

7 Manifesto

In the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus returns to Galilee sometime after his baptism, we are told how he went and settled not in his own town of Nazareth but in the bustling lakeside town of Capernaum, in the ancient land of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. His coming was like a light in the darkness, as the prophet Isaiah had foretold:

Land of Zebulun and Naphtali!
The sea road beyond the Jordan,
cosmopolitan Galilee!
The people covered in darkness have seen a blaze of light;
on the land of the shadow of death the dawn has risen. (Isaiah 8:23; 9:1)

Jesus' message was the good news that "The kingdom of God is at hand." And it was still good news that he said: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." That "Repent" was God's invitation into a kingdom so different from the miserable way of the world that only a radical change of heart would see anyone ready for it; and it was a promise that such a radical change of heart was possible. It was an invitation into the world of God, a very different world where God rules and even broken humanity can be changed and saved from its ruin.

People listened to Jesus, and in the town of Capernaum, as Mark also tells us, he collected disciples. Among those who began to follow him were the brothers Simon and Andrew, from a fishing family, and the two sons of Zebediah, who ran a small fishing business.

From Capernaum, Jesus went about Galilee with his message, and wherever he went he taught in their meetings, announcing the big change, the good news of God's kingdom. He healed people who were sick or lame and soon the friends of the sick and the lame began coming to him in crowds, bringing many who were suffering, crippled, disturbed or insane. And he healed them. Something beautiful, joyful and very different had broken into their world.

He proclaimed the kingdom of God as an imminent reality. Indeed, he spoke as if the rule of God had already begun among them; and the power of his teaching and his healing was surely evidence of it. It had been a long time, their waiting, but suddenly, there was no more time to wait, only just time to change and be ready for God. For the world and the rules of the world were already under reconstruction. Nothing would continue as it was. The reality of God, God's hand in human lives, God's breath, God's life and action was already among them overturning everything else that claimed to be reality.

Jesus gathered his disciples together and taught them:
Blessed are the poor in God's Spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.
Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are the suffering, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice – they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the compassionate, for they shall receive compassion.

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Blessed are those whose hearts are genuine, for they shall see God.
Blessed are those who work for peace, for they shall be called the children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of justice, for the kingdom of
heaven belongs to them. (Matt 5: 3 – 10)

As soon as Jesus opens his mouth, it's obvious that we are faced with a challenge to faith: to believe in him and so to trust in his judgement, or not. "Blessed are the poor in God's Spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth." These aren't the kind of ideas you can test by getting together a panel of experts. You can't get anywhere by conducting an opinion poll to see if the world, or the poor, or the gentle agree with him. It is clear that Jesus has an unequivocal view of the world and the human condition, and it becomes a question whether (against a mass of contrary opinion and evidence) you believe in him or not.

That view is not some static judgement about how things are and how they will always be, as if the world cannot be changed. Blessed are the poor, full stop. In every case the blessing does not consist in recommending the present: the poverty, the mourning, the persecution, or even the more positive states, the compassion and the sincerity of heart. In every case it is a dynamic vision: that present state is going somewhere. Under God's rule it is moving quickly and directly to a blessed conclusion, and therein lies its blessing. The poor are not blessed because poverty is a good thing. Unhappiness and persecution are not to be indulged in as a morbid or masochistic pleasure. They are states to be escaped, if possible (Jesus himself got away from persecution when he could) but when people do not escape, when they suffer, poverty or persecution, the blessing lies in the new way beyond and out of these that God is making, the new life and relationship with God in which God is sharing their cause.

That new life, which is the very character of the rule and kingdom of God, is not a mere reversal of their present state. The poor are not blessed because God is going to make them rich. The persecuted aren't going to get their chance to put their tormentors in prison. The sad, the unhappy, are not just going to have a change of fortunes with something turning up to make them happy again. The sad are blessed because God is going to comfort them. They will experience what no one does or can until unhappiness has hit them: they will discover the comforting of God.

What Jesus sees is the active befriending of God, moving with the poor thru poverty to a new world order; thru gentleness (not the deterrent credibility of weapons) to permanent security; thru the hard work of peace to the liberty of the children of God, thru slander, imprisonment and torture to the justice of God's rule on earth; and the blessing lies in that movement towards the kingdom of God. It is never just a reversal of misfortune, but the actual building of something new and adventurous that comes from God's intervention for the poor and the suffering.

