

Matthew 6 1- 17

I've been trying to be some sort of preacher for a long time now. It's a hard gig. It becomes even harder when the passage is a famous one and even harder still when not only is the passage one of the most famous in the English language but the preacher in the passage is without peer as a preacher.

Added to that the Sermon on the Mount is full of seemingly impossible demands- pluck out your eye, give your cloak as well as your coat, be perfect. It includes things that we'd rather not even try - blessed are the poor. We work like slaves to not be poor.

There are passages where the words are well known but there are numerous different interpretations of what the words mean. - the Lord's Prayer for instance.

The sermon is also taken to sit at the pinnacle of Christian teaching and yet it wasn't spoken to Christians. It was spoken to Jews. Not only that but it was spoken to Jews who knew next to nothing about Jesus. It was spoken at the very beginning of his ministry. Jesus has just been introduced onto the stage. He's just performed some miracles and people have gathered around him to learn something about him. To learn what he has to say.

So Jesus sits down in the position of a teacher. By the end of the sermon we learn that he teaches with authority unlike the Jewish leaders the people were used to. Jesus sits down and speaks and it's as though he has Israel gathered in front of him. What will he say to them as he begins his ministry? Will it even be a ministry? As we read it we have to try to push to the back of our minds all that we know of what will happen next, push into the back of our minds all that we know of what God is about to do in the next few years. All that we know about this Jesus who has come to die, who has come to make peace between God and people, us, to restore creation. What can we learn as Jesus begins his ministry?

You've already looked at part of the sermon and my allocated section is most of chpt 6. I have to confess I'm going to sneak out of chpt 6 a bit. I've also decided to use my two weeks having a quick look at the Lord's Prayer today and then doing the rest of the passage next week.

But before we do have that quick look at the Lord's Prayer there are a few things to keep in mind. The first is to think about where Jesus is going in this sermon. Just as you have to try to work out what points I'm trying to make, and I have to try really hard to make that as easy as possible for you, Jesus was trying to say something in this sermon. It's not just a series of random thoughts. I think that Jesus is wanting to make the point that begins with the therefore in chpt 6:25 therefore I tell you, I not only as the one saying these words on the Mount, but also I as distinct from all those other I's who speak to you, all of those other voices, therefore I tell you. The point that he makes there in the verses following v 25 are what leads him to his main point which can be found in 7:24 be wise people and make sure that you're building on solid rock. Over the past couple of years we've seen news reports of what happens when people build their houses along the coast on moveable sand dunes. The results are not pretty.

Another thing that I think is worth bearing in mind is that what we know as the Lord's Prayer isn't a magic formula. It's not a series of words that you pull out when you feel in special need of God's help. It doesn't even seem to have been a prayer that Jesus himself ever said. It doesn't appear in the NT other than here in Matt and in Luke's account of the sermon in Lk 11. It's not in Mark or John. It does seem to have been a prayer, or perhaps as I want to suggest, a style of prayer, that Jesus taught on one or two occasions.

Jesus has just been talking about prayer already in his sermon. In v5 he tells his audience to not pray as hypocrites. They love to be seen, they love to be heard, they love to heap up empty phrases. They think that they'll be heard by God if they use lots of words. So presumably not being a hypocrite when you pray will involve being private, not using empty meaningless phrases and not using too many words by sticking to the point. Throughout the Gospels we're given examples of Jewish leaders at prayer. There's an example in Lk 18:11

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.’ [But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”] How damning a statement is that by Jesus, the Pharisee stood up and prayed - with himself. Prayed not with God but with himself. He’s not even talking to God, he’s talking to himself.

So presumably this prayer that we know as the Lord’s prayer, this style of prayer, prayer about these sorts of things, is what Jesus is teaching people to use in contrast to the arrogant hypocritical prayers that people were used to hearing. Don’t pray with yourself, remember that you’re speaking to God.

I don’t think that this prayer that Jesus teaches the people is the sort of prayer where you start with line 1 and go through to the end. As I’ve said I think what he’s teaching is a style of prayer. When you pray, pray in this way, to the point, and pray about these sorts of things with this sort of attitude. Don’t use lots of words, they’re not necessary. Pray about the right sorts of things, not about how great you are and how bad other people are.

