

**St John the Divine
Menston Parish Church**

**Sermon Series
Matthew 6: 5—13**

Prayer



Matthew 6: 5—13

Prayer

⁵ “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

““Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.’

Matthew 6:9a
'Our Father in Heaven...'

Prayer is hard. Even St Paul admits it's hard in one of his letters where he says 'we do not know how to pray as we ought.' Prayer can be mysterious, life-giving, and miraculous; but it can also be depressing, isolating, disappointing and frustrating. Most of us when pressed will admit that prayer is essential to Christian faith, but equally, most of us will admit that knowing that doesn't translate into spending any significant amount of time regularly actually praying. It always feels like the thing to do when we've nothing else to be doing, and a waste of time when there's things which need to get done.

This is why over the next few weeks we are going to be thinking about prayer. Unapologetically, I have chosen the Lord's Prayer for our gospel reading for six weeks running. This will give us time to think through it carefully, perhaps learn it for the first time, perhaps begin to use it; but certainly to see what it teaches us about praying. If this is the way Jesus taught us to pray, then it's a good place to start to understand prayer. Even then, it's not the whole story and we will be returning to prayer later in the year when we look at some Psalms, but it is a good place to start.

So, briefly then, the Lord's Prayer is structured as three petitions towards God and three or four towards each other, a bit like the ten commandments and Jesus's command to Love God and love our neighbours. It can seem a bit formulaic, but it really isn't meant to be. Instead, it is an invitation to turn to God and spend time in relationship with him. We often struggle with prayer because we can't imagine God and we can't imagine what prayer can do really, but this is why God gives us words to use, so by praying, our minds can catch up.

Today, we're literally looking at the first four words – 'Our Father in Heaven' – and this sets the tone for the rest of the prayer and remains present throughout, so it's worth taking our time over.

Just as we start, a little note of caution. There will be some here who thankfully have had great experiences of having a father, but there will be others for whom fatherhood has been far from ideal and for whom picturing God as Father using our own experiences conjures up painful images. I don't want to dwell on this, but simply to say that if this raises issues for you, it's worth talking them over, with Andrew or me perhaps. Fundamentally though,

whatever our experience of fatherhood, this prayer actually isn't asking us to import them because however good or bad our fathers were, they are not God. From a Jewish point of view, God as Father meant very specific things.

This is also a reason why we don't need to get side-tracked by gender equality. God is indeed described using both female and male metaphors in the Bible, but Mother is never applied to God as a title. There could be many reasons for this which I don't have time to deal with, but as the Bible uses the title 'Father' and in doing so pulls on its own internal imagery of Fatherhood, it isn't actually referencing much external gender stuff that we can debate, so we don't need to be distracted by it. Again, if there's a reason you aren't comfortable with God as Father, come and talk to me.

Let's look at what it actually means to pray 'Our Father in Heaven,' having spent time setting the ground. This short phrase is a treasure trove that we tend to skip over. It is what defines God for us, not as a cosmic polytheist or a remote omnipotent being, but instead as a God who is close and present, intimate and loving, and yet at the same time immensely powerful, great and mysterious. It's a difficult tension to get our heads around. By calling God Father, we acknowledge that we are created, and he is the life-giver.

For the Jews, to claim God as Father is something which goes back a long way. When Moses went to Pharaoh and demanded that the Israelites be released from slavery, he said 'Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son. Let my son go that he may worship me.' For the Jews, therefore God, as Father, was a sign of hope and liberty, of release from disaster. It was a claim that they held on to throughout various oppressions by Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Persia, Syria and Rome. They clung on to this Father-liberator even when exiled or oppressed and even when it seemed like God didn't care. The prophet Isaiah, for example, says, at one such time:

*For you are our father,
though Abraham does not know us
and Israel does not acknowledge us;
you, O LORD, are our father;
our Redeemer from of old is your name.*

Calling God 'Father' was a claim to being a people of freedom and hope. Even when these prayers didn't seem like they were being answered, they clung to God as Father. Something we perhaps need to remember...

Jesus develops what 'Father' is like as a title as well. Fathers give Good Gifts in Matthew 7 for example. But most importantly, we learn what God as Father looks like by looking at Jesus. For example, in John 14 we read:

Philip said to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.'

Jesus's life and work give us a view of what God, as Father, looks like. The story of the prodigal son for example gives us a view of God as Father, waiting, aching, for the return of his wayward son. This isn't a culturally correct view of fatherhood in Jesus's day, but it is a view of God. God as Father is a source of security and forgiveness, of liberty and hope.