(This is something very pertinent to the work of a church like mine, in the Blackbird Leys area of Oxford. Called as we are to minister in a low-income, marginalized area, we have found ourselves helping local people to meet their own needs by setting up an advice centre, an adventure playground, pre-school organisations and their own credit union. In this work, I have found, the challenge for the church is always to discover a new way of being and working together which God is creating out of

disadvantage, rather than just attempting to reverse the disadvantage and make everyone in our area the same as the “advantaged”. The poverty and disadvantage are to be removed indeed, only displaced not by wealth and advantage but by a new way of being community.)

Which is the challenge to us. As soon as we begin to hear Jesus, whether we recognise him as the Messiah or are not yet sure, his words start challenging us to believe in a new dynamic of this world and its relationships, in a movement of God with the poor and the persecuted, where God’s rule is redeeming action, promise and blessing. There is no room here for a faith that is merely contemplative or doctrinal. Any real belief in words like these will get up and go, moving with the eager movement of God to live in the plan which God has put before us, even as God delivers it.

If you start here where the teaching of Jesus starts in Matthew’s gospel, you won’t get locked into false dichotomies between faith and works. From this beginning, you cannot build a belief in Jesus which fails to be actively involved in the world, with God who is changing it. Your faith will live in works, God’s works in you, inspired by faith.

In the new world order which Jesus announces, some of our values are affirmed and lifted into new dimensions of fulfilment: the eager pursuit of justice and peace, a genuine character, peace-building. And some of the values (gentleness and forgiveness) about which we are ambivalent or doubtful are strongly reaffirmed. And some values are proclaimed which we do not recognise and have no words for, for they are the new values of God’s own solidarity with the suffering: the poor, the unhappy, the persecuted.

If the picture of the world as the world presents itself is based on realism, then Jesus’ words are naïve and hopeless idealism. But if he is talking about some other world – a different place or a different time – then they are irrelevant. In neither case would they be worth our belief. But Jesus is talking about the reality of the world in which he lived and walked, and that is still our world in which his words reach and challenge us. They are not naïve idealism, but the utter realism of one who knows God and knows that the world as we recognise it is the diseased and hollow construct of our ignorance. His words are the realism of one who sees the kingdom of God.

If we believe in him, we will believe that the world and reality are as he saw them. And that vision will, more than anything else, determine what we do. The works of our belief will challenge and overturn the world as it seems to be.

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Some of the words in Jesus’ famous blessings need comment, for they are not easily translatable. (Words of feeling and value seldom are, because they owe much to the culture and the experience in which they are framed.) When Jesus proclaims the blessing on the poor, Matthew tells us they are Poor “in the spirit” (or that they are blessed in the spirit). I don’t pretend to know exactly what this means, but I do know that it doesn’t mean “poor” in some sense that is different from material poverty. It is not an opening for the rich or the comfortable to include themselves as poor, on the

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basis of some “spiritual” poverty. (Luke, who also records Jesus’ blessings, leaves it simply as “Blessed are the poor.”) Clearly, Jesus’ followers knew that he meant the poor.

Then there is “justice” – “dikaiosune” in the Greek. It is sometimes translated as “righteousness” - an ugly word to those who are not steeped in the religious tradition which gives it meaning. It means “rightness” in the sense of everything being right: humanity in its right relationship with God and among themselves. It is sometimes seen as a private or other-worldly virtue of pious obedience to God, to which earthly justice in politics and economics is hardly relevant – but to think that, you have to tear up half the writings of the prophets of Israel and pretend that Jesus didn’t know about them. I have translated the word as “justice” because it does include everything that we recognise under this term – justice in land and trade and work and money, and the recognition of human rights - and also because, if once we commit ourselves to that kind of rightness, we soon find out how it is bound up with the “righteousness” of a good and true relationship with God.

Finally, “peace”. I think that the word used by Matthew should be understood as a Greek translation from the Aramaic of Jesus, behind which lies the Hebrew “shalom”: a concept of order, security and well-being that was wider than the mere cessation of hostility. It reflected the well being in which every family lived secure in the legendary times of Solomon, in their own land, “under their own vine and fig tree”. To build this kind of peace is to work for a social order in which a deep personal security liberates each one for sound and happy relationships with others. It may have as much to do with honest and humane administration as with the settling of quarrels.

