

24 July 2022

Hosea 1:2-10
Colossians 2:6-15
Luke 11:1-13

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. [Colossians 2:6]

The opening of Paul's letter to the Colossians is a wonderful piece of writing. Writing from a prison, he sends word to the infant church in the city of Colossae. This little church which Paul founded, is bearing fruit and growing; and Paul wants to tell them how to nurture that life to bear more fruit.¹

In the first chapter of his letter, Paul has woven together four intersecting stories: the story of creation, the story of Christ, the story of Paul himself, and the story of the Colossian believers.² It is in the gospel, the message of the good news, that these four stories converge – the gospel of Christ, proclaimed by Paul, announcing reconciliation to the church and, through the church, to all creation. Now in the second chapter Paul invites the Colossian believers to inhabit their part in this big story. They are to live or “walk” in Christ.

And to do walk in Christ means, among other things, rejecting rival narratives that compete for their imaginations. Among the rival narratives confronting the Colossians is the idea that the Christian life somehow needed to be completed by engaging in the practices of Judaism. Paul explains why, if you've already got Jesus the Messiah as your Lord, you don't need to be completed by any other system at all.³ Among the rival narratives is that of rulers and authorities – and powers, systems and structures, worldviews and values – things that try to assert their call on our lives in place of Christ. These things can trap us into ways of thinking and ways of being which run contrary to the way and purpose of Jesus. “Our imaginations often fall captive, for example, to the logic of ‘the economy’, as though the world

¹ Wright, *Paul*, 142.

² This idea, and the outworking in the paragraph that follows, from Schellenberg “Commentary”.

³ Wright, *Paul*, p.167

were governed not by Christ but by the market's invisible hand. And so we live in servitude, as though our having enough depended not on the abundant generosity of God in creation but rather on our obedient devotion to economic forces whose logic we must not doubt."⁴

Paul asserts that Christians are subject only to a different authority – the one true authority: Christ. Sometimes Paul writes harshly about the practice of circumcision, and here it may appear that he is contradicting himself by speaking of it positively. But here Paul is using circumcision as a metaphor. In Judaism circumcision was the physical mark which made one a member of the family of God. Paul asserts that our membership in the family of God is now the result of Christ's work on the cross. It is through God generous and grace-filled action in Christ that we become children of God, and become at the same time submitted and committed to his authority rather than to the rival powers that would claim us.

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him...

And how do we do this? How do we continue to live our lives in him?

Well, an important part of this prayer.

About fifteen years ago I came across Richard Foster's excellent book on prayer. I read it carefully. It has 21 chapters, each on a different kind of prayer. And as I read it, I found myself sighing from time to time – sighing at the poverty of my prayer life. At each point that I sighed, I turned down the corner of the page intending to come back to the issue later. I ended up with a volume with a great many pages so marked. I didn't know what to do with this: I felt burdened and overwhelmed with the magnitude of the task – this vast gulf between my poor practice and the high standard suggested by Foster's 21 chapters.

I took the issue to my spiritual director – someone who helps me sort out what God is doing in my life. My spiritual director suggested that I simply take one marked

⁴ Schellenberg, "Commentary"

page at a time, and take whatever time I needed on one issue at a time – weeks or months if need be.

I turned to the first place I had sighed: it was on page 4, the Preface! There Foster had written:

One day a friend of mine was walking through a shopping mall with his two-year-old son. The child was in a particularly cantankerous mood, fussing and fuming. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet his son but nothing seemed to help. The child simply would not obey. Then, under some special inspiration, the father scooped up his son and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key. And yet, as best he could, this father began sharing his heart. ‘I love you,’ he sang, ‘I’m so glad you’re my boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh.’ On they went from one store to the next. Quietly the father continued singing off key and making up words that did not rhyme. The child relaxed and became still, listening to this strange and wonderful song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle his son into the car seat, the child lifted his head and said simply, ‘Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again!’

Foster goes on to say:

Prayer is a little like that. With simplicity of heart we allow ourselves to be gathered up into the arms of the Father and let him sing his love song over us.⁵

Now at first this seemed all wrong, as delightful as Foster’s story was. Surely prayer is primarily about what we should say or sing to God.

But Foster and the story he shared make a vitally important point: prayer is first of all about a relationship, and it is a relationship in which God has moved first. God invites us in; God, through Christ, has done what is needed so that we can be his beloved children; and as we come in prayer we come to the one who would first of all sing his love song over us.

