The Secret Life of the Soul

The First Sunday in Lent 2020

Matthew 6:1-18

*But when you pray, go to your secret room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.*

*Matthew 6:6*

Those of you who were present for the Ash Wednesday service will recognize these verses as the ones we read then. Jesus’ teachings here are so rich and full that there is much to mine here. And so, I wanted to spend a bit more time in this place.

Let us pray*: Holy Jesus, as your disciples of old implored you, we do as well: teach us to pray, Lord, teach us to pray. Amen.*

If I were to ask you what passage from the Bible you know best, I can guess some of your responses. I would imagine John 3:16 would make the list. Perhaps one of the Beatitudes would appear as well. Maybe 1 Corinthians 13 may make your top ten. The twenty third psalm surely will be mentioned, too.

But I have the sneaking suspicion that your list would also include what we fondly call the Lord’s Prayer. Most of us can recite it in the King James Version. Some of us use “debts,” others prefer “trespasses,” and less commonly, “sins.” We recite it every Sunday here. It is so familiar we don’t need to print the words. I have led it at hospital beds, grave sites, and at weddings. It is firmly implanted into our DNA as Christians. And it is no small wonder why. In introducing his disciples to this prayer, he encourages: *When you pray, pray in this way.*

It’s not a long prayer, by any stretch of the imagination. Sixty-nine words, in the translation I most commonly use. In fact, Jesus chastises the religious ones of his time for their verbosity: *When you pray, don’t pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do. They think that by saying many words they’ll be heard.*

When I was in the Baptist seminary in California, I had a good friend who earned his undergraduate degree at a rather conservative Baptist college in Oklahoma. Jerry and I enjoyed sharing a laugh or two talking story over our breakfast in the cafeteria. On one occasion, he shared a story about a class he once took at that university that was taught by a rather pious professor who began each class by asking one of the students to say a prayer. On one occasion, the midterm exam was to take place. Several of the students were totally unprepared for the exam. As the class began, the professor asked one of the ill-prepared students to begin the class with prayer. The student began to pray and pretty soon, other students around him began passing him slips of paper stating particular things to pray for. The prayer time went on and on. The professor, being a very devout believer in prayer, did not stop the prayer from extending well into the class time. When the student ended his prayer, Jerry laughed, there was not sufficient time to take the exam and the professor postponed it until the next class. From that moment on, the professor never asked students to pray on exam day.

I don’t know if the story was true or not, but it made for a good laugh, nevertheless. But it says something about long-winded prayer!

The Lord’s Prayer, or as some have called it the Model Prayer or the Disciples’ Prayer, as I have mentioned earlier is a compact prayer. But there is so much there. I once taught a six-week class on it. To try and cover its full breadth would not do justice to it in a single meditation. Rather, I would like to spend these moments in the overarching intercession that Jesus prays in the opening words: *your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* Just a couple of brief thoughts as we consider Jesus’ petition here.

If, by asking of God that the reign of God come, that the will of God be done on earth, our Lord is here implying that God does not reign in this world, that God’s will is not being done on earth. This may see rather self-evident, but it goes against the grain of much bad theology that seeps into our way of thinking. It comes out when the catastrophic happens: when a marriage becomes irretrievably broken; at the funeral of a nine-year old; when a rampaging fire destroys all in its path; when a nation refuses sanctuary to men, women and children fleeing persecution and certain death. Oh, it’s tragic, for sure, but God has a reason for it, some are wont to say. Jesus prays, let your reign come, O God, your will be done, because it certainly is not being done in our broken world.

The reign of God will not come in the twinkling of an eye, but moment by moment. It will come when Christ’s followers let their light shine, when they become salt of the earth. It will come when we love our enemies. It will come when reconciliation takes place. It will come when we do not retaliate against those who manipulate and use us. Do you see how the whole Sermon on the Mount is encapsulated in this one petition: *your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven?* In this one plea, Jesus prays, and as he prays, he teaches us just what is at stake. To pray that prayer is to pray for a revolution to happen. So, when you pray that prayer, please be fully aware of what you ask for and just what it requires of you.