The blessings are a manifesto for the kingdom of God. They are not, as I was once taught to believe, “counsels of perfection”, advice for those who wish to go further than demanded by Christ’s commandments. For they are not advice at all, but a definitive statement of the way reality is: challenging us to see thru the “realism” that would dismiss them as unrealisable ideals; to believe that Jesus speaks to us with more than the authority of our own eyes and ears, with more than the combined wisdom of an experienced and cynical world.

He describes the world of God’s kingdom, the sphere of God’s rule in this world where the Messiah will govern in the strength of God. He gives us God’s evaluation of the human predicament. The blessings of Jesus do not describe the world only as God intends it to be, or as it will be when the work of God is all done, for then the promises: consolation, satisfaction, reconciliation, vision and possession of the land, will all be fulfilled, and here they are still promises: “for they shall be ...” However, the blessings are already blessings. They describe a powerful dynamic of now, in which suffering itself is already transformed with the power of the new order it is ushering in, and so they challenge us to face the worst in the world, honestly and bravely, knowing that tho it can still hurt us, it is already constrained to give way, because God has intervened and the Messiah has come.

Above all, the blessings are a proclamation to the poor and the persecuted that already the friendship and energy of God belongs to them. If those of us who are not poor and not persecuted want to share in that blessing, we must share in God’s outreach to them. We must put ourselves actively on their side. If we want to enter the kingdom

of God, we must find it among those to whom it belongs: not indeed in the hopelessness of the poor and the shame of the weak who have nothing to protect them from the bullying of the strong, as if we should just accept their predicament as a mysterious dispensation of providence; but in vigorous commitment which engages with that shame and despair to change it, to turn it into hope, determination and grateful pride; in God's own commitment and vigour, which we will count ourselves blessed to share.

Those who are willing to be engaged in this work of God's, believing the words of the Messiah, will find themselves gifted with strength to stand up and to speak up for right and justice, in the face of nations, governments and corporations, and in spite of the scorn and rejection of colleagues and friends. For those who believe, the blessings of the kingdom will be the rock on which their lives are built, foundation for a work that will change the world. What they have entered into is not just a program of private regeneration, but a public and revolutionary one for changing the world. As such it challenges the world, explicitly and bodily, and the world will meet that challenge with hostility, scorn, misrepresentation and persecution. But,

Blessed are you when they pour scorn on you and persecute you, when they slander you and brand you as evil. Be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.
(Matt 5: 11)

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In all of this, one thing is so obvious that it might be overlooked and its significance missed: that Jesus speaks to his followers, to instruct them. Whatever his mission, authority and power, his task from the start is to teach and empower his followers. God has not sent them someone to take control and impose a new order, but Jesus, to instil and cultivate that new order in their lives. He has come to make friends, to win their trust and to point them towards the coming rule of God, for what is coming will come about in them.

“You are the light of the world.” A manifesto might tell the waiting world “We are ...” but Jesus’ addresses it to his followers: “You are ...” He does not begin with “I am”, for he first tells the people who believe in him who they are. In fact, he makes them who they are, by his recognition of them.

“You are the light of the world.” It’s a wild claim to come from a vagabond preacher, and even wilder that he makes it of others who are only starting to learn what he can teach them. Jesus’ followers are the light of a world that would seem so dark that nothing could pierce its blackness until the whole world is done away with. And there are those who see it that way: that the world will have no light until Christ comes in the future – that we can only hang on until a new world begins. But that was not Jesus’ teaching. He taught that we who follow him are the light of the world. If the world still flounders in hopeless darkness, then it’s we who are dysfunctional.

We are not the light of another world. It’s not for us to tell the world about a different world where there is light. That is a sad and destructive parody of the Christian calling. Whatever we may have to say about another world, a future world, or the world of heaven, it has meaning and authority only in so far as we are light to this

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world, only in so far as it is rescue and hope for the troubled world in which we now live and have our calling. To witness to Jesus, we have to fulfil the promise made of us. For all its darkness, this present world is to see its light.

God does not light a candle to put it away in the biscuit tin or hide it under the bed. You can no more hide the daylight of the coming Messiah than you can hide a city built on a mountainside. And that is the light that breaks out in the lives of Jesus' followers. It shines on a darkness of money, privilege, fear, suspicion, war and cynicism, for that is the world in which his followers live; and it is light for that darkness, the one hope that dark world has. Because of Jesus' followers, there will be vision: people will see the work of God in their work and will bless God for it.

