

The Lord's Prayer – Luke 11, 1-4
28th July 2019, Trinity 6, (*Proper 12*)

Twenty and a bit years ago, the definitive revision of our church services, 'Common Worship,' was nearing publication at the millennium. Rumours were circulating, and it seems one bone of contention for the revisers centred on a particular line in the Lord's prayer – 'Lead us not into temptation.' The theologians pointed out that of course God wouldn't lead us into temptation – that was Satan's role! And the experts in NT Greek felt it was a poor translation: it was not about everyday 'temptations', but about that greatest test of faith, when faced with persecution. 'Please don't bring us to that ultimate trial' – of either renounce your faith, or face a grisly death.

In the end, as we know, the familiar version got through, despite being incorrect, for *pastoral* reasons. People felt it more relevant – to the everyday temptations of their lives, unlike ancient persecutions. (Ironically, today there are many places in the world where Christians live in fear of precisely that.) That's by the way, but I bring up this process of revision because it has clearly been at work from the very beginning.

The starkly brief version we've just heard from Luke is almost certainly the nearest we have to the original. The more elaborate version in Matthew's Gospel shows signs of being adapted, expanded, for corporate liturgical use – a bit more explanation ('Our father in heaven', not merely 'Father'); more topical, not only 'your kingdom come' but, in the meantime, also 'your will be done,' *both* of them 'on earth, as in heaven'. In most languages, the words now settle into a rhythmic pattern, fitting for recital by groups of worshippers. And the final paragraph 'For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory...' is an obviously rounding-off appendix: in the Roman Mass it is actually separated from the rest by an extra short prayer.

Even Luke's own version, in many of the early manuscript copies has been amended and expanded, some making it more like Matthew's version. And what's more, even our most basic Greek version cannot be the actual 'original'. Jesus himself spoke not in Greek or Hebrew but in Aramaic. A lot of research has been done to try to piece together what his actual Aramaic words would have been. Of course we cannot be certain, but one thing is clear: Aramaic, like other Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic, is a very 'allusive' language. Words have not one specific dictionary definition, but a whole surrounding aura of associations and subsidiary meanings. Of course most languages do, this to some extent; without it, poetry and metaphor would scarcely be possible. Think of our word 'love', for example ...Or 'power'. Or 'father'....

But Aramaic has these allusions and associations to a high degree, and the most likely original words of the Lord's Prayer would have a huge range of 'shades of meaning'. There's a book called 'The Lord's Prayer in Aramaic' which has pages and pages of subtly nuanced, perfectly plausible English translations of the supposed Aramaic.

Now the point of all this is not to confuse, nor to suggest that anything goes. But rather, to emphasize that the Lord's Prayer in the Gospels is not just a formula to be repeated and repeated like a magic spell. But it's a highly suggestive basis, a framework for

prayer. It gives some fundamentals from which our imaginations, our concerns and delights, our duties and our joys, can be brought into the transforming presence of God. Fundamentals such as our close, family-like dependence on God (not *literally* our father, obviously); and the proper place for 'hallowing God's name' – 'name' meaning his character, his nature, in the Hebrew understanding of name – to be hallowed in both word and deed. It acknowledges the importance of persisting in praying for – *wishing* for, *hoping* for, the presence of God's kingdom in its fullness, on earth as in heaven.

The prayer for daily bread is not so much a prayer for our security in knowing it will always be there to rely on; rather, it's a prayer for just enough for tomorrow – like manna in the wilderness, enough for each day, one at a time, but any hoarding and it turned rotten. A lesson for our times? And asking forgiveness for our sins, forgiveness which is necessarily a two-way process of giving and receiving, receiving and giving.

Each line of this wonderfully suggestive prayer opens a door to a whole new world of possibilities for prayerful contemplation. 'For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.'

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