

Sermon at Eaglehawk Uniting Church

28/7/13

by Rev Ralph Clarke.

Readings Hosea 1:1-11; Luke 11:1-13

Prayer means a lot of different things to people. One of my family often ask me to "say one for him" if he is not going to church. I suppose that's in the tradition of praying for each other but it feels like a bit of a cop out. There are prayers on the internet and dial a prayer. Someone told me, "there's even a dial a prayer service for atheists. You dial a number and nobody answers". He said, "I think it is run by Telstra".

In worship I usually call you to prayer with, "Let us pray". But what is meant by praying? When I pray, do you see me as the one paid to pray on your behalf, or as one who is supposed to know the right words to say? Do you enter into the prayer with me, or just wait for me to finish, or maybe ignore what I do and say your own prayer?

Luke tells us it was when Jesus was praying that the disciples ask him to "Teach us to pray". They recognise that they are also meant to pray, that Jesus wasn't praying for them and that prayer is important. The prayer Jesus taught is one of many prayers Jesus offered and taught but we call this one the Lord's Prayer.

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus gave the disciples a Jewish model of praying. He taught us to begin by acknowledging and praising God. Jesus says, "When you pray, say, "Father, holy is your name." Honour God! It helps to have confidence that God is great, and is there for us. It often helps to have a sense of the presence of GOD. If we find that difficult we can do what one Scottish man used to do - sit with an empty chair in front of him, imagining that Jesus was in the chair, then talk to Jesus.

When we say the Lord's Prayer in church we say the words so quickly, but in private, it is worth stopping for silence after the opening line – to remember the greatness of God, and to open ourselves to the life of God, to let go of the things we are planning to do, or things we're worrying about, to open a door to all the ways we speak and act and let God have a good look at who we are and what we are like. Now to do that can take some time, but it begins to change prayer from us talking to God, to being open to what God might want to say and do in us.

One of the temptations in prayer is that we can be inclined to try imposing our own agenda onto God. Then we may not get to hear anything new, or different, or life changing. An old man had a badly ulcerated leg and yet every day he used to come and sit in church and pray. One day the priest asked the man what he did every day in church. "Oh", he said, "I contemplate". "What does that mean", asked the priest and the man replied, "I look at him, and he looks at me, and I change".

After recalling God's greatness, Jesus taught us to pray "Your kingdom come", to remember God's mission, what God is doing in the world and to share in that. Jesus told us stories that God's kingdom or rule is where all people are important to God, where forgiveness and mercy, love and justice is a priority. Remember those things first he was saying. This will prevent a lot of your prayers becoming selfish and shallow.

Only after this focus on God does Jesus encourage *asking* prayers. Jesus taught us to ask for four things. First, "Give us our daily bread". "Give US, OUR bread", plural. We have to be able to ask for the same things for others as for ourselves. If we ask for something that others can't have, then we are asking God to be unjust, which God isn't. We are all inter-connected. What hurts others can hurt us and what helps others can help us. It is daily bread – enough for the day. No wastage! No needless pillaging the resources of the planet.

Jesus taught us to look for forgiveness, but also to recognise that desiring forgiveness for ourselves entails being forgiving to others. Jesus taught us to ask and expect, not that we will have an easy life, but that God will not let us face trials that will destroy our faith and trust. Lastly, just as we expect Jesus will say God will give us anything we ask for, he says, "God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask".

The emphasis of this teaching on asking prayers is on God's goodness. Jesus stories of the friend at midnight and giving good things to our children reinforce God's goodness. Knowing the goodness and love of God is far more important than us getting what we want. It's the same in the book of Hosea. Hosea's marriage to Gomer is a reminder that God patiently refuses to give up on even the most wilful people. Like Hosea and his people, God is able to be deeply hurt, and yet still love us, and to keep caring in spite of constant rejection. We can rely on God's love even through our low times.