But they will also be hidden in the world, like salt in the cooking or yeast in the flour. They will do their job often unseen, transforming that hopeless and tasteless mass into a dynamic, living, moral and confident society. Because of them, there will be hope. Because of them, there will once again be the taste of victory in people's lives, the smell and rich savour of meaning and value, the joyful experience of faith.

Jesus spoke of a new order in which law is not only obeyed but perfected. He hasn't come to replace the law which Israel already had from God, but he has come to complete it in a fulfilment both deep and spectacular. The law forbids murder, but Jesus' fulfilment of the law points to the murder committed in the heart whenever we hate and despise another. It's not only people's outward actions that are to be brought under control, but we will find our inmost thoughts searched and purified by God's strict judgement. We are challenged not only to refrain from evil but to keep clear of the prompts and causes of evil. Not only killing, but hatred itself is wrong; not only adultery, but the lust that imagines it.

The law limited revenge to the extent of the injury suffered: measure for measure, without any addition for injured pride or warning against the next time. But the followers of Jesus have a higher standard. They are to be like God who is their Father and who gives his gifts to good and bad alike. They are to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute them. Where they suffer evil and injury, they are to return good. It doesn't mean much if you love your own, those who love you. But if you love those who attack you, you are children of God.

The Law was an instrument of social control. Passing judgement on unacceptable behavior, the well-behaved mite group themselves together and identify miscreants to reaffirm their own worth as law-abiding people. The Law gave you a firm and authoritative basis for criticising, and the better you knew the Law, the more confidently you mite point out the faults in other people's conduct. But of course, this very ability to identify other people's failings mite be deflecting any consciousness of your own. Whatever the Law to which Jesus was pointing them, it was not to be an excuse for fault-finding. His followers, taught by him, were to take note first of all of the failings to be found in themselves.

You say to your neighbor, "You've got a speck of dust in your eye. Let me get it out for you. You hypocrite! Get the plank out of your own eye first, then you mite see clearly enuf to tackle the speck in someone else's. (Matt 7:3-5)

Jesus' followers, having started by keeping the law, are to go beyond it. The law regulates the harsh practice of a hardened people, in divorce, in their invocation of God to affirm their otherwise unreliable promises, in exacting revenge for injury. All these things the law regulated, not because the regulations represented ideal behaviour, but because they limited the harm. Jesus' followers are to find a new way of living where the regulations no longer apply: because they no longer see divorce as a convenient way out of marriage; because they no longer use unreliable words; because they no longer brood on revenge. And if they use the Law to criticise, it is to be as a critical standard they apply to themselves.

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Jesus' manifesto is an ambitious and idealistic one, so much so that it is often abandoned, even by Christians, as something suited to a better world than this; which in this world only the greatest saints might follow, and then only as it affects their personal lives and relationships. (Except for the bit on divorce. We've been happy to make that a binding rule on even the weakest of our family.) But Jesus was giving his followers a program for this world. This is how they are to live in the world where they find themselves now, where they have enemies, and where they are hurt, where they are doubted, and where they are tempted to lust and rage. This, the program for a new world order, is the way they are to live here and to be the light of this world.

We can do it, but not because Jesus expects us, by the exertion of our will, to be able to live up to high standards. Nor is it that, if we make the effort, we will find it's not so difficult. We can do it because Jesus is offering his followers a place in God's own program for radically changing the world. Jesus' followers will be able to do these things, because they are living in the power of God as God's children, able to ask their Father to bring about the new world they are striving to realise, and to bring it about in their own lives.

At the heart of Jesus' manifesto is a prayer. It is the prayer, the model of all prayer, for it is the life-source and energy of his followers, the rationale and the resourcing of all their efforts. It is both their program and their means of fulfilling the program, their appeal to God for God's work to be done, for God's power and rule to be established and for heaven to begin to be, here on earth.

Jesus told his followers, This is how you should pray:
Our Father in heaven,
May your name be honoured,
your kingdom come,
and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (Matt 6: 9 – 10)

Prayer at its best and highest, at its most faithful and obedient, is asking God. The "prayer of petition", far from being the lowest or crudest, is the prayer "par excellence", the one that Jesus himself gave us to pray. In coming empty to God and asking God for everything, we show ourselves to be children of God – and you cannot go higher than that.

