THE LORDS PRAYER

Matthew 6, 9 – 13

As a child, I found the idea and practice of prayer a problem. I was used to hearing and reciting the matins and evensong prayers from the KJ prayer book, but personal prayer was a different matter. How did I make direct contact with God to have my questions answered and my requests received? 'Ask and it shall be given'. It did not seem to work. Also, why did an all-powerful God need prayers of praise? Was it not taking coals to Newcastle? Fast forward half a century, coming towards retirement. A time to reflect on past life. It finally occurred to me that I had known since I was about thirteen that I wanted to be a scientist and I had a pretty smooth ride through the process – all the right doors opened: opportunities for study, jobs etc, an offer to shift to Australia passage paid. I had had no need for career guidance through prayer – it had been given to me from the outset.

But of course, as life progresses, things get more complicated, issues arise, and personal prayer becomes more immediate and important. One of the advantages of retirement is the time to think and the opportunity to join bible study classes. I became interested in the various means that God has chosen to communicate to us, and particularly through the gospels.

Have you ever wondered why Christ did not write the Gospel? It is a good question but maybe not one for today. What we have is the next best thing: firsthand accounts by eye witnesses who also received intensive on the job instruction and follow up support and experience.

The gospels are written in the form of reflective historic accounts, a bit like a life history written late in life supported by diary records. So, there is a narrative, a story of Christ's ministry which includes extensive reproductions of his actual words. Many of these words are in the form of parables but some are direct instructions, and some clear statements including warnings.

So, what does Christ have to say to us about personal prayer? Taking Matthew's account – the church I was baptised and confirmed in was dedicated to St Matthew - we read in Matthew chapter 6, vs 9 to 13 the well-known words of the Lord's prayer. Most Christians can recite this from memory, so it has survived the centuries well. It comes at the beginning of his ministry as part of the Sermon on the Mount which was received by the disciples and 'the multitude' alike. The multitude were largely Jews.

The prayer is apparently simple, and intended for use in private presumably on a daily basis. As an instruction on how to proceed in our personal relationship with God, surely it deserves careful scrutiny in our role of obedient students of the bible.

It contains six parts: Firstly

Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name

Returning to the problem I had as a child, why does God need my praise? Rob mentioned in an earlier address that he could never see why this can be an issue. It was for me and I have heard others, Christian and otherwise, say the same. But I think the answer is simple – he doesn't but we do. Turn the question around. We need to remind ourselves every day that God created the world. It is in effect the first commandment of the old testament and is repeated through one of the other direct instructions from Jesus: I bring you a new commandment. So, it has a long pedigree.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven

Ever since Christ lived on earth, Christians have been waiting for the second coming and the end of the world as we know it. Initially it was expected to occur in their lifetime – clearly it did not. But then the recognition came that Christ has offered the kingdom of God on earth, here and now to those who believe in Him. So, this becomes a personal opportunity for each and every one of us, today.

Give us this day our daily bread

Help us to maintain the essentials of life. That's more like it. Give us what we need not necessarily what we want, but need. Maybe not the new car and the win on Lotto but put food on the table and a roof over our heads. (And we are expected to help others in that regard, remember).

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Is it significant that there is an 'and' at the beginning of this line? Is this the condition inferred in 'ask and you will receive'? Do we have ears to hear? We must make the commitment to believe and thus to ask for forgiveness – which is then unconditional. But in the second half of this statement is the reminder that we must forgive the sins of others upon ourselves – we are not going to get away with it that easily! The offer of redemption through the passion is foreshadowed.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

Now, why would God do that? Is it that sometimes we have to be tested, to prove ourselves, to go through a time of trial as we sometimes interpret it? This is a sticking point for many would-be believers and goes straight to the heart of the questions surrounding the existence of good and evil. We were given the freedom of choice when we attained consciousness, which results in chains of events, some of which seem random to us. Christ instructs us to pray that we come through these experiences with God's help. And we are reminded of the existence of evil in the world, which we must confront when making certain choices, at which time we need God's help to make the right decision.

And then the 'denouement'.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen

The past (the creation), the present (the current power) and the future (the glory)

GOD IS THE BOSS, was, is and always will be. And don't forget it – you do so at your peril.

Being by nature an analyst with an enquiring mind, I like to look sometimes at what is not included in bible passages. The Lord's Prayer was given to the disciples early in his ministry, when his audience was primarily Jewish. Just before this passage Christ tells us to pray in private, in secret and not to use endless repetitions. No mantras for us. There is no mention of the crucifixion, the sacrifice of the lamb to give us the promise of eternal life through the redemption of sin. This will become a fact in good time, of course. There is no mention of Hell and Damnation. There is an assumption that we believe in Jesus when we use this prayer, there is no exhortation to do so.

The Lord's Prayer is the minimum we need on a daily basis to keep us in touch with God. Jesus made it easy for us. It is short, but is it simple? I often find something new to think about when I use it.

May the Lord write the words of his gospel in our hearts and grant us understanding.