

Preaching the Lord's Prayer in Lent, 2018 (Year "B")

Suggestions for a Five-Part series running in parallel with Bishop Bill Hockin's

***Pray: Reflections on the Lord's Prayer* Fredericton: Taylor Printing, 2017)**

--the Rev'd Chris McMullen, 2018

February 18: Lent I –Mark 1: 9-15 “Our Father...”

When Jesus is baptized he hears the Father tell him, “You are my Son, the Beloved...” The very Spirit with which he is anointed then “drives” Jesus into the wilderness, Mark tells us in breathtakingly brief terms, to be “tempted by Satan”.¹ We know from Matthew 4 and Luke 4 (which must derive from Jesus’ own pictographic report of his “forty days” to his followers, as no-one else was with him) that for Jesus this meant struggling with his vocation as God’s Son. The guidance he received lead him to continue John the Baptist’s proclamation with the important difference: “the time is fulfilled...”

Through Jesus, we are adopted as God’s eternal children, and commanded to pray to God as “our Father...” What does this mean for our identity and vocation in these days of “fulfillment time” –the time between Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection, and his coming again to bring in the “Kingdom of God” in all its uncompromised glory? Jesus, like John, calls us to “repent”. To turn around our living, from false priorities and inauthentic living, to the life and the vocation of God’s own adopted children. To seek out and fulfill the full meaning of our baptism into Christ. To live, as we pray, the mission: “...Hallowed be your Name!”

Many people traditionally “give up” something for Lent –perhaps something almost frivolous, like chocolate! What if, instead, we sought out a new habit of behaviour with others (I Peter 2:12), or a new project of service to others (Matthew 5:16), that resulted in the hallowing of God’s name (i.e., bringing glory to God)?

February 25: Lent II –Mark 8: 31-38 “Your Kingdom Come...”

This is the first of three predictions Jesus offers of his passion, death and resurrection (cf. Mark 9:30-32; 10:32-34). Especially if we recall Jesus’ allusion to his baptism in Mark 10: 38,45, we can appreciate that probably from the moment of his own identification with his compatriots in their need to repent in preparation for God’s promised uncompromised reign (the “Kingdom”), Jesus knew he was taking up the way of the cross: of suffering love, selfless faith, and trusting courage in his Father to deliver on his promises. This is how Jesus interpreted the opportunities and challenges of his own life: how they may serve the coming of God’s Kingdom. In the same way, those who confess Jesus as the Lord of Life who reigns over all things, will want to ask and pray about how our lives may serve the coming of God’s kingdom.

Peter’s reaction to Jesus’ foretelling shows that God’s true will and purpose for our days may be quite different from what our society has conditioned us to expect. We expect security, comfort, and perhaps even ease (if the commercials are to be believed). If we are to pray for the coming of God’s reign in human affairs, however, we will need to adopt very different values from those pursued and promoted around us. That may lead us into conflict.

Jesus’ stunning, even macabre image for this is “taking up the cross”. We should not let two millennia of Christian devotion blind us to the shocking nature of this image, for a people being

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¹ (All references and quotes are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*, 1989.)

terrorized into submission by Roman public executions. God's reign is a reality where love is restored, and people say "yes" to God's way and others' needs in love even by saying "no" to our own slothful and egotistical short-term self-interest. Are we proud to be citizens of God's Kingdom in Christ (Philippians 3:20)? Do we pray that the King will be proud of us (Mark 8:38)?

March 4: Lent III –John 2: 13-22 "Give Us this Day our Daily Bread"

John surprises us by reporting a "Cleansing of the Temple" by our Lord not during Holy Week, during Jesus' final fateful days before his death, but at the beginning of his public ministry. In Matthew, Mark and Luke's records of the latter "cleansing," Jesus is recorded as objecting to God's "house" becoming a "den of thieves" (Mark 11:17 etc.). Note that in John, Jesus speaks of his "Father's house", and objects to it being degenerated into a "marketplace".

We do have a God-given instinct for the transcendent, which we too often turn into a search for the spectacular. The misapprehended example at hand is Jesus' promise to raise a temple in three days. We always want more. Indeed, several generations of astounding advances in our standards of living and recreational technologies have conditioned us to expect ever greater experiences of the sensational. This is because we are made for and destined for eternal life with God. Nothing less will truly satisfy. Nothing in the marketplace. Or in temples that are governed by the limited goals and values of the marketplace. Jesus has commanded us to pray for no less than the coming of the Kingdom!

But when we turn to our needs and aspirations in this life, we are to ask for nothing more than our "daily bread". The simple needs required for living a life of love for God and others. Indeed, the needs that we may and must share with others –"our" daily bread. Today people speak about the "economy". The word comes from the Greek "oikos", for "household". Is our "economy" but a "marketplace"? Or is it "our Father's house"?

