway, how much more would a loving father God go to a lot of trouble to give us what we needed, however persistent we could be? Jesus is saying that we don't need a formula to pray. We sommer just ask!!!

So let's go back and look at the "Lord's Prayer." Some of the oldest manuscripts give a very short version of Luke's version indeed. What we say Sunday by Sunday comes from Matthew and seems to have been added on to by others. The short version is:

Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.

That's it. Now bear in mind, other gospels have other words, that Jesus would have taught people how to pray in many different contexts, and the traditions of the early church would have been added to by those who remember Jesus or the apostles saying this or that. But here, Jesus is talking to his disciples who should know more than the general public, Luke is showing that Jesus is making the point - we don't need elaborate words. We keep it short and to the point.

But there is something else Jesus is showing us. look at the structure of the prayer. Firstly, God is "Father." That implies immediately we relate to God as "family", and we call God by the name which describes this relationship. Then "Hallowed be your name" means that we regards God as holy. "Father", doesn't mean cheap familiarity, it means a loving relationship, but we are relating to GOD, our creator and the beginning and end of everything we know. We need to give God due honour. And the next part, "Your kingdom come," shows that we appreciate who God is, and we want to become part of that. We value what God is, and agree to become part of it. Then the practicalities. We want and need bread every day.

Not cake, not a big car, not a scholarship to Harvard. Just bread. We ask God for what will make us live well, and no extras. Presumably the luxuries we enjoy, if honestly gained, are regarded as wonderful manifestations of God's abundant grace, and we are thankful for them. The bread we need. The butter and jam show how much God loves us, rather than a result of our hard work.

Then we recognize our human frailty and ask God to forgive us those things we did wrong, and we also recognize the frailty in other human beings, and acknowledge God wants us to forgive them and remain in relationship to them. And we also recognize our own weaknesses and ask God to save us from being tempted by being put into circumstances that are too difficult for us to deal with. This becomes an acknowledgement of our common humanity and our dependence on God, which we experience as being at one with everyone in the body of Christ.

So to summarise: we recognise the greatness of God, we express our willingness to identify with God, we ask for what we need both in terms of sustenance and protection from what would lead us astray, and we take responsibility for what we do, and also are willing to be in good relationship with others who are on the same road we are travelling.

So to look at the other two readings. Look at the citizens of Colossae who are looking away from their identity in Christ and are letting themselves be led astray by the "should and oughts and why don't yous" of their society. See how anxiously Paul brings them back into relationship with Christ and how earnestly he speaks to them of Christ's salvation. Compare the Gospel parent who feeds the child, or served the neighbour to the wayward Gomer and her unhappy children in Hosea. When God is not part of a society, it spirals out of control and even its religion becomes a travesty.

So in our rather depressing world of today, where it seems God is of no consequence, what can we do? Three things, which are only a start, but with God's help, God can lead where we need to go. Firstly, be very aware of our identity as people for whom Christ died. It's an awesome bit of grace, and one we have heard so often, we don't realise how very special it is. Let us be aware of it. Secondly, let us look again at what being a Christian means. Not being a good person. Any religion has that, but being Jesus' friends, and being able to call God "Father." We belong to the family firm, and what upsets God, upsets us. Let us allow ourselves to grow into that big-hearted love, and yearning for forgiveness and restoration of all the lost people whom God so dearly loves. And thirdly, let our prayer life be as Jesus wants it to be. Ask, seek knock. We don't need a formula to talk to God. God put words in our mouths before we even knew what they were. And let us keep our eyes open to see what God is doing, and our ears open to notice and listen to what God wants us to do. They won't be big things. We are not big people, but if every Christian pulled out one little brick out of the wall of cruelty, evil, corruption and injustice, the wall will soon become unstable and will fall down. And we truly believe the extra bits of the Lord's prayer "Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever." We have two choices. We are "in" or we are "out." Let's all choose to be In, in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

Amen