

Sunday Thought

24th July 2022 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings

Hosea 1: 2 - 10
Psalm 85
Colossians 2: 6 - 19
Luke 11: 1 - 13



A New Way to Pray!

Today's readings have a common theme of 'family', illustrating God's relationship with his people through good and ill. That includes us who have put our trust in him as Father and Lord. Hosea's preparation for his prophetic ministry, getting ready to hear and tell God's word, comes through a very sad family experience. We may recognise the story as not uncommon material for a contemporary television 'soap'. It involves Gomer, the prophet's wife being unfaithful, probably through sexual activity in pagan temple practices. She gave birth to three children, none of whom were his. Beginning with the eldest son, Jezreel, they are each given names which mean 'judgement', 'rejected love' and 'separation from God.' Hosea tells how the names describe the condition of God's people. Circumstances and people can change though, and he goes on to speak of the day when the Lord will reverse these national tragedies. His people will repent, receive forgiveness, and know again that they are his true family, loved by him. It is the story of the Gospel, as Paul reminds Christians in Colossae. His letter assures them of their faith experience. They too are God's children. United to Jesus, they now share the very nature of God, and are growing ever stronger in their faith. They are always thankful for forgiveness through the sacrifice of the Cross, for their trust in Jesus and their baptism in his Spirit. They are now deep-rooted members of God's family!

That amazing, good news is as real for us today, and sends many 'thoughts' flooding out of these scriptures. With limited time and space, I pick up on one special 'Sunday Thought' from the gospel reading. It's about just one aspect of Christian family life – prayer! Luke relates how Jesus' disciples have caught up with the Master early one morning while mists are still rising from the lake, and they must wait for him to finish his prayers. They quite naturally talk together about prayer and how to pray. It's akin to one of those rare moments when we have time to think about something we have taken for granted – perhaps all our lives! The disciples would be aware of the formal prayers of the synagogue and the family mealtimes, especially at Passover, and the occasions when they needed to cry out to the Lord for help beyond themselves. Their 'learned by rote' prayers, like many of ours, would be gabbled at *newsreader pace* and without much attention. Those who had been with John the Baptist recalled how he had given his followers their own prayer, and now, when Jesus came to them, they too asked for their own 'disciple prayer'. But they asked for more. *'Lord, TEACH us to pray.'* *Don't just give us a prayer to say, but show us HOW to pray, intimately with God, as you do! Teach us this conversational, family way of praying.*

He did give them a prayer. We and a third of the world still know it and often rattle through it in our worship. More than just a form of words, it's really a prayer-guide about honouring God and working for his Kingdom and its coming through mutual forgiveness and peace. It's about trusting him for our daily needs - and those of the rest of the world too - and gaining strength to live his way of truth and holiness. Often, while a congregation speeds the prayer along, I like to grab just one phrase and think about that. Best of all, when it's hard to pray I just like to hear our Lord remind us of the best way to do it. *'When you pray, say "Father!"'* In the very hardest of times there is no better way to pray than to think upwards and simply whisper - *'Father'*. That can be the whole prayer we need. It was Jesus' final prayer from his Cross! Some people find it hard to say *'Father!'* because of their personal experiences, but then God won't mind if you say *'Mother.'* The psalmist did when he felt that coming close to God felt like being a little child in his mother's arms (131).

There are many other thoughts to share, but there is a helpful one from the end of the gospel reading. It's one more of Jesus' great parables. He would have heard teachers in the synagogue tell a similar one. This one is about an embarrassing neighbour who risks a real friendship by knocking up the people next door in the middle of the night. He needs bread to give to a friend who has called by unexpectedly and very late. It is another of Jesus' humorous stories - he knew just the right level of fun to make them remembered. The bread should not have been such of a problem - most families would bake fresh bread in the morning anyway and an earlier bake would keep for breakfast! Christians have sometimes used the story to encourage long, even all-night, prayer meetings. Jesus did not encourage the practice as it suggests wearing down God's patience. Rather, he wants us to talk to our Parent in heaven about everything and so build a deeper relationship with him. In the story he is saying, *'God is NOT like that neighbour who must be woken up and pestered until he gives in! You don't have to keep going and knocking with your begging bowl, like the ambitious cook next door who never has the right ingredient in their store cupboard. He is the Parent who has the baking done long before we wake up and is never short of an extra three loaves!'*

A prayer for the nation [based on Psalm 85]



Lord, we have passed through events in our nation which have not always honoured you.
We pray for a new commitment to your ways by our national leaders and by ourselves.

Lord, let all our thought and practice be guided by your gracious help.
Teach us to listen to your words, promises and laws which lead to prosperity and peace.

Give us wise leadership from people we may respect for their wisdom and compassion, their faithfulness, honesty, and right living, and their longing for peace and unity.
Help us to contribute to a new openness to your living and active presence in the governance of our nation.