The Lord’s Prayer tells us what we need to hear, what we need to know, what we need to speak about to God, how we need to speak to God. The two issues that I want to look at are, first, that God is in control and second that we need to recognise that we depend on him for our needs. The backdrop to that second point is something that Israel experienced for many years when they received the manna in the wilderness

The first thing to understand, the first thing to believe, the first thing to trust in, is that God is in control. Pray with recognition that you want God’s will to be done on earth as in heaven. It will of course be done. Nothing can stop God’s will being done. For God the Father is indeed in heaven. He does sit on

the throne. He is sovereign. It's not that God's will won't be done but that we need to pray with an understanding that it will be done and that we want it to be done. We don't want anyone else's will to be done. The first petition in this prayer is not so much a petition as an act of submission. It's a declaration that we want the will of God to be done.

We need to know that it's God who's in control. We need to know that. Not just that it's nice to know as an intellectual exercise. But we need to know for our spiritual and emotional and psychological health. When things are going well we need to be humble and know that we're dependent on God. When things are going poorly we need the comfort that comes from knowing that God is at work. We're not in control of our lives and our destiny, the Government isn't in control of our lives and our destiny, Centrelink isn't in control of our lives and our destiny, the UN isn't in control of our lives and our destiny, Covid isn't in control of our lives and our destiny. All of these things try to pretend that they are. We sit, stand, pace, and try and plan, determine, decide, our todays and tomorrows. Next week we'll look at the section in the sermon on the mount where Jesus speaks to this issue. Satan is always trying to make us think that he's the one in control. Do this he whispers and you will be happy, do that and you'll be miserable. I can build you up or knock you down he speaks to us. All the while suggesting that we ignore his plans for us at our peril. All the while suggesting that he's the one who will determine if we're successful in life. But it's all a lie. Jesus will later say to Peter that Satan wanted to sift Peter but Jesus had prayed for him. It would be God who would determine the fate of Peter, not Satan. Talk to God about your hopes and fears for tomorrow. He's the one you need to talk to. He's the one who sits on the throne, sovereign over all he created. On Good Friday Satan exalted to think that he'd won, on the Sunday he realised that it was God who was in control.

Who's in control of your life? Who's in control of the tomorrow of this church fellowship? Who's in control of the lives of your loved ones? God is. God is. God is. That's not a matter for sadness or despair or indifference. That's a matter for rejoicing. This God who's in control is the one who so loved the whole world that he gave his only Son. This God who's in control is loving and just. This God who's in control is working towards an end to all evil and

suffering. Even if it seems slow in coming that only means that it's slow by our standards. By God's standard it's all part of his definite plan and foreknowledge, planned from before the creation of the world says Paul in Eph 1. History has meaning and purpose. God is at work. Our lives have meaning and purpose. Nothing is random or chance. In spite of the suffering and tragedy God is working, loving and caring, we need to trust him.

Just in passing, praying thy kingdom come is a scary thing to pray for. You're praying for the end of the world, which is truly good or bad news depending on which side you're on. For believers to pray for God's kingdom to come, to pray for the return of Jesus, to pray for the end of this world and the coming of the next is inspiring and a wonderful thought. An end to suffering, an end to tears, an end to the constant struggle and an end to evil. But an end to evil means an end to evil. You've probably had a discussion with someone who thinks that the God we see in the OT who judges cities and nations is not the God of love that they know from the NT. They, perhaps even you, rebel against the idea that God did, and might again, bring judgement on to people. Yet, every time you pray, your will be done, your kingdom come, you're praying that God will come in judgement just like he did against the peoples in the days of Noah, just as he did against Sodom and Gomorrah, just as he did against Nineveh, as he did even against Jerusalem when the people of that city turned their back on him. Every time you pray your kingdom come you're praying come Lord in judgement against your neighbours, come against Sydney, come against China, Russia, the United States, come against this world, put an end to evil once and for all, come and bring righteousness, come and deliver us. It's not a light thing to pray your kingdom come. It's to acknowledge that God is the one who's in control. It's also to acknowledge that as much as we might not like the idea of God judging we like even less the idea that evil people might get away with it.