However, Jesus's use of 'Father' isn't completely consistent with the Jewish tradition. As we have seen, Jesus calls God 'Abba'. This would have been fairly shocking. The Jews, if they prayed, prayed in Hebrew and referred to God in Hebrew. Jesus addressed God in his mother tongue of Aramaic. There was no longer a sacred language, no demand for a racial tie to Abraham, but instead God could be approached and addressed in our own tongue. The reason the Bible writers retained the little bit of Aramaic in amongst the Greek is because it was so significant. 'Abba' meant 'Dad'. It was personal, but also respectful. It could be used for a father but also for a respected friend, like I was brought up to call people 'uncle' who weren't necessarily related to me. Introducing this as our way of addressing God retains the respect that we must hold for God, whilst assuring us of his personal intimacy with us.

So where does all this talk of God as 'Our Father in Heaven' leave us?

In praying 'Our Father in Heaven', Jesus teaches us to approach prayer in a boldly and verging on the cheeky or crazy when you think about what we are doing. We are putting ourselves in the position of relating to God personally, even if we don't 'feel' it, and yet approaching God respectfully. We are remembering that he gives us life and that God is close. He embraces us as we come to him having patiently waited to receive us. We know we approach a forgiving Father who wants to give good gifts. We are also claiming that we are the people who God will save. We are a people of freedom from oppression or any other system of this world. We are a people of God's Kingdom, signing on for an apprenticeship in faith, just as any other son of Jesus's time would learn from his father. We are committing to following Jesus, our picture of God's

Fatherhood, and living like he lived. 'Our Father' is therefore already a prayer of hope and a prayer of commitment.

Praying 'Our Father' also acknowledges that we pray alongside others and requires us to be in peace with our brothers, our sisters, and even our enemies. I am not God's 'only child'. All of us are God's children, all can approach him as Father. This unites us but also gives us a responsibility to love each other as God first loved us.

Finally, praying 'Our Father in Heaven' with all these implications is a goal, and not only a starting point. It is recognising our co-sonship with Jesus and being like him. It is being like a younger sibling dressing up in an older brother's clothes and pretending to be them. We will not inhabit Jesus perfectly – his clothes do not fit us and our behaviour does not fit him – but we do learn more about what it is like to be a child of God by imitating him. It is therefore a starting point, but our goal is to truly pray 'Our Father' as perfect sons and daughters of God. This is our apprenticeship in God's kingdom and our ultimate aim, knowing that it is only through Jesus that we are presented to God as perfect children.

So this week try to pray. And when you do, pray 'Our Father in Heaven,' knowing God's intimacy and his greatness, and feeling the hope of the freedom of living in God's Kingdom as his child. Amen.

Matthew 6:9b
‘...hallowed be your name’

We're in the thick of a series of sermons about prayer. Prayer can be hard, and that's why Jesus's own followers, the disciples, asked him to teach them how to pray. If even these people who hung around with Jesus on a daily basis and saw him praying didn't know how to do it, then obviously prayer is something that we all need to learn about.

We started last week by thinking about how God is both Father to us as well as being a heavenly, powerful and awesome God. When we come to pray, we pray to a God who loves us personally and deeply, and who is big enough to help us. In praying it's like coming home to a dad but at the same time approaching a hugely powerful throne. Hopefully you've had time to think about that this week and pray with this in mind.

This week, we're looking at another phrase from the Lord's Prayer – Hallowed be your name. Initially, it seems like the trickiest in the prayer to understand, but hopefully today we'll get to grips with it. It's got a lot to tell us about God, our lives, and prayer, and as we found last week, it's not as simple as it seems because its roots go way back into the early parts of the Bible.

'Hallowed' is a funny word. It means 'to make holy' or 'to honour as holy'. And 'Holy' means to be set apart for God; to be sacred. So when we pray 'Hallowed be your name' we are asking that God's name would be honoured and revered and made Holy. It's an odd thing to be asking God for when you think about it – that God would make God's name holy. So what does it mean?

On one level, it's as simple as praying that God's name would be worshipped by the whole of God's creation as it should have been from the very beginning. But on another level, this has much more to tell us about the God that we pray to. It's all in a name...

