

## 12 Asking God

11: 1 - 13

Those who thought that the story of Martha and Mary is about action and contemplation, and the superiority of the contemplative life, might have been influenced by the fact that it is followed by a collection of teachings on prayer. But that would be a mistake. For the teaching that follows says nothing about contemplative prayer, but is focused, very sharply, on a greater form of prayer: that of petition. It is prayer in which we ask God, as God's needy children, for all our needs.

Jesus himself had been praying one day, when his disciples asked him, Lord, teach us to pray. I was once teaching a group of children who I thought knew their stories of Jesus, and I asked them: "When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, what did he say to them?" The children were more puzzled than I had expected them to be, till eventually one bright lad replied: "He said: 'Join your hands and close your eyes.'" It made me realize how wide of the mark we sometimes are when we try to teach, and what a wrong impression of priorities we give.

Jesus told his disciples, "When you pray, say:

Father,  
let your name be honored as holy;  
let your kingdom come;  
give us each day our bread for the day.  
Forgive us our sins – and we ourselves forgive everyone who is in debt  
to us;  
and do not bring us to the test." (11: 2 – 4)

A profound and remarkable revolution has taken place. When we pray, we are to say "Father". Jesus who now knows himself as the unique Son of God, the One who reveals God to others, tells us that we too are to speak to God as God's children. The little children to whom the great will and wisdom of God are revealed are to address God, confidently, as God's children.

I have been at pains to show that the kingdom of God is neither a mystical revelation nor a private salvation in another world, and that Luke's gospel tells us quite differently. Now, however, we can recognise that, within the context of God's kingdom, in its coming, there is a transcending and

mystical revelation. Thru Jesus there is a revelation of God, and each one who recognises Jesus and welcomes the kingdom of God is able to come before Godself in prayer and call God "Father". Not a private salvation for after we die, but the right and privilege for each one, in the kingdom of God as it now comes among us, to call God "Father".

I have stressed that the kingdom as Jesus announces it (and as John the Baptist had announced it) is a revolution in the economy, government and relationships of this world. Selfish individualism, the idea that salvation comes thru a purely individual relationship with Jesus, or one that extends to others only as they immediately relate to us, where we can be polite, kind and helpful to them without disturbing the even course of our own comfortable progress thru the world, this, tho very well established in Christian circles, is alien to the gospel. Our privilege thru Jesus of standing before God as God's own children is a challenge, as we shall see, to very high responsibility in the world, tho we have managed to interpret it thru a narrow and self-serving heresy of private, interior and individualistic privileges. That we are children of God, understood in the context of God's rule proclaimed and already having effect upon earth, is a challenge to take up our role in the world God rules.

God's children ask God. That is the true prayer of children, and there is nothing higher for us to be than children of God. And what we ask for is, first, that Godself may be valued, that people may recognize as holy the name of God, that is, the reality of God and God as revealed to us. Like anyone who greatly appreciates something or someone, a book, a pop star, a football team, a political hero, their country, their culture, an idea, we want others to recognise and appreciate it too. Appreciation is not for hiding, but for sharing, and the deep and great appreciation we have of God is something we want others to share. For that is what we all need most of all, to be able to value God, to recognise in God an integrity of goodness to which we can only respond with worship. And we know that there is nothing we can do to share the vision of God that even remotely compares with what God can do to make Godself known, to give to others that vision he has given to us, as our Father.

So we ask: "Let your name be honored and appreciated; let your kingdom come." Prayer at its best, as Jesus teaches us to pray, is not aimed at heaven or our future there, but at the coming of God's rule into this world. Whatever we think of the present state of the world, we are not satisfied with it; we want the kingdom of God to come, the rule of God to be seen and experienced even here. And we know that God wants it too. And Jesus teaches us that God wants us to ask for it.

## Jesus Kyrios

This is the key to all understanding of what the kingdom of God must be for us. It is already coming into the world in the acts and the teaching of Jesus. His disciples find themselves not just announcing the kingdom, but living according to it and acting as its instruments. It is already bringing healing and release. It is already changing relationships and people. It is already challenging status and structures in Israel. Already it transforms the simple who receive it and makes them children of God. But we are to ask for it as a need. God wants the kingdom to be not just an act of God's to which we must respond, but also God's response to our need and request. God intends to engage us in the coming of God's rule upon earth, as active participants. It will be not only what God has willed, but what we have asked for. And what we have worked for: God will engage us as workers in the harvest.

Luke wrote his gospel some two generations after Jesus, and clearly he does not believe that it was all a mistake, that the kingdom did not come and was not coming yet, that Jesus really had another agenda for us to be involved in while we wait for God to decide to inaugurate his kingdom. Luke wrote because he believed that the kingdom, already active in the world, was engaging him and engaging his churches, challenging them to show the active faith that Jesus was teaching his followers, and to pray for the kingdom as something they sought with all the energy of their minds and bodies.