At the heart of Jesus' manifesto we are shown how that manifesto is to be fulfilled: that we, the followers of Jesus, are to ask God to accomplish it. Everything that Jesus

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has urged is possible, because it is the will of God who has the power to carry it out. But even as Jesus has focused all his energy and his program in his followers, so God will not act to carry out God's purpose, except by inviting us to ask for it. The rule of God is not for the benefit of God, just as the power of the Messiah is not for the benefit of the Messiah. It is for us, the world, for the people who live in darkness, and so it will come about only at our wanting and asking.

It is when we want the glory of God, for the name of God to be honoured, when we want the rule of God to be established here, and people to live the will of God as perfectly here as it is lived in heaven, that we will turn to God our Father, the only one able to bring such a thing about, and ask God to accomplish it. And if we ask not in despair but in faith, with confidence in our Father, we will know that we are answered. Our own actions will be the living body of our faith and God's very answer to our prayer.

The Lord's Prayer is the heart and summary of the Christian manifesto. It sets the whole pattern of our Christian life, teaching us that we are to seek the perfect will of God not in some other or future world, but here; that we are to ask for and therefore to believe in and strive for the rule of God in our world. "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth ..."

It is set in the middle of Jesus' commands, because it is not to be a passive asking, the easy dependency of those who ask because they don't want the effort of doing for themselves. It is set in the middle of a powerful and challenging description of the way we are to live, because it is the passionate prayer of those who, when they ask, have already given over their whole life and energy to that for which they ask; because all their striving is for a life and a world that shows the rule of God, where the will of God is done, even as perfectly as it is done in heaven.

The asking of the Lord's Prayer is not an abstract "Your will be done" as if we do not know and do not feel for whatever that will might be. It is not just a polite or politic deference to God who is more powerful and has greater right. When we ask for God's will to be done, it is because we have been given a glimpse of God's desire, and it has set our hearts on fire. "Your kingdom come." We have tasted possibilities in which our own energies and hopes explode, craving an adventure which will consume our lives, to which, we find, God has already dedicated our lives. It is to ask for the rule of God with a desire born not of our fantasies but of the blessings we have heard declared. It is to cry out to God from a life already committed to living in those blessings.

That is why it is the perfect prayer. It expresses all those levels of prayer we are taught to consider higher than mere petition: the petition itself is adoration and praise, flowing spontaneously from a life already won by God, given over to adoration and filled with the highest form of praise, which is imitation and obedience. To ask God, as God's children, for the rule of God to be established on earth is to adore the One who is ultimate value and ultimate reality, desiring nothing more than that God's desire should triumph. To pray the Lord's Prayer (as distinct from reciting it) is to express our total commitment to that triumph and to acknowledge our total dependence on God. It is total repentance; it is the ultimate of contemplation; it is the declaration of a revolution.

To live the lord's Prayer, as we must if we pray it, is to believe. In Jesus' manifesto, in the Sermon on the Mount as we call it, and especially in the prayer at the heart of it, lies the true harmony of faith and good work. To believe in God, to have faith in Jesus, is to step confidently and eagerly into the work he sets before us: nothing less than living the life and doing the deeds of a world transformed. Our true relationship with him, and thru him with God, is that we believe him enuf not just to preach and defend his doctrines or to live a respectable and law-abiding life, or even to work miracles in his name (for many will work miracles and still fail to follow him) but to do the will of God, as he has set it out here.

To believe, is to live as if the teachings of Jesus are real: for they are. It is to follow thru, working in pursuit of the justice we hunger for, making peace, speaking up and taking action even to the point where a hostile world turns upon us and beats us. It is to send our money and our property coursing towards the needy, in the conviction that that is the way it is ment to flow in the kingdom of God. It is to purge our lives of self-seeking and self-interest (especially when that's dressed up and inflated as "national interest") so that, with clean hearts, we see God. It is to go to the sorrowing and comfort them, knowing that there, and not in any careful and expensive provision for ourselves, will we find real comfort. It is to do all this because we have it from Jesus himself that this is the real world of God, the way for his followers, and because, believing him, we pray every day for this kind of world to come about.

In the teaching of Jesus there is no distance between faith and works. The faith that he seeks to build in us is our obedience to the will of God, submitting all our work, all our energy, all our desire, to God's passionate desire to rule our world, to be its energy and authority. Faith is a deep confidence that is able to take action because it trusts in God. Such faith has an energy that cannot be channelled into the mere defence of doctrines or restricted to a clearly marked out sphere of personal and "church" activity. It claims everything as God's, seeks the rule of God in everything, actively; it works and it does.