To understand this phrase, we need to delve back into the history of the Israelite people as they learned who the God was who had chosen them, and how they were to relate to him. Back in the time of Moses, early in the Bible, God first appeared to him in a famous story about a Burning Bush. And in this encounter, Moses asks what he is to call God, and God's answer is 'I Am who I Am.' It's an odd name, but this is where the name 'Yahweh' comes from – a derivative of the Hebrew word 'To be'. It's also where the name Jehovah comes

from as a corruption of what scholars now think the name would have sounded like.

By giving Moses a name by which to call God, God gave him much more than just a title. Names are important. They establish the possibility of a relationship. It's one of the first things you ask someone when you meet them, because it gives you a way of addressing them and everything else you know about them becomes attached to that name. It gives the potential for fitting them into our own little worlds and puts them within reach of our call – once you know someone's name, you can get their attention. It's why if someone gives you a fake name, it's a really big deal for us, because names carry trust, relationship and potential for future interaction. By giving Moses a name by which to call him, God establishes a relationship with his people.

However, as you will all know, giving someone a name also places you in a vulnerable position. Someone can accuse you, misrepresent you, or implicate you, just by the use of your name. This is no different with God. God becomes vulnerable to his people just as he seeks to establish relationship with them. The two go hand in hand.

The Israelites understood this, which is why they held the name of God in such high regard. For them, Yahweh was a holy name which mustn't be uttered. It mustn't be spelled with its vowel sounds so you couldn't accidentally read it out. They invented ways of talking about God grammatically, called the 'divine passive', which meant they could hint at God doing things without using his name. Our prayer this morning is an example of this – it is effectively saying, 'God, please make your name holy, but without naming God.' God's name was mysterious and could never be used just like any other name. It's partly what lies behind the commandment to 'not take the name of God in vain,' and all the Jewish blasphemy laws. God had made himself vulnerable in order to have relationship with his people, but this name must not be misused and sullied. It must remain holy, because a name is a key part of an identity.

So last week we had the paradox of God as Father but in heaven. Today we have God giving his name, but the need for this name to be kept holy, and also the paradox of God who cannot be damaged or hurt, making himself vulnerable through relationship with his people. These are amazing concepts and worth thinking about at home.

However, in Israel's history, God's name was sullied. For example, in Ezekiel,

the book of one of the prophets in the Old Testament, it says:

I had concern for my holy name, which the people of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone. Therefore say to the Israelites, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

God is concerned for the holiness of his name. His reputation is damaged by his people's mistakes and errors, and God will defend it. In 'hallowed be your name' we pray that God would not allow his name to become polluted and disfigured.

In Israel's history, this name of God comes full circle. Since God's name was given to them, and it was holy, and they were the carriers of his name, they were to be holy too. Both the laws the Israelites were given and the prophets' teachings made this clear. Basically, as representatives of God, they had to be good representatives of God. The same applies to God's people, the church, today. God's name must not be misused, co-opted, or distorted as this sullies God himself through his association with us. We must be Holy because God is Holy.

This is why episodes of Church history, like the crusades or slavery, are so dark. It's not just the human failings, but the fact that God's name is dragged through the mud along with us. It's partly why the recent abuse case scandals are so incredibly sad. One can only imagine the damage done to the victims by people who claim to be people of God. God, who loves the vulnerable and seeks the lost, has been sullied by his association with those who are meant to represent him, but instead callously misused God's name and their position. God is the God of the orphan, the widow, the alien, all through the Bible, but God's association with us has enabled us to twist him into something dark and terrible.

In praying 'Hallowed be your name' we pray with this in mind. We pray that God's name is honoured in me. We pray that we might make room for God in our lives and that his holiness would be manifested within us. God makes

himself vulnerable to us by giving us relationship with him, and letting us call him Father. The love of God as Father must be held together with living holy lives as his representatives.

But finally, here, though it includes us needing to be holy, we are praying that God would make his name holy. We know we aren't perfect and we know God must act to preserve his name. As I've said, God puts himself in our hands when he gives us his name and brings us into relationship with him. In Jesus, when you think about it, he did this in an ultimate way – he put himself completely in the hands of humanity, became vulnerable, and was killed. In Jesus, we are the inheritors of the name for God who loved us so much that he died for us, to establish a relationship with us that our sins cannot break. In praying 'hallowed be your name' we pray that Jesus would save us, and save others from all we have done, and we pray that God would establish his new Kingdom among us so that we can live in ever closer relationship with him, through Jesus, as those who bear his name.

Let's pray this week that God's name would be made holy in my life, your life, the church, and the world. Amen.