And we who have seen two thousand years pass – is it still Jesus' agenda for us? Are we to pray for the coming of the kingdom in the same faith and active expectation? If we have understood what we have seen and heard in the gospel, the number of years does not make a difference. Even if there are still two thousand years, or twenty thousand years of history to run, we are privileged and challenged now with the coming of God's rule upon earth.

And what that kingdom is to be is told in the greatest commandment, which the lawyer acknowledged, to love the Lord your God with your whole heart and soul, with all your bodily strength and with all the gifts of your mind. This is to echo thru every consideration of what the kingdom of God might be. When that commandment was given to Israel, it was a command for their definitive loyalty and commitment to Yahweh, proclaiming him as their God and defining them as his people. It shaped them in the world they lived in and it gave them a role for all of history.

When the command was given to Israel, it made them a nation and bound them to one another: in loving God they were to love and value their neighbor.

Now, when even the enemy is the neighbor to be loved, the commandment is God's definitive Law for all the nations of the earth. All are to be bound together in loving, valuing, God, in loyalty and commitment to that highest value. And all humanity is to learn to love and value each other one, without boundary, without limit. That and nothing less is the undertaking of God's kingdom, and that kingdom is coming. It already affirms us as God's children. It already engages us in the work of God. It is what we are taught to ask for.

As children of God we ask. And that includes the regular needs of our bodies. We are material beings, and if we are to live we have to eat. We need our bread for each day. That trust we have in God for so great a thing as the coming of God's kingdom is one with the trust we put in him for our ordinary, daily needs. The great plan of God is not aloof from the common experience of human need, and to be God's children is to live that need in a new dimension. We ask our Father to give us, day by day, our ordinary bread.

And we ask our father to forgive us. For we are sinners. We have done and we do wrong. Forgive us our sins. The children of God, we are under no illusions, and we do not dread facing the truth. But neither do we wallow in guilt. We ask with the same uncomplicated trust: Forgive us our sins. It is God who will deliver us from guilt and sin by forgiving us.

And here too, we are actively involved. That forgiveness is a pattern of acceptance and healing which is to permeate all our relationships. We show that we have recognized this, declaring that we ourselves have forgiven those who have injured us. In this, Jesus is quoting another Jesus, Ben Sirach, who wrote some two hundred years before:

Forgive your neighbor the hurt he does you,  
And when you pray your sins will be forgiven. (Ecclesiasticus: 28: 2)

That is the integrity of God and of God's kingdom. We speak to God with the total confidence of God's children, but without illusions about ourselves. The good news, our new relationship with God, does not consist in obliterating or hiding reality, but brings it into open acknowledgement, and, in asking for forgiveness, we accept our own inclusion in a community of acceptance and forgiveness. The injuries done to us, the betrayals, the trespass upon our rights and comforts, are forgiven as we know our own need for God's forgiveness.

## Jesus Kyrios

And knowing ourselves, we ask God not to put us to the test. We could not undergo real testing, such as would try the limits of our constancy, our commitment, our faith. In facing God we face reality, and we ask God, who is utterly real, to be merciful. We already know that we are weak, and if it is not just us but our whole community, our people and our nation, that is put to the test, how weak we will be! We ask God to spare us such a trial.

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Jesus gives a parable, a little illustration of what he means by asking.

Suppose one of you has a sudden call on his hospitality. A friend arrives unexpectedly in the middle of the night. You've got no food to give him, so you go to a neighbor, another friend of yours, and knock on his door to ask for some bread. What will your friend do? Shout out from inside: "Go away! I've locked the door and my family's all asleep"? I tell you, even if your friend would answer like that, in the end, he'll get up and give you the bread, just because you keep on knocking. (11: 5 - 8)

Persist in prayer. Keep on asking God. Jesus recognizes that our experience will not be of every request instantly granted. But he encourages us to persist. Our prayers will be heard.

I think of it this way. When we ask God for what we need, God gives it, right away - but that "right away" is from God's point of view, and God is eternal. Every moment in time is equally present to God, and God's answer is enacted wherever it is appropriate. For us, living in time, it may be still somewhere in the future.

More importantly, we often ask with not much notion of what we're asking for. I may pray for justice for all - but do I really mean that I want to pay higher taxes and more for the goods imported on my behalf, because that would be justice for others? In a time of war, I might pray for peace, and pray earnestly with my church and with other earnest believers across the country - but if the way to peace is the defeat of my country (because it is pursuing its interests against the rights of others) do I really want peace?