The faith that scorns to work may indeed prophesy and work miracles in the Lord's name, for God responds to every kind of faith, but if in the end it never learns to do the will of God, it will be rejected.

"I do not know you. Get away from me you evildoers." (Matt 7:23)

And the faith that is pleasing to God is the faith that inspires us to do the will of God, and to encourage others to do it.

The one who keeps and teaches my instructions will be famous in the kingdom of God. (Matt 5, 19)

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Because God knows how much we need, and desires to meet our needs, God wants us to ask:

Give us our bread today;
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who are in debt to us.

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Do not bring us to the test,
But deliver us from evil.

(Matt. 6: 11 – 13)

In all our confidence we still know our need and our neediness, but we also know who meets our needs. The prayer of our faith does not float above the material world and the world of daily human needs, but looks to God for those needs: for food, forgiveness, tolerance and security. It is the prayer of people whose bodies get hungry; who struggle with a sense of debt in the relationships that are breaking around them all the time, and which they in their clumsiness are breaking; who know that if they are put to the test – as Jesus was put to the test in the wilderness – they will not pass it; who do not find in themselves strength sufficient against evil, but look to God to rescue them. It is a prayer for needy people, and blessed are those who can pray it.

It is not a private prayer. It is our bread and our debts, our testing and our powerlessness before evil that we bring to God, asking God to act for us.

And here too, the faith that asks will be the faith that does: that gives to the poor their bread, and their land from which to produce it. It is impossible to pray for our bread and still to tolerate the big corporations that take both land and food from the poor in order to provide for export and their own profit. It is impossible that we should ask God to be our provider and still support the vicious trade rules promoted by European and American governments. “Give me my bread today” is Satan’s parody of Jesus’ prayer, the prayer of the World Trade Organisation, of the G8, of Brussels, London and New York. It is the foolish prayer of the rich who don’t want to be disturbed in their wealth and comfort.

If we believe when we pray “Give us our bread today,” we will find the very energies of God will answer us, leading us, driving us, giving us the resources to feed the hungry or to move that they be fed, and allowed to feed themselves. In this, we will find ourselves in opposition to most of our governments, whose policies (usually on behalf of business and money) starve the poor of trade, of land, of bread. If we believe, and pray believing, it will be impossible to accept the world order our leaders still maintain and defend.

It is impossible that we should pray “forgive us our debts” and tolerate the flow of debt repayments from the world’s impoverished countries into the banks of the rich – even if those banks hold our accounts. While it is good to pray the Lord’s Prayer, it is evil to fall into hypocrisy, and so perhaps we should, in some of our churches, refrain for a time from saying the Lord’s Prayer, until we are committed to the forgiveness of debts and can safely say “as we forgive our debtors”. Otherwise, we mite only be invoking trouble on ourselves. If we do say it, and believe in the forgiveness of God as we say it, we will find it a serious commitment, to be sustained against the world, against the hostility of our governments and the patronising contempt of our economic institutions.

When we ask for forgiveness, we ask for what we need most of all. For we owe. God knows how much we owe! We are in debt to the world, to one another, and to God, and we can’t deliver. We’ve nothing with which to pay back. We owe, not because God has been good to us, but because somehow we have failed, and we go on failing, to honour that goodness, to share it, reflect it and pass it on. We’re so far

behind on everything we should have done and been able to do, we've failed so often to rise to the opportunities God opens up to us that we can now never make up the lost time, the neglect, the wrong-doing.

Knowing how much we're liable for, we can only ask God to forgive us, to remit the debt, to let us begin again as if we had never failed. But we do ask, because God is our Father, and we receive God's forgiveness, generously given to us. And because we bathe and breathe and live in the forgiveness of God, it flows thru us to others, a reconciling, healing love that mends all wrongs, restores broken relationships and sends our debtors' money back to them to nourish their lands, to build their roads and to staff their schools and hospitals. That's how the forgiveness of God works – it knows no limits, and nothing - not sin, not ignorance, not insult, not international debt – is outside its scope.

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But before we even draw the conclusion that there is something needs forgiving or putting right, the rule of God leads us to tolerance and compassion. We are only too quick to pass judgement, especially when we have come to think of ourselves as among the "righteous". But God's way for us is to hold back from censuring others. The judgement we pass on others is the judgement to which we will have to submit – that has always been God's way¹ – and we need to be humbly aware of our own faults.