Matthew 6: 10

***‘Your Kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.’***

We’re in the middle of a series of weeks looking at each phrase from the Lord’s Prayer one at a time and trying to learn more about what some of us find the most difficult part of our Christian life – prayer. We’re therefore looking at how Jesus responded to his followers when they asked him to teach them to pray. What we’ve been finding so far is that we can call God Father because our awesome and mysterious God wants to be in intimate relationship with us.

We’ve also found that God is holy, sacred, and by being in relationship with us he has actually made himself vulnerable to us, and so we pray that his name would be made holy, by his action and also by us being holy. And then we come to this week where we are looking at ‘Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as in heaven.’ We’ll be thinking about what this means for us and how it helps us to pray.

Firstly then, let’s look at what this Kingdom thing is all about. In the UK, we’re used to having a monarch, so we sort of understand what we mean by a Kingdom. The problem is that we are also used to a monarch who chooses not to use her power most of the time, and a government who we can vote out every so often. Perhaps this has coloured our view of what God’s Kingdom might mean. We may acknowledge that God is king, but perhaps we see God more as a figurehead for our own ethical and moral preferences than actually as a king who rules. Maybe we see God like we see the queen – a benevolent person who does a lot of good work and who we’d love to get an invite to a garden party from, but actually has no real say over our day to day lives.

As you can guess, I’m going to say that this isn’t how God’s Kingdom is meant to work, and it’s one of the key parts of understanding the ‘On earth as it is in heaven,’ bit of the Lord’s Prayer. God’s Kingdom is where he has ultimate dominion and authority. It’s where God’s will and his justice is final. It’s where God reigns, not us. You could look at it this way: to the extent that God’s will is done on earth, that’s a measure as to how much of ‘heaven’ is present on earth. By praying ‘Your Kingdom come and your will be done’ we are praying that God’s space and our space are to be fully integrated and married up.

There is a real tension here, though. Repeatedly, Jesus talks about God’s Kingdom and what it is like, and very often he uses parables of growth – like a

plant growing – and makes it clear that it is God who grows his Kingdom and that his Kingdom is a gift from God. It's on God's initiative. It makes sense for us to pray therefore for God to bring his Kingdom closer and closer. But at the same time, we also know that just as in a human Kingdom, we have free will to do what we want. We can rebel against the monarch if we so choose. As Guy Fawks found out, there may be consequences of that rebellion, but we can do it. God's kingdom is the same. We have a choice about whether to be citizens of heaven or not.

But there's also another tension where God brings his own Kingdom into fruition, but also allows us to participate in that. God grows, but he lets us plant seeds. God plans to come and live with his people in so many Old Testament prophecies, but he needed Mary and Joseph's co-operation. This works every day, where God provides our basic needs as human beings for survival, and yet he does that through farmers, harvesters, bakers, and supermarkets.

So there are creative tensions in thinking about God's Kingdom, but to the extent that we are willing to pray that his will is done and that we are willing to obey his commands, heaven – God's Kingdom - is made present on earth. Just to note in passing. By obedience, I'm not suggesting that God is like a tyrannical monarch of history who requires that people do what he says or else.

God's commands are a revelation of what God is like. So being like God is keeping his commands. When God commands that we should love our neighbours, this is a reflection of God's character of love for the other, rather than simply a command. When God commands that we should be generous with our money towards God and others, it's a reflection of God's concern for those who have less and for our need as humans to worship.

So that's God's Kingdom, and I find it a really helpful thing to think about because it reframes so much of my natural thinking and priorities. God's Kingdom gives meaning and direction to life which would otherwise be lost, and God's Kingdom lifts my eyes up from the grimy day-to-day petty jealousies, arguments, frustrations and deceptions. It makes all these things that were so all-encompassing before, seem like nothing. God's Kingdom is transformative.

So... next a bit of theology. You may ask, if Jesus announced that God's Kingdom had come, how is it we can't see it? How is it we are still praying for it? We'll mention this again next week, but there's an extent to which God's Kingdom has in fact come. The prophet Isaiah promised release for Israel, the defeat of evil

and the return of God to his people. We see this played out in Jesus celebrating with sinners, those who are released from their guilt; Jesus dying to defeat evil once and for all; and Jesus as Emmanuel, God living with his people as shepherd to guide us and King to rule us. In Jesus, God's Kingdom has indeed come and the world has turned a corner. At that first Christmas, the whole of history turned on its axis.