When we pray, we ask for our daily needs, our bread for the day, and that's a modest request, in which we hope for a modest answer. But we also ask: "Your kingdom come." And that's a request that surpasses the visions of the most dedicated revolutionary and overreaches the most ambitious dictator. It's a wonder we dare to ask it - and we probably couldn't, if Jesus hadn't

told us to. To pray for God's kingdom to come is to pray, I'm afraid, for we know not what; and yet we do know something of what it is, enuf to be challenged to the deepest change of heart and the most radical action, in line with the kingdom we're asking for. If God answers our prayer, even in just one little part, it will be enuf to set us praying again with an even deeper, wider, more challenging vision of what it is we ask for. And if we do not yet see an answer, if the answer seems to be denied, it will, if we have glimpsed the kingdom, only fire us with desire to ask again.

C.S. Lewis observed somewhere that God, far from finding us over-greedy with desire, seems to find us altogether lacking: and needing to be encouraged in it. Jesus sed: "I tell you, ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. Everyone who asks will receive. Everyone who seeks will find. The door will be opened to everyone who knocks."

We are to trust God. Not everyone's experience of a father is good. But the majority of us, whether as children or as fathers (and we could say the same of mothers) have some experience of the affection and fondness that a father or mother shows their children. We survive because of it. We may be a pretty ropey lot, but if a child asks us for something to eat, we don't hand them a dish of sand. If they ask us for something to drink, we don't pour them a glass of bleach. Even we, who can be cruel to one another, know how to act kindly and warmly to our children. How much more will our Father in heaven be ready to give to those who ask him the Holy Spirit.

I have sed before that Luke is a careful storyteller, but sometimes he surprises us with a phrase or an idea dropped in from we don't know where. Perhaps the terms were so familiar in the churches he knew – his Christian audience two generations after Jesus – that he expected them to recognise what he was saying. Or perhaps he was hinting at an idea he wanted to explain later. When the phrase "eternal life" first appeared, in the lawyer's question, I suggested that we should draw on the Jewish tradition of resurrection which the lawyer probably shared with the Pharisees, to understand what he ment.

Now, Luke reports a very surprising saying of Jesus without commenting further or explaining it. We are to ask and we will receive, seek and we will find, because God is as willing and eager to give us gifts – and more so – than an affectionate human father. Opportunities will be opened up to us, and the things we long for will come to us, from the goodness of God. Jesus tells us: "If you know how to give good things to your children, how much more will God your father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

## Jesus Kyrios

We should be shocked. It's like being told about a wonderful country where, at harvest, all the fruit and produce is laid out in the markets and anyone can just go and ask for whatever they want. And then, after being assured that everyone is given what they ask for, you're told, almost as an afterthought, that what you're expected to ask for is to be made ruler of the country.

What does Jesus mean by saying God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? And what does Luke mean by reporting it here? We're probably ready to interpret it with a whole theology of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit learned from Saint Paul, but we shouldn't just load it into this text like that. Luke is not referring, as far as I can see, to Paul's teaching. He never does in his gospel, and even in the "Acts", where he says a great deal about Paul, such teaching as he draws from Paul is very limited.

There is only one exceptional precedent in the history of Israel for such asking and receiving of the Spirit. The Spirit of God was given by God, at God's own initiative, to those who were to lead and rule Israel. The heroes who fought off their enemies, the chiefs who judged their disputes and the kings who ruled over them, received the Spirit of God to fulfil their task. Prophets also were given God's Spirit to speak out with authority, declaring what God had to say to his people, whether rebuke, encouragement or promise. But it was always at God's choice. You couldn't ask for it.

Even when authority was delegated by the passing on of God's Spirit, the decision was in the hands of Yahweh. We are told<sup>1</sup> that Moses gathered seventy elders at the tent of Yahweh, who took some of the Spirit that was on Moses and put it on the elders. But Yahweh also chose two others who had not been brought to the tent, to give them a share of the Spirit too.<sup>2</sup>

The only person to have asked for God's Spirit was the prophet Elisha, who put his request to his master Elijah when he knew Elijah was leaving the world. He asked to inherit the Spirit from Elijah, but Elijah made it clear that only God could answer such a request and he could not say whether God would grant what Elisha had asked.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 11: 24 ff

<sup>2</sup> There is a parallel in Exodus chapter 18, where Moses delegates his authority at the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, but here too, it is a matter for God to decide. Jethro finishes his advice with the recommendation to do this, "if God so commands you".

<sup>3</sup> II Kings 2: 9 - 11

The Spirit of God is about leading, speaking and ruling in God's name, with God's authority. That is how the Spirit is revealed thruout the history of Israel. And yet we are told now to ask, and God will give us God's Spirit like a father giving his children what they ask for.

All this stuff about prayer, about asking and receiving, is leading us into very deep water.