Why do you scrutinise the speck in your brother's eye and don't even notice the plank in your own?
(Matt 7: 3)

The fact is that the faults we criticise in others are very often precisely those we are most guilty of ourselves. It's a kind of defence, or a transference of guilt. Manipulative and dominating people are quick to protest at anyone else presuming to get their own way. Timid or apathetic people complain that others, their bosses or their leaders, are not active or forceful enuf. When I gossip and back-bite, my first accusation is the nastiness of the absent back-biter. The nation that sends out its forces to hunt down terrorists is the nation that has used terrorists to promote its own policies.

All this criticism, all this heavy judgement, is a symptom of our insecurity, our need to shore ourselves up and protect ourselves by putting the blame (which somehow we feel is around) onto others. But Jesus points us to a generous acceptance of others, a willingness to spare them, to excuse them, to find reasons for them, the way that we hope our own sometimes offensive behaviour (tho we never ment it to be so) will be understood, and allowances made.

The prayer and the manifesto of Jesus are an invitation into an altogether different world where we rely on God for our livelihood, and not on our own persistence in worrying or planning. It is the world where God has taught us to put God's will first, to find that God's will is infinitely resourceful and ambitious. It is a world of

¹ Cf II Samuel 12: 1 – 7

Jesus Messiah

limitless asking and receiving, not because we are greedy and dissatisfied, but because we are forever refilled with the very desires of God.

Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. (Matt 7:7)

It's not because we are spoiled children, endlessly worried about ourselves and pestering an indulgent parent to keep on satisfying our whims. It is because we have lost our selves in the overwhelming desire for God's will, for a world and a humanity transformed under God's rule:

Seek the kingdom of God before everything else, and everything else will be added to your store. (Matt 6:33)

God knows our needs, and we do not need to be trapped in the anxiety of providing for the future. God will provide. We can rely on God. I am sometimes challenged on this, by people who say: "How can you tell that to a third-world peasant whose children are starving?" The fact is that God does not want me to tell it to third world peasants. If ever I am in contact with third world peasants my job then is to listen, not to be telling them anything. God is not telling us to preach to third world peasants: on the contrary, God is telling us to overthrow first world governments and stock exchanges both, if necessary, to ensure that no third world peasants are starving. God is telling us that that should be our desire. And then everything else we need will come to us.

God knows that many people starve in this world. And God knows that the major cause of their starvation is our greed, and that the major cause of our greed is our fear, and that the major cause of our fear is that we do not know and trust God. That is why God speaks to us in Jesus. It is now two generations since the rich world of Europe and North America reached the point where they had the resources and systems of distribution in place to meet the material needs of all their population, with a good deal over for luxuries. And instead of going on from there to see how we can lift the rest of the world out of poverty (and we have enough for that, too) we have let the market build a massive advertising industry to convince us that we need a great deal more. We have interpreted the hunger of our hearts, which is made for something much more beautiful, for the love and the friendship of God and of one another, as need for more and more possessions, more and more securities for the future. We have locked ourselves into mortgages, wrapped ourselves up in the clothes and symbols of status and committed ourselves to levels of consumption without which we think we would die. And so we believe them when they tell us that our livelihood and our economies, our jobs and our incomes, can only be protected by continued exploitation, by mean-minded protection for ourselves, and plundering of the poor.

The words of Jesus "Ask and you will receive ..." "Do not worry about tomorrow ..." do have a meaning for third world peasants, and someday I hope they will be able to teach it to us; but meanwhile there is a meaning and a challenge in those words for us of the comfortable first world too. Tho our comforts rob us of the kingdom of God, there is hope and encouragement in Jesus' teaching even for us. We can still seek the kingdom, and if we seek it we will find it. We will find that we have permission, after

all, to throw off the shackles. We are under no obligation to those fears and desires that the market plays upon to nag us into spending. We too are free to pursue, we are positively invited and urged to pursue, the kingdom of God.

So don't be worrying about your livelihood, your food and drink, or your looks and your clothing. There are much more important things. Don't be storing up investments here, where it can all crash or leak away. Put your treasure in heaven where it is safe, and your heart will be there as well.

(cf Matt 6:25, 19 – 22)

I have, in fact, seen something of what the kingdom of God might look like when it arises among the poor and oppressed. A few years ago, I travelled in Central America and the Caribbean and in three of the countries I visited, Jamaica, Cuba and Nicaragua I saw something remarkable. It was a spirit in people that seemed to be rooted in the fact that they had suffered and struggled and, each in different ways, had, for a time at least – for a memorable time – won their revolution. That spirit showed itself in quite different ways in the different countries.

