

On the metaphors and migration of the Lord's Prayer: A sermon preached at Robinson College Chapel on November 17th 2024.

It is something of an irony that before Jesus tells his disciples how to pray in Matthew 6 he tells those who repeat long prayers; the issue is not, I think, their length (many pious Christians find it difficult to avoid that) but mindless repetition. The so-called Lord's prayer can become just such a prayer; if I am organising a service and omit the Lord's Prayer, someone is bound to complain, just as if I use a contemporary version someone complains about changing the familiar, even 'original' words. The Lord's Prayer offers a moment for everyone to go onto autopilot as we repeat the familiar cadences like a sort of comfort blanket; the reassurance of institutions that do not change.

This week we have been reminded (if needed) that religious institutions as much/ more than political, social, economic, even educational institutions can become mechanisms of control and self-inflicted blinkers, unaccountable because of their apparent sacrality, self-serving and self-preserving. Institutions includes structures, worship, liturgy, and even prayer.

We might ask, who is prayer for – for God, in case she does not know or will not otherwise act? Or is prayer for the person praying, shaping their intentionality and habitus; is praying this prayer a commitment to hearing how others pray the same words? It is we who pray, 'our Father', but who are 'we'? Who will we include, who will we exclude as we pray? Religious language is inevitably metaphorical – metaphors draw on deep networks of evocations and associations that give them their power and ensure they are never static/ fixed. They may survive centuries and cultural migration, but they are context responsive; contexts may change.

And so we start, 'Our Father' - a metaphor, but some would say a truth, which for Christians establishes the very foundations of an understanding of God and of ourselves. A metaphor which for some is unspeakable. Not just because of the patterns of unequal power, unaccountable decision making, and hierarchy — true in Jesus's time and ours — some might label patriarchy, but because of visceral responses of fear, experience of misogyny, expectation of violence, or even of sadistic control masquerading under the guise of a longed for father figure.

Or 'Kingdom', which last week Simon suggested should evoke not a set of geographical boundaries but sovereignty. I would suggest the two are not mutually exclusive. Let's translate 'empire', evoking the British empire on which the sun reportedly never set. May your empire have its heyday? May it become globalised. How easy is that to ask in an age of competing would-be empires? And what sort of political model does empire proclaim and authenticate? What are the cultural consequences of globalisation, even a globalised church?

But my interest is in the petitionary verses – the requests for us (which us?) – give us bread; give us what bread? For linguistics students — the word describing bread is the only adjective in the LP. BUT, the long list of conflicting translations and interpretations hides the nerdy fact that this adjective is not found anywhere in Greek before its appearance here in Matthew and Luke — for fellow nerds 'epiousios', — a word whose origins and therefore whose meaning is not at all certain. Does it mean the bread for the day which is present, the familiar 'daily' bread; today's bread for those struggling to bring it home. The Message, a modern, supposedly more accessible but colloquial translation, asks God, 'keep us alive with three square meals' – which I would find difficult to intone with a straight face; while the Living Bible says 'Give us our food again today as usual' and the Voice adds 'no more, no less'. We don't want God to think we are presumptuous for asking. Or, as in Bibles with footnotes, is it 'the day which is coming': tomorrow's bread for those who are more anxious

about whether they have got anything for breakfast than longing for something more substantial than Simon's promised light refreshments after today's service?

Or perhaps not bread for tomorrow Monday, but in line with Jesus's persistent focus on the end time coming shortly or even here and now, the bread of the ultimate tomorrow, the end time, the bread of God's Kingdom (or Empire). Another possibility would be 'the bread for our being' – the essential or necessary bread; many contemporary translations offer the bread we need for today – and that is favoured by many interpreters who can wax eloquent on what we do **really** need – which is not just a handful of crisps but something God alone can supply. Perhaps with this in mind the Latin translation made in the 4th century gave 'supersubstantialis' which then became the norm in catholic translations until very recently - 'supersubstantial' – which if you were studiously reading the text would stop you in your tracks. Super as in super-natural – which is not natural at all but transcends what is natural: that which transcends material substance or even all substance. A persistent line of interpretation has found here the religious equivalent of Marie Antionette's supposed response to the people of Paris's complaint that they had no bread, 'Let them eat cake'. Not 'cake' but the good things that God offers which are of greater value than mere bread-crumbs. God's spiritual food. In practice this was regularly referred to the eucharist/ communion.

But are these the self-indulgent ruminations of someone who can afford to have a crust of Gail's bread in her lunch box – which I might throw away because it has gone stale? Ivory tower musings to join the deeply debated question of how many angels can dance on a pin head. I have a freezer full of all sorts of goodies at home; but how do I say these words when I read of looming famine in northern Gaza because aid trucks are not getting through. Margaret Atwood in those excerpts from her prose poem on Bread said it better than I could do, challenging us to use our imagination to find ourselves speaking, listening, somewhere else. Challenging us whether we can ever look at a piece of bread again, or ask for bread again with the same nonchalance.

A colleague, translating and interpreting the same Greek as I do, but in a Ghanaian context, suggests, 'Give us today our abundant socio-economic resources just like you do every day'. For another colleague, 'this challenges all who eat, store or throw away food to be producers and givers of daily bread'. But before you get out some coins to put in the collection plate, she protests, 'no not charity, which reinforces patterns of inequality and oppression, but working towards environments when all can work fairly for their bread', If I say 'Give us the economic resources we need now' whom do I include in the 'us' and who do I expect to do the giving?

And so we come to the next clause, where again a cacophony of competing translations painfully side-steps some searching questions. Forgive our trespasses – have you ever trespassed? I have, and not been prosecuted because, at least until 2022 as I understand it, trespassers are not prosecuted, and anyway I believe in the right to roam. In fact, 'trespasses' is not used by any English Biblical translation still in use as far as I can see, but goes back to William Tyndale in 1526. Or, in some versions, forgive our sins, a term which again keeps our eyes fixed on God and our relationship with him/ her; again, this week we may well have pondered on who has the right to grant forgiveness, for whom, and whether some can be pressurised/ compelled to forgive as soon as forgiveness has been asked for. Or, perhaps we should after all follow the King James version and numerous translations since, 'annul our debts as we annul the debts of others'. Jesus tells a parable about a man who sells his family and himself into bondage to pay a debt - a very common form of debt in the first centuries. So how do I speak of annulling debts in the week of Cop 29, or shortly after the meeting of the heads of Commonwealth countries with their call for reparations for the long history of

the consequences of slavery, and in face of the world economic structures that impose debts on struggling nations.

Perhaps someone will tell me to keep religion out of politics/ politics out of religion; ask me not to cast shadows over their favourite prayer in times of stress or to distort these spiritually uplifting words. We are as we pray, just as we pray as we are – or perhaps we become as we pray. The language of prayer is the language of metaphor and we cannot control how those metaphors will come alive in our context, or in the contexts of others. The Lord's prayer is in fact our prayer – in it, it is not the Lord who speaks but we speak. Who are we as we speak? for whom/ with whom do we speak?