But we all know that heaven hasn't fully come to earth. It doesn't take a genius to work it out! And so we understand God's Kingdom as come, but also as coming – like a genius medic developing a cure for cancer, but needing an army of doctors to take it out to all the cancer sufferers. And so we pray for the saving of the world - started but not finished. We pray that we would be kingdom bearers, like we thought about last week, taking God's name to the world. We pray that we would be able to submit to God in holiness and that we would be able to teach the world to pray.

When faced with God's Kingdom, we all have a decision to make. And in thinking about it we can focus on Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Knowing he was about to suffer horribly and die unjustly, Jesus went with his friends to the garden and prayed. While he was doing this, he prayed 'Not my will, but yours, be done.' Jesus, despite all that it meant for him, put God's will first before his own. Despite that meaning ultimate sacrifice and ultimate cost. We may think that this is obvious because Jesus had to die and he was better than the rest of us, and so on. But at that moment, when Jesus was so stressed and horrified and alone because his friends had fallen asleep. When he was so sad at the betrayal and the ordeal that he was to face as he was abandoned by God himself. At that moment, he was alone with no eye-witnesses. He could have just scarpered. I would have. In the garden, Jesus was given the chance to run away and just disappear and live a quiet life elsewhere. But instead he effectively prayed, 'Your Kingdom come, your will be done – not mine.'

Pope Francis talks about there being two responses to God's kingdom – yes, and no. Adam and Eve demonstrated the 'no' in the garden of Eden when they hid from God in fear and began to accuse each other. They refused God's Kingship and rebelled and ended up in hiding, ashamed and homeless. On the other hand there was Mary, mother of Jesus, who when asked by God to bear his son gave an unconditional and unreserved 'yes', and as a result, God came among us. Responses to God's kingdom either increase or decrease the presence of God among us. Francis says that we as Christians are good at 'half-yeses'. We are good at saying yes to God only so far as it doesn't impact on us

too much or doesn't cost us. These half-yeses are not prayers that 'God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

Praying God's Kingdom come and his will be done is therefore scary and costly. But it also brings faith and hope that the world is turning a corner and has already turned it. It is a prayer of commitment to God as a real monarch rather than a figurehead. And it is a prayer of bringing all God's world, including ourselves, into its creator's hands once more and bringing more and more of heaven to earth. Let's pray all that this week, for ourselves and for our world. Amen.

Matthew 6:11

'Give us today our daily bread.'

We're now in the middle of the Lord's Prayer – the prayer that Jesus taught his friends and followers to help them learn how to pray. And today we get to the good bit – the bit where we get to ask God for stuff that we want! Let's be honest, this is often the only bit of prayer that we actually do. For many of us, I'm guessing that prayer has mostly been asking God for stuff that we want or need. This is either in a panic because something has gone badly wrong and we need help, because we've run out of other options, or because we feel it is polite to ask before we go and get the new car anyway. Today we get to the 'magic words' we need to use to get the stuff out of God that we want...

Or maybe not.

In fact, this bit of the Lord's Prayer is really, really hard, because it leaves us not only questioning what it is we are asking for, but also why God doesn't seem to answer our prayers sometimes. And that's before we even begin to get to the big issue of the context of our requests within the prayer itself. Who would have thought that 'Give us today our daily bread' could provoke such confusion!

Now, there's no way of covering the whole thing this morning. There's some really interesting linguistic stuff in here which is really relevant for the theology, but I can't touch it today other than to mention that the 'daily' part of 'our daily bread' could mean 'bread for today' or 'bread for tomorrow' – the Greek word is ambiguous - and the difference affects the nuance of the request. In this sermon, I'm going to go with recent scholarship and assume the ambiguity is deliberate so that the statement covers all the nuances. If you want to know more, you'll have to ask me!

Also, it's important just to say that Jesus is teaching his friends about how to pray in the normal moments of life. I'll talk about context, and how asking God for things is done within a context of knowing God and worshipping him. But that isn't saying that if I find myself in the middle of a road with an out of

control steam roller heading towards me, I must only ask for help once I've spent enough time addressing God formally and praying for his will to be done and... splat! This is about our daily routine of prayer – which if you haven't got into a routine yet, that's something you need to sort out.

So, 'Give us today our daily bread'.

