

THE LORD'S PRAYER IN A TIME OF COVID19

Eph 6:10-18

Mt 6:5-15

In times past, the Church has put extra emphasis during Lent on three disciplines – giving, prayer and fasting. I'm guessing that's because these are the three things Jesus speaks of in Mt 6 as part of the Sermon on the Mount. There He says, 'When you give...When you pray...When you fast...'

I plan to look at these over this period of Lent, beginning today with prayer. More specifically, the Lord's Prayer, and even more specifically how the Lord's Prayer may relate to the pandemic we are living through.

The prayer begins with a reminder of who it is to whom we are praying. Jesus tells us to pray 'Father'. We are praying to one who is a loving Father. Sometimes we can become so wrapped up in what to pray that we forget who it is to whom we are praying. We are coming to a Father – a Father who cares as an earthly father should, but who cares more than the best human father ever could. God is a Father to us – Abba, Daddy. In Johannesburg we lived in an area where there were lots of orthodox Jews, and every now and again one might hear a young child calling, 'Abba, Daddy'. We can call on our heavenly Father, Abba, in the same way.

Gordon MacDonald tells of an incident where a young child was asked to go outside to bring in a broom from the shed. It was a dark and stormy night, and the child had hardly left the house than he was back again with the comment, 'No one should go out there without a father'. And equally, no one should venture out into our world without a Father. Perhaps even more so amidst the present crisis.

Having a Heavenly Father, who is God of all, we can confront the challenges of our world, including the present one. Of course we need to be sensible and not take unnecessary risks, but beyond that we need to exercise our faith and trust. We need to trust that God will not allow anything to happen which He himself has not permitted, and which will not be only for our very best. Paul's picture of the armour of God speaks of the shield of faith. Our faith is a shield to ward off anxiety and panic, not letting them penetrate our mind and heart.

Linked to the fact of God's Fatherhood is the next phrase of the Lord's Prayer which reminds us that He is the God of the heavens; the God who is holy and sovereign; the God who is in control of all things. Because He is sovereign, He can protect us, and because He is Father, He wants to and will watch over us.

In this prayer we pray that God's will may be done, on earth as it is in heaven. God's will is perfect, for God knows the end from the beginning. His will may not always be to spare us hardship and pain, but it will always be for our very best. There is that book, 'Love in a time of cholera'. Well for us it's a case of 'Love in a time of Coronavirus'. God's love will not fail, and there is nothing that can separate us from it, not in the present or the future, not in life or death.

Further along in the prayer we ask, 'Give us today our daily bread'; 'Give us the things that we need for each day'. This phrase takes us back to the story of the manna in the wilderness. God provided for the people, but just enough for one day at a time.

I think that is relevant for our material needs at this time. Should we be panic-buying and stockpiling when God asks us to trust Him a day at a time. By all means let's be sensible and be prepared, but let's moderate that in the light of having a Father who says we can trust him for our earthly needs.

This also relates to our consideration for others. Excessive stockpiling means others may not be able to get what they need. Notice we don't pray, 'Give me today my daily bread', but 'Give us...' It is a reminder of our need to consider the needs of others, not just our own.

God wants us to trust Him – one day at a time – for food, for health of body and mind and spirit. For calmness when others around us may be panicking. As believers we can be witnesses to others through our attitude of calm peacefulness in these days. In the words of Eph 6, ‘Your desire to tell the good news about peace should be like shoes on your feet.’

‘And deliver us from evil’; or as the version we heard earlier puts it, ‘Protect us from evil.’ We can and should ask the Lord for protection from this present pandemic. We must be praying for ourselves and for others. Paul says in Eph 6, ‘¹⁸ Never stop praying, especially for others. Always pray by the power of the Spirit. Stay alert and keep praying for God’s people.’ But we also need to play our part. We need to use our common sense and do the things that can help to prevent being infected.

But simply because we are God’s children doesn’t mean we are necessarily exempt from this danger, or indeed the other dangers that life brings. I am reminded of the three friends of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They were condemned to die in the fiery furnace. They say to the king, ‘If our God whom we serve is able to save us from this blazing furnace, then he will. But even if he doesn’t, your majesty may be sure we will not bow down to the gold statue you have set up.’ In a similar way, we say, ‘Our God can protect us from this evil, but even if he doesn’t, we will not be swayed in our belief in Him and our allegiance to Him.

Whether we are affected by the virus or not, we can hold onto God’s promise that He will work for good in our lives through this crisis. Whatever physical affliction we may or may not experience, we believe that God will use it for our growth and our good.

Yesterday our daughter passed on a message which had come from a British family in Wuhan in China where the virus first broke out. The message says, ‘It’s about the 48th day of the city’s quarantine. We’ve been locked in our apartment complex for weeks. But much good has come from this time. Our family life has never been better. We’ve been forced to reconnect with one another and have become a stronger family than ever before.’ ‘We’ve learned how to accept help from others. We have become aware of the birds for the first time; before they were drowned out by the noise of traffic. I could devote a whole post to the amazing community we’ve been blessed with because of the lockdown. My prayer time has never been better. More than anything I am bowled over by God’s goodness at every turn. We are at peace in the epicentre of this virus. Fear and worry have no seat at our table.’

Paul wrote to Timothy, ‘God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind’. So we can say, in the closing words of the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.’