

Lord, teach us to pray

A sermon preached by Revd Prof Rob Gilbert on Trinity 9, 24 July 2016

Refs: Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13

We are given two contrasting images of God in our readings today. The reading from Genesis has a different understanding of what God is like than our readings from the letter to the Colossians and Luke. Different but also part of the same move in human understanding that enabled the *kindness* of God revealed in *Jesus* to be realised. The Genesis reading in itself witnesses to a journey of understanding about God that is being made.

The contrast I have in mind is between: a view of God which is like that of a worldly ruler, like a super-powerful, super-big, super-strong and rather distant king who operates within a rigid legal framework that expresses and protects his power and; a view of God which understands that he is closer to each person than we are to ourselves, and is loving and full of compassion. Another way to see the same contrast is to think of it as being between idolatrous and archaic religion, and a mature monotheistic faith.

In the passage from Genesis we find the strange spectacle of God seeming to speak with condemnation of a whole city, and of Abraham arguing him to a more nuanced position, so that God agrees that even for ten righteous persons the *whole* city can be spared – and if for ten then I think we should assume also for one righteous person. The contrast I have referred to between an anthropomorphic god and belief in a God who creates, redeems and saves is set up immediately – at the beginning of the reading God is on the warpath, at the end he is taking account of just ten good people whose virtue will save a whole city. At the beginning he sounds like a warlord god, but at the end somewhat more like the personal God revealed in Jesus. At the beginning the view of God is like that of a dictator – but bigger, more powerful and immortal; at the end a bit more like that of a forgiving father. Which of our modern-day warlords or dictators would spare a city for ten harmless people within it? He would in fact see the good people as condemned by association, or just not care. And in plenty of places in the Old Testament the total destruction of the opponents of Israel is presented as the will of YHWH. But already in the Genesis story there is a contrast set up between the goodness Abraham is finding in God, and the cruelty and violence of a heavenly or earthly dictator or warlord. We are being shown that God in his goodness cares *in particular* for individual people.

In the letter to the Colossians, Paul too wants to make a contrast between the cosmic powers of the world, between worldly powers and power structures, and Christ. Paul argues that the legal frameworks of humanity are to be set aside and a spiritual law from God is to be embraced. He seems to be saying: “Don’t try and apply worldly laws, worldly condemnation, or human traditions to each other or to yourselves – instead see yourselves as grounded in God’s generosity and reflect that generosity in your treatment of others”. Paul says that the world’s legal structures, the world’s laws, were nailed to the cross: that is, they were used to condemn Jesus – but he overcame them through his dying and rising again, transforming the laws of the world into the law of love.

It is in the reading from Luke, densely packed with Jesus’s own teaching, that we encounter the kind of spiritual understanding Paul wants us to have. The first few verses give us the Lord’s Prayer. We say this so often sometimes it’s hard to remember the simplicity and honesty of this prayer: we worship you, Father God; give us what we need; may we forgive others just as we are forgiven; save us from trouble. Jesus is telling his disciples to ask God for what they really want.

One of the greatest influences on my understanding of Christianity and the life of faith has been the Dominican friar Herbert McCabe. This is his take on prayer:

“You feel you *ought* to want the grace to be nice to your next-door neighbour or you *ought* to want your mother-in-law to recover from her painful gumboil or you *ought* to want passionately to see a cure

for AIDS, but as a matter of cold fact what you *really* want most of all is a short holiday in North Wales. But it would be 'selfish' to pray for that, so you resolutely turn your mind to more high-minded things. ...[W]hat people call distractions in prayer are just their real wants and concerns breaking in on the bogus wants and concerns that we think are the only suitable ones for prayer. If you get 'distractions' ...take a good look at them and see what wants and needs they spring from and pray about those – whatever they are."

This is a very intimate way to relate to God and a very intimate and simple understanding of God himself – as I said earlier, of God as closer to us than we are to ourselves. We can talk to him like we talk to ourselves.

And then, just as our reading from Genesis sets up a contrast between an older, and a newer and better, understanding of God, Jesus himself uses contrast itself to teach something more about what God is like and how he gives himself to us, comes to us, shares himself with us. Jesus paints a picture of someone who has safely shut up his house and is in bed – and points out that if he doesn't at first leap up to help his friend who has come calling in the middle of the night, he will do so eventually just to get rid of him. The contrast is with God: if this man can be made by something as simple as persistence to give his friend whatever he wants, just think how generous God who loves you better than *any* friend must be, and how anxious he must be to give you what you want. Ask – and you will receive. Search – and you will find. Knock – and the door will be opened. Look for God, and you *will* find him.

There are different ways of looking at these statements of Jesus – not incompatible with one another, just different aspects they have. I want to offer you just one this morning which is to suggest that we think of these encouraging words of Jesus as something we do and which is *self-fulfilling*. Jesus is speaking about our spiritual quest, about our desire to know God's will for us and to know God with us. Jesus says that in asking for these things we are receiving them; in searching for them we will find them; figuratively, in knocking on God's door we will find it opened. As the poet RS Thomas put it, God is "not there / When I turn, but in the turning".

Another way of perhaps saying the same thing: to ask for something shows you know what you need; to seek for an answer shows you know what the right question to ask is; to knock at a door shows you know the right way to go. Knowing what you need, having the right question on your lips, turning in the right direction is often at least half an answer to whatever it is that is troubling us or whatever it is we need or want.

To help us do that we should keep our questions simple – like asking for that holiday in North Wales. And, Jesus says, God will take you, your questions and your pushing at doors seriously and will want to give you what you really need, what you really want. Sometimes we ask for one thing when we really want something else. And to do this Jesus again uses contrast: if you know how to respond appropriately to a request from a child for a fish or an egg, then how much more will your heavenly Father give you? He will give you not just the fish or the egg you asked for, but himself.

The Lord's Prayer itself expresses these ideas. It asks for simple things, and it recognises the reciprocity of our prayers. Forgive us our sins, *as* we forgive those who sin against us: *in* our forgiving of others *is* our own reconciliation with God and with those we find ourselves at odds with; in our forgiving of others *is* our own pardon.

When you turn, God is there. When you knock, God answers. When you seek, God will be found. These are the simple messages from our readings for today, and grounding them all the eternal truth that God is the constant presence in your life willing you well and loving you. Amen.