Pray that you want God's will to be done on earth as well as in heaven. Many people would be quite happy to have God working out his purposes somewhere else, heaven sounds good to them, but they aren't as happy about God working out his purposes here, on earth, in their lives. Leave us to ourselves, leave me to myself. Let me do my own thing. It's none of your

business. I don't need you. I don't want you. Pray your will be done on earth as in heaven says Jesus. Pray that you want God to be involved in your life, in your world.

This will involve praying that God's concerns will be your concerns. What, and who, do we know that God cares about? We should be concerned for those things as well. What sort of things might they be? Well the last words that Matthew records in his Gospel that Jesus spoke to the crowd tell us. As he goes to his death what might Jesus say to the people who've come to hear him speak? This is what he spoke about and is recorded in Matt 25 34 -'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Nothing about worship in the temple or prayer or reading the scriptures. Care for the those without.

Are we going to be praying Father your will be done on earth? Jesus has told us what that would look like for us. Care for the needy, care for widows and orphans, care for refugees.

The second issue that I'd like to speak about is the section which we traditionally say as give us today our daily bread.

It's a difficult petition to understand. Some translations instead of daily bread say bread for tomorrow. There are after all two todays in the one sentence, not only that but the second daily is a Greek word only found in this one place in the NT, not only that but this is the only use of this word in all of Greek literature of the time. What does it mean this sentence translated so often as give us today out daily bread? One commentator that I read gave four possible meanings for the word. Rather than doing the fun thing of going through all of the options let's just go to what I think the petition is asking. There's a very helpful couple of verses in Proverbs 30. Verses 8 and 9, that I think help us understand and those verses cover one of the four options for the meaning of the word translated daily bread.

This what the writer of the Proverbs said from my RSV.

Prov 30:8 - 9 Remove far from me falsehood and lying;

give me neither poverty nor riches;

feed me with the food that is needful for me,

The NIV says feed me with my daily bread but as I just read the RSV says feed me with the food that is needful for me. Today give me the bread that I need for today, not too much, not too little. As the proverb goes on to say in v9 lest I be full, and deny thee,

and say, "Who is the Lord?"

or lest I be poor, and steal,

and profane the name of my God.

Not too much so that I don't become arrogant, not too little so that I don't become bitter and resentful. Just enough. I'm going to go a bit further and suggest that there's an implication here that this enough extends to other things as well. Give me neither poverty or riches. Give me the money that is needful for me, the housing that is needful for me, the pleasure that is needful for me. Too much and I will become arrogant and vain and indulgent, too little and I will become cold and full of hatred. This is also an outworking of praying that we might be people who do the things that God desires, caring for the widow's and orphans and the strangers in our midst.

We're asking for bread, not cake. We're asking for what sustains life and not for luxuries though God might be generous and gracious to us and give us some luxuries. Bread, like all things, are gifts and not rights.

Nor are we to pray give me 'my' daily bread, that bread that 'I' need for today, we pray give 'us' - 'our' bread. It's a petition for others as well for ourselves. Just as in the wilderness after the escape from Egypt the people would go out each day to collect the manna that they needed for the day. It was there each day, enough for everyone. It could not be hoarded, it just went bad if people tried. Just enough, just what is needful for each person. No need, no opportunity to be arrogant and think they earned their food, deserved their food because of their hard work, their status in life, or their innate goodness.

A recognition that they, we, need to depend on God for all things. We didn't create the bread. At times we try to deny this, at times we forget this, but when troubles come, a job lost, a sickness, a change in circumstances, then, then we realise it was not us, never us, that provided. It was always God. And we need to pray and to live with that understanding.

Keep this in mind when you pray says Jesus. Not like those hypocrites who pray to themselves.

It's good that these two themes are grouped together. Acknowledging God's will and acknowledging God's provision. One reason that we can be reluctant to care for the needy is that we think that it might mean that we'll have to go without. This prayer teaches us that we can care for others because we can trust God to care for us.

I've been suggesting that the point of the words that we call the Lord's Prayer is to tell us the way we should pray and the sorts of issues that we should pray about. In a few minutes we're going to sing two songs that are in keeping with what I've been saying. We're going to be singing part at least of the Lord's Prayer. God is in charge and we have to trust in him and we're going to sing All things work together. God is the one who provides us with what we need. We're going to sing O breathe of life.

Next week we'll think some more about being wise and building on the rock. Now to finish I'll pray and then I'll ask if there are any questions.