Bread was the staple food of those who Jesus was talking to and so it symbolises all that we need to sustain life. We're talking here about turning all our cares for the things we need over to God, and praying honestly and specifically for these things. This isn't just some transcendent prayer that God would sustain us spiritually – though it is that too – it is a brass-tacks prayer about what we absolutely need. It's about sustaining life and subsistence. It's about the bread we need today. It's an echo of the people of Israel collecting the miraculous manna bread each morning in the desert when they were starving and God provided for them on a daily basis. And it's a claim of faith in Psalm 136 where God gives food to his creation. This prayer is a request for what we need each day, in faith that God has provided before and will do so again. In it, we acknowledge that what we need comes from God as a gift, rather than as a right or something we earned or made.

But it's not a prayer for us alone. It's 'our daily bread' that we are asking for, and so we are praying for others too. We are praying, not for other people as if they are distant and remote, but we pray collectively, standing with those who do not have enough and praying with them and on their behalf. I've no time to develop this, but go home and think about it.

Moving on, this is a prayer for what we need, not the Ferrari that I've always fancied. That's not to say I can't pray for things I want, but that here, in the Lord's Prayer, I am taking a good honest look at my situation and praying for my needs and praying with those in need.

On one level then, this part of the prayer is practical and focussed on our needs and the needs of God's world. It feels quite a departure from the earlier parts of the prayer. But it's actually a lot more connected than you might think.

In praying 'Give us our daily bread,' we are praying for bread that doesn't run out. The bread we need for today, tomorrow and for always means that we are placing ourselves in God's hands for what we need. We trust that God will provide and therefore we needn't fear being hungry. In this sermon we are looking at prayer for release from hunger and fear. Next week, we'll be covering praying for release from sin and guilt. All these are hallmarks of the coming of God's Kingdom on earth.

The prophets talk about the day of the Lord as a day when the hungry are fed, when there will be a banquet for all peoples, when the sick are healed and the captives freed. When we prayed last week that God's Kingdom would come, we were therefore already praying for our daily needs, and the freedom from fear of scarcity. We were already praying for forgiveness. These things are all part of the fulfilment of God's Kingdom, begun in Jesus and still edging towards completion. When we pray for the blessings of God's Kingdom, this includes our basic needs too. So this part of the prayer isn't a departure from what came before, but is a sign of its fulfilment and a commitment of trust in God's Kingdom coming.

This is why the context of this line 'Give us our daily bread' is important. In it, we pray alongside the whole of praying humanity, for God's Kingdom to show up more and more in freedom from fear of scarcity, and movement towards that final banquet that is pictured in the prophets when God's Kingdom comes in its completeness. It's finding our place inside this sweep of history and praying for it to move onwards.

Obviously, we have a role to play too – how can we stand with those who have nothing, and demand that God provide their daily needs if we sit back and do nothing! So we don't just pray for God's Kingdom, we work towards it as well.

A final aspect of this is that we can't ignore communion when we talk about bread from heaven. Importantly, when we come to share bread and wine, we do so in celebration of Jesus who came as God living with his people – the ultimate They Kingdom Come moment in history. Jesus came, not to reward his

followers, but as medicine for the those who were sick and needy in their relationship with God. Communion is therefore not a reward for the holy, but a privilege and medicine for us who are not yet perfect. Communion is both an embodiment of the prayer that God would give us our daily bread, but also its answer. We come with empty hands and receive the bread of life. Jesus is both our bread for today, satisfying our spiritual hunger, but also our bread of life for tomorrow and the future. We never need to fear ever being without Jesus.

Give us our daily bread is a spiritual as well as a physical prayer. We recognise our lostness and yet God comes to find us in Jesus and in Jesus we are forever satisfied and part of God's Kingdom coming.

Of course, there is so much more that could be said – I've barely scratched the surface. We might ask why some still starve or do not have enough. We might ask why God appears to heal some people but not others. We might ask about how God acts through us. And all these are good questions to discuss further.

However, we live in a world where God's Kingdom has come, but also is incomplete. And we pray, with Jesus' friends, trusting and hoping for the day when God's Kingdom comes on earth as in heaven, when fear, hunger, guilt, shame, and need will be things of the past, and all the world will worship at the greatest banquet ever set. 'Give us our daily bread' is a petition of faith in a God who provides, a statement of intent to stand with those who have less than us, a prayer that God's Kingdom would manifest itself in freedom from fear and need, and a prophetic foresight towards that day when the world is complete and God's Kingdom is fully here.

'Give us our daily bread' is a powerful and practical vision of the future that we can pray for and work towards every single day, and it's a promise from our heavenly Father to the children who bear his name. Let's pray in this way this week. 'Give us today our daily bread.' Amen.