⁵ Foster, *Prayer*, p.4

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

We are so familiar with the prayer that Jesus then taught (more particularly in its Sermon on the Mount version as recounted in Matthew 6) through our regular use of it in corporate worship and private prayer, that we may have lost touch with what we are really praying. (Keep watch for my article in the August edition of *The Messenger* in which I say more on this.) The danger is real: it is not for nothing that the English word "patter", meaning rapid mechanical or glib speech, comes from the Latin *paternoster*, meaning "Our Father".

There is a great deal that can be said about this prayer, but I just want to make a few observations of things that have struck me afresh.

The first is to note that Jesus was not intending that we limit ourselves to parroting the exact words that he gave. He was rather giving a model prayer, a prototype, a way of thinking about prayer which should inform all prayer.⁶

And this way of thinking about prayer, this model, focusses on God as Father. When Jesus is asked how to pray he focuses not on *what* is prayed, but on the *one* to whom prayer is made. The nature and character of God shapes our prayer – and as Foster's story noted, when we come in prayer we come to the one who would sing his love song over us. And that means we don't have to be elaborate; we don't have to come up with carefully crafted petitions; we don't have to use particular formulas. We can be as spontaneous as a child – "Sing it to me again, Daddy!"

In prayer we come to God as Father.

In Hosea the metaphor of family is used prophetically. It is used to make known God's passionate attachment to God's people, how this attachment makes God vulnerable to the agony of their unfaithfulness, and that God's love for them will nevertheless endure.⁷

⁶ Garland, *Luke*, p.460

⁷ Scalise, "Commentary"

In prayer we come to this passionate, loving, faithful God. We come to God the Father who longs to give his children what they need. Jesus goes on a little later in this passage to emphasise this point. Of course no earthly father in his right mind would give his child a snake instead of a fish, or a scorpion instead of an egg! How much more then will our perfect heavenly Father give us what we need.

The rival powers and narratives cannot be trusted, because they are self-interested – they seek our submission for their own gain. When the Christian comes in prayer, we come to the God we can trust without reservation – our Father.

In prayer we come to God as friend. Jesus follows up his model prayer with a little illustration of a man seeking help from a neighbour in order to fulfil the important social duty of providing hospitality to an unexpected visitor. In effect Jesus is saying, “When you go in need to the typical neighbour everything is against you. It is night. He is asleep in bed. The door is locked. His children are asleep. He does not like you. And despite all this you will receive even more than you ask. This is because your neighbour is a man of integrity and he will not violate that quality: he will act to preserve his honour. So too the God to whom you pray also has an integrity that he will not violate; God is holy and honourable; and beyond this he loves you. And so if one can be confident of having one’s needs met when you go to such a neighbour at night, how much more can you rest assured when you take your requests to a loving Father?”⁸

The rival narratives of the powers of the world do not have integrity: they will act deceitfully, and slip and slide to avoid any obligation or cost to themselves.

The parable of the friend in the night has presented quite a difficulty of translation of the original Greek text, and you’ll therefore find a range of versions in English translations. Many versions try to avoid the translation difficulty by presenting the parable as being about the issue of persistence in prayer.⁹ Having looked into the

⁸ Bailey, *Poet*, p.133, summarising an extended exegesis..

⁹ Bailey, *Poet*, pp.125-133 deals very thoroughly with this. See also Garland, *Luke*, pp.465-470 who comes to the same conclusion. Wright, *Luke*, 134 treats the passage in terms of persistence, as does Sarras, “Commentary”.

translation issue I'm inclined to the view that the parable is not about persistence, but nevertheless I want to offer a thought on the matter.

Some will tell us that we should be persistent: that we should keep on praying on an issue to which we don't seem to get an answer. Others take a negative view of such persistence. It seems to me that there is an element in truth in both positions. I think keeping on and on at a particular request can be wrong if it is motivated by some idea of manipulating or shaming God into action: God is not asleep and needing to be roused by our hammering; God is not uninterested and needing to be begged. Positively, I see persistence as being appropriate in the context of a relationship with God. Just as with a father or friend, with God we continue to bring our needs and concerns; then we stop a while with God and we listen; and in doing so are exposed to the possibility that we and our request may become transformed in time. We may become reconciled to the issue; we may see things in a new light; or we continue to weep with God over what is disordered in the world and to long for the coming of his kingdom.

Prayer is a vital part of weaving our story with big story of God and his purposes for all creation. In the Lord's prayer this is modelled. The prayer brings together the relationship between a praying people and the Father who loves them and is glad to receive their prayer; it brings together the needs of the people with God's purpose for this people – to be working in the world to his glory. As we pray the Lord's prayer, and whenever we pray in obedience to Jesus' command to follow the pattern of these concerns, we increasingly come to inhabit God's big story rather than the narratives of the rival powers..

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

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