

The 17th Sunday Ord Time C (2019)

St. Luke's Prayer and Friendship (Lk 11:1-13)

St Luke has his own way of presenting The Lord's Prayer. He puts it in the context of friendship. He takes it completely for granted that everyone knows what the experience of friendship is. Most are only expected to live it not to define it! The loneliest people in the world are those without friends. St. Luke's presentation of friendship in illustrating the Our Father is so realistic. You expect your friends to help you out in difficulties even though the demands are sometimes awkward. A true friend is one to whom you can tell most things and they will accept you anyway. Having a friend is seeing things in the same way with that person, sharing things through thick and thin.

Luke's Our Father

That is how St. Luke wants us to think of the Our Father. He has the shorter version of it. just five petitions. Matthew has seven. Rather like the Beatitudes in The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain where Luke has four blessings and four woes and Matthew has nine blessings. Luke tends to be very realistic, describing things just as they are. When we pray alone, and nobody is listening to us, that is when we are truly realistic about our needs our hopes and our failures. When people ask us to pray for them, they normally do so with the utmost sincerity. When people are sick and in danger, and under pressure and take us into their confidence to pray for them that is when life is being lived at its sincerest.

We recall Jesus decrying those who make a public show of their prayers. He advised us to go into our room and close the door and pray to our heavenly Father in secret. Truth and sincerity are here attested. I am the way and the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). In the following of Jesus one does the truth. It is not just a case of the right words. It is having the right stance towards life, following his way in our department.

The Our Father expresses this powerfully. The prayer expresses total dependence on God. This is pure realism. As when our parents bring us into the world, we depend on them for everything; we can do nothing on our own. The love they show us from the beginning determines the quality of our relationships for the rest of our lives. Everybody is sympathetic to an unloved child. How often in the context of tragedy a photo of an agonising child will stimulate action to care for it. I wonder if we recall the picture of the little girl running in flames during the Vietnam War, caused by napalm bombs dropped by the Americans. It roused the U.S. public to protest so powerfully that the beginning of the end of the war there was pursued relentlessly. Love and suffering go together especially in the case of the innocent children.

Prayer and Love

Our responsorial psalm today is an excellent instance of what prayer is about (Ps 137). Your love O Lord is eternal. And the sentiment of gratitude is expressed there continually: I thank you Lord with all my heart, I thank you for your faithfulness and love. There is a real sense of intimacy. Your hand will do all things for me. There is the consciousness of need and protection expressed to someone who knows the suffering and the needs of the suppliant. Though I walk in the midst of affliction you give me life and frustrate my foes. The foes are not named. They do not need to be. In some psalms the pressure is such that the psalmist asks for dire punishment on the perpetrators of sufferings, as when in exile in Babylon the final line of Ps 138 proclaims: Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against a rock! By contrast The Our Father has us say: Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them who trespass against us. And do not put us to the test!

But Our Lord also had hard words for people who rejected him and his message of love and reconciliation: Woe to you Bethsaida, Woe to you Chorazin, And as for you Capernaum (Lk 10:13)...These words are exhortation to change and not merely words to assure vengeance. What may strike us here is that these words are said in the presence of the disciples- impossible to imagine such being addressed to whole town populations with all of them listening and being equally condemned! And when Jesus said: Jerusalem, Jerusalem, still murdering the prophets— how I would have gathered you to me as a hen gathers her chicks (Lk 13:34)...he is full of regret that their negligence of his message was bringing about the destruction of the city- which took place less than forty years after his crucifixion. His dying words were Father forgive them they know not what they do (Lk 23:34).

Conclusion

As I was finishing this sermon the telephone rang with the news of the death of one of my oldest friends, Canon Paul Mitcheson. We were boys together in St. Bede's Manchester. I was deacon at his ordination to the priesthood in 1960. Years later I discovered that he was the first cousin of Sr Anne Donockley here in Boarbank Hall. Both were gifted, especially as musicians, adding greatly to their service to Christ and the Church. Prayer was an essential part of Paul's life. Though for many years in desperate health he instantiated what Bp. Paul Swarbrick exhorted us to do and be when preaching at Sr. Silvana's Final Profession last Sunday: to be joyful and to be generous. When Canon Paul moved into the Little Sisters for his last sojourn, he phoned me saying, "this is game set and match". Full of gentle humour to the end. Remembering him at Mass today and praying for his eternal rest, many know that he embodied everything of the Our Father: Love and friendship, kindness and goodness- and when he heard of people being cantankerous and difficult and critical, he asked: But what would Christ say? The answer is: Say the Our Father. It is all there. Amen.

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