March 11: Lent IV –John 3: 14-21 "Forgive Us Our Sins..."

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night seeking answers to his perplexity. He is a member of the High Council, who regard Jesus as their enemy. That's why he snuck over to see Jesus at night (John 3:2). Yet he knows that Jesus' "signs" (a special word for John, meaning more than mere magical miracles but almost "sacraments" of Jesus' saving truth) prove that Jesus has "come from God". Jesus however does not give Nicodemus a break, or even a polite acknowledgement of his interest: "You must be born from above!" (John 3:3,7) Our Gospel Reading for this Sunday is a key excerpt from our Lord's explaining to the flabbergasted Pharisee what this means. If the primary meaning of "sin," in the Greek "hamartia," an archery term referring to "falling short" of the target (i.e., the "glory of God", Romans 3:23), then Nicodemus' great theological knowledge and religious accomplishments as a "leader of the Jews" (John 3:1) is, in the end, but a sinful inadequacy for "entering the Kingdom" (John 3:5).

So what can Nicodemus do? Jesus refers the Pharisee to a significant incident in the "honeymoon years" of Israel's wilderness-living preparations to enter the Promised Land, as recalled in today's Old Testament Reading, Numbers 21:4:9. During our Lenten Forty Days, it is good to recall the formative nature of living by faith in the wilderness, as Jesus himself undertook (Mark 1:12-13). Nicodemus like the ancient Hebrews needs to turn from his sinful self-preoccupations

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—whether of guilt or of moral pride (Luke 18:11). Jesus puts this in a more positive as well as memorable way: Nicodemus needs to look to God’s provision for forgiveness and healing.

The incident of the brazen serpent puzzles us. But it was a representation of the very fiery serpents that were inflicting God’s people, as a result of their sinful grumbling. (Sympathetic magic to people at the time? But now, a sacramental sign, when interpreted in the context of the whole narrative of the Biblical record?) The people were to hold up their very inflictions, and presumably the sinful complaining that provoked the inflictions, to God. Jesus recognizes that this is a wonderful dramatic representation of the required repentant faith and prayer.

And so we are to pray, “Forgive us our sins...” We are to hold up the causes of our “snakes” to the Lord. “As we forgive...”: we are to recognize that the very sins that bother us in others, are perhaps a telling sign of our own moral inadequacies (Romans 2:1-4). And in fact, we are to ask for the kind of forgiveness that will not simply excuse us, but change us —enlighten us (cf. Jesus’ references to darkness and light, John 3:19-21), and mature us into eternal life (John 3: 15-16).

March 18: Lent V –John 12: 20-33 “Save us from the Time of Trial...”

Bishop Hockin chooses the ecumenically agreed modern translation of the phrase we usually pray as “Lead us not into temptation” (cf. the *Book of Alternative Services* pp. 58 f., 70, 211). “Trial”, “test” and “temptation” are all the same word in the New Testament’s original Greek. James 1:12-16 assures us that God does not tempt us, though God does try us (cf. Job). The “trials” become temptations when “one’s own desire” (James 1:14) warps our perception and obedience. In the Lord’s Prayer we honestly and humbly pray that with God’s help, our “time of trial” will not become a time of destructive temptation.

The Lord’s Prayer is quite plainly an eschatological prayer —a prayer for those who live in the “end times” between Jesus’ first and second comings, and who want to live in anticipation of and loyalty to our future in glory with Christ, even now. Because of this “kingdom come” emphasis, we need to learn to appreciate that Jesus is teaching us here to ask for far more than strength or wisdom to keep to our diet or put up with a tiresome person! The “time of trial” is the period of testing, tragedy and even persecution that followers of Jesus must endure during the “final days” in which we live (Mark 13:19-31 etc.).

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus finds great significance in the fact that some non-Jews have come to meet the Messiah of Israel. That is why he gives what seems to be a rather odd response to Andrew and Philip’s communicating their interest: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified!” (John 12:23) The end must be near, when even the Greeks are noticing the Lord. That means Jesus’ final trial and vindication is at hand. When he is “lifted up” (John’s way of colorfully alluding to the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension all at the same time, cf. John 3:14 from last week and 8:28), he will “draw all people” to his saving person (John 12:32). He is seeing his particular circumstances in the light of his final great destiny in glory.

So may prayer give us an eternal perspective on our daily challenges. When we pray “save us from the time of trial” we are asking for strength that we may trust, as Jesus did, that “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial” (2 Peter 2:9). We ask God’s help to claim the promise that “God is faithful and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” (I Corinthians 10:13)