In Kingston, Jamaica, it was a certain “bounce” and cheek: even people who asked you for money didn't cringe or mumble deferentially. The attitude of people everywhere seemed to be saying “We have been slaves, and we have won our freedom.” Kingston has appalling rates of crime and violence, but still that personality is there: a “bounce” in the spirit. In Havana, Cuba, by contrast, it was a strong, pervading air of freedom and safety. To wander safely thru the darkened streets of the city after midnight, in a blackout, and to see by day the gentle and humane policing that builds trust and creates that security, is to glimpse something that just might happen even in Miami or New York, if those cities could only put themselves into the way of the kingdom of God.

And in Nicaragua it showed itself as a certain deep confidence in spite of current oppression and fears for the future. It was as if people knew, in their dry fields and impoverished villages, that once before they did win freedom, and even if that freedom was strangled by the United States and its terrorists, the strangling hasn't worked. Ordinary poor people now know that it is possible to win your freedom and to defend your freedom and to put into place a government that believes in freedom, as the Sandinista government did, and that what is possible will, because God will help them, be done again. In none of these places is the kingdom of God achieved – at least not to be noticed by a passing visitor like me – and only in Nicaragua did I meet with people who would say it has to do with the kingdom of God, but in all those people I saw something that reminded me of what the kingdom of God might be like, and how dismally absent it is from the streets of Oxford or London.

In Jesus' manifesto the gentle voice of God tells us of another and far better way to live, and that we can live it. The will of God about which we pray in Jesus' prayer is bent on setting us free of possessions and worries, and entering us into the kingdom of heaven where God's power is at hand to serve us. Our desires are to be the desires of God: justice for the poor and comfort for the suffering, forgiveness of sin and remission of debt, peace and good order, the spacious land that the gentle inherit, the vision of God that opens up to an honest heart, the total wholeness and holiness that will only come when we have passed thru the fire of the world's hostility.

Jesus Messiah

When our hearts are set on the kingdom of God there will be more than enough of glory and adventure there, more than enough of comfort and security, more than enough of value. Anything else we need will look after itself.

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In Matthew's gospel the teachings of Jesus come to us as a big collection of sayings, but they certainly didn't come tumbling out of Jesus' mouth in this way. They are remembered and collected from many different occasions, when each of them had its context and its immediate relevance. The challenge for us is to take them back into the contexts of our own time and lives, to let them speak, each to its own occasion, and to see how they spring back into life and relevance, with a power and a clarity that transforms our experience and changes our perception of the world.

It is always an adventure to live the gospel, and it is an adventure to interpret the gospel so that we know how to live it. If our interpretations water it down so that it is comfortably manageable, then we can be sure we have failed; but if they go to the heart of our present predicament: our world, our economies, our society, our relationships, our possessions and our inmost thoughts, and there successfully challenge and inspire us to radical change – repentance – then we can be sure God has won, we have heard and understood and are finding the kingdom of God among us.

The manifesto ends with a warning. It won't be enough to get excited about the theology, or (for me) to sit at my computer organising ideas into nicely cascading sentences. I have to believe, and so to let the words of Jesus change my life – otherwise it will all be swept away at the first testing. The world Jesus describes may not be obvious, but it is real, and any project that does not build on that reality will not endure. The teachings of Jesus, seen by many as impossible idealism, or as “counsels of perfection” for saints, are in fact the fundamental strengths and values recognised by God; and what God recognises is solid reality. It will stand when every rival perception, every rival assertion, however powerfully backed up, collapses and dissolves like dust in a flood.

The question is, Do we believe? Do we have faith? And if we do have faith, we will act. If we believe, we will know that this is how God's world, the only real world, is; and we will act in step with it. The measure of our faith is whether we plan and carry out our actions according to Jesus' manifesto or whether we let a rival perception of reality decide how we live our lives. It's up to us how we build, and on what foundations. But if those foundations are not real, however grand our constructions, they will collapse.

Whoever hears these words of mine and carries them out is like an intelligent man building his house upon rock foundations. When the wind and storms break upon it, it stands up. But whoever hears my words and does not carry them out is like a foolish amateur who builds his house upon sand, so that when the storm and the rain comes, the house is undermined and blown down. Its collapse will be a disaster. (Matt 7: 24 – 27)