Matthew 6:12
‘Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors’

We are in the middle of a series looking at prayer, and the Lord’s Prayer in particular since this is how Jesus responded to his friends asking him how they should pray. We’ve discovered that God is our Father – an intimate liberator who makes all of us brothers and sisters in God. We have a father in heaven – powerful, holy and able to help us. We’ve talked about how when we come to God, we come to a holy father who expects us to be a holy people, and who will act to make his name holy, despite all that we do to sully it. We’ve talked of God as King and how we pray as citizens of a kingdom which is here, but also as those who wait in expectation for God’s Kingdom to come fully. And then last week, we talked about praying for the things we need and seeing God’s provision as a sign of the hope of the coming Kingdom. This week, we arrive at forgiveness, as we pray ‘forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.’

As with all the lines of the Lord’s Prayer so far, this isn’t just another disjointed part of a shopping list for God. Instead, forgiveness is very much bound up in what has come before. In this line we are asking our heavenly father, who loves us intimately, to forgive. We are asking that his name be made holy in us as he cleans out our mess. And we are asking for yet another sign of God’s Kingdom to come, as we are released from guilt and shame. Old Testament prophets equate God’s Kingdom coming with forgiveness. When Israel was oppressed, they understood that their exile was the result of their sin, and therefore their liberation was a sign of God’s forgiveness. God’s Kingdom coming was bound up in God’s forgiveness. So, this line of the Lord’s Prayer is at home in the context because freedom from hunger, guilt, shame, need and fear are all hallmarks of God’s Kingdom come on earth as in heaven.

Why is that important? It is important because we pray as citizens of this Kingdom who have failed but want to Kingdom to come, rather than outsiders. We pray as children of a heavenly father, rather than as orphans who have nowhere else to go. Our sins, our mistakes and our shame have not exiled us from God’s Kingdom, but instead the Kingdom of God and the heavenly family are the context in which we can beg our forgiveness. This is important if you ever feel like you’ve done something that means you aren’t worthy of forgiveness or you feel like God won’t want you any more or you don’t deserve the place reserved for you in his Kingdom. You have not left, you are not exiled,

and you have not been sold for adoption. You remain a citizen and a family member of God's Kingdom, and you ask forgiveness from within, not from without, with the promise of liberation for those that are forgiven.

So, having said that, I want to focus on two issues: one is about the word for sins, trespasses or debts; and the second is about forgiving others. Firstly then, our readings says 'forgive us our debts', but we are also used to praying, 'forgive our sins' and 'forgive our trespasses.' All these words come from the same word in aramaic, the language that Jesus talked. For us, the word 'debt' implies an unfulfilled obligation, like me owing you money, and the word 'trespass' involves some sort of doing something I should not have done. This is why we talk of asking for forgiveness for the things we have done that we know were wrong, and also the things we haven't done when we know we should have.

It can be hard to imagine the need to be forgiven. We tend to trivialise our own wrongdoings in comparison to great evils in the world like the Holocaust. But even if we don't have huge 'axe-murderer' type sins to be forgiven of, all of us do things we aren't proud of. I'm not as patient as I'd like to be with my kids for example. And all of us don't do things we know we should do, like visiting Great Auntie Edna and instead watching the football. These are all debts and trespasses, and although some of it might be funny and we are used to making light of our short-comings, they are also all things which do not belong within God's Kingdom. It's ironic that something like the Holocaust can be used as evidence against the existence of God at the same time as the 'little' sins we commit are laughed off as God just being picky. So we only end up only talking about sin and evil when we think God should have stopped it but didn't; and yet we are perpetually involved in sin and evil, but on a scale we don't think God should care about!

The fact is, all forgiveness is costly, and even our little debts and trespasses require this costly forgiveness to overcome the evil that has been done. This is why God's only son, Jesus, came to die on the cross for us. If you don't think sin matters – it cost Jesus his life.

So we have trespasses and debts, but we also have the second half of the line from the prayer: 'as we also have forgiven our debtors.' Can I just say that sometimes forgiving others is hard. Possibly inhumanly hard. We have a limited capacity to overcome the evil which has been done to us or those we love and so it is sometimes just too costly to forgive. But forgiving others is important.

We could say that if forgiveness is part of God's Kingdom, then forgiving others is our loyalty to God's Kingdom, and refusing to forgive is refusing God's Kingdom. I'm on dangerous ground I know. Let me be clear – forgiveness is not the same as tolerance. It's not an excuse for the perpetuation of injustice. We can forgive and still struggle for justice, but not vengeance.

However, Jesus does couple our forgiveness from God together with our forgiving of others. This would have been shocking at the time to appear to make God's forgiveness conditional upon our forgiving others. It is a tricky concept. But it's not the only time that Jesus talks about this. In Matthew 18 he tells a story about a man who was forgiven an eye-watering debt, only to go out and put people in prison who owed him piddling amounts by comparison.

The point of the story is that it makes no sense when we have been forgiven eye-watering amounts by God that hold grudges against others for comparably small things. This is by no means to trivialise those hurts that have been done to us, but to say that we constantly trivialise the hurt which we do to God. It's hard for us to understand or recognise this. But if we think about it in terms of a rejection of his Kingdom every time we commit another debt or trespass, then we start to look like rebels working against our King, but who expect him to turn a blind eye. It doesn't stack up. And then if we throw into the equation the fact that the King reacted, not by hunting down the rebels and punishing them, but instead by putting his Son in the midst of the rebels to pay whatever was required to overcome the evil, then clearly we are looking at our sense of sin as being naïve at the very least.

Perhaps we need to forgive others in order to gain some sense of our own need to be forgiven. If it hurts us and costs us to forgive, then how much more has it hurt and cost God.

Sometimes we say we can only forgive if someone is sorry. Contrition does make forgiving easier! On the cross, however, Jesus said 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.' God forgives us when we don't have a clue about the damage we've done. How much more should we forgive those who may not fully appreciate the hurt they have caused.

This is a hard message, and one which is painfully brief, for which I am sorry. If I've trodden on your painful areas, please come and talk to me about it. Sometimes, we need to be assured that we, ourselves, are forgiven before we can forgive others. Other times, we need to be in a safe and forgiving

community, where we can daily taste and see forgiveness in action – I hope that our church family is one such place. All of us need to pray for forgiveness for our world as we watch the news, and especially for the church as we see some of the headlines coming out from our own wider family.

All of us rely on God's forgiveness for ourselves, and also for when forgiving others hurts too much. Ultimately the answer to forgiveness and its pain lies on the cross on which Jesus was broken for us and for our world. Even as he died in agony, his best friend denied him, his other close friend betrayed him and a thief mocked him. And yet, Jesus cried out that God would forgive them. Our own cries to God can be like that too. If we struggle to forgive, perhaps we can start by praying that God would forgive, and then that might enable us to catch up.

Forgiveness is essential to God's Kingdom - the forgiveness of God the Father through Jesus who broke himself for us. May we forgive as we have been forgiven, and may we be forgiven as we have also forgiven those who sin against us. For the sake of our souls and for the sake of God's Kingdom. Amen.

Matthew 6: 13

***'And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.'***

It was famously, Oscar Wilde in his play 'Lady Windermere's Fan' who wrote: "I can resist anything except Temptation", whilst Mae West boasted "I generally avoid temptation, unless I can't resist it".

Advertising companies have embodied the voice of the tempter in most of their campaigns for as long as they have existed: "Go on...you know you want this!" In the 1980s we were told that cream cakes were "naughty...but nice!", a campaign penned would you believe, by none other than Salman Rushdie working as an unknown advertising copy writer.

So at last after 5 weeks we have come to the final episode in our series looking at the Lord's Prayer: "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil!"

There are so many obvious places to turn to for readings about temptation, starting right at the very beginning in the Garden of Eden. It was snake then of course, not an advertising campaign but the message was the same. Perhaps the very first version of "Go on....you know you want to...just one little bite... what harm could it do?"

Temptation is such a regular part of the human psyche that there were literally dozens of passages we could have looked at, so why 1 Samuel 24:3-7?

David's life story is made up of highs and lows, after his spectacular defeat of the Giant Goliath and by association the Philistine troops, David became a national hero, a real celebrity with women throwing themselves at him, men wanting to be his best mate, society invitations coming thick and fast, and Piers Morgan wanting him on his chat show! Well maybe not, but you get the picture: the man of the moment, with everyone, except with the King. That spirit of jealousy worked inside of Saul and he decided that he wanted this annoying little upstart dead! David quickly became man on the run, hiding out in the caves of the desert of En Gedi. Caught between the Philistines troops on the one hand and the now angry Israelite troops of King Saul on the other. He has hit an all time low, hiding like an animal in a cave. Bbut whilst he is there,

he is joined by many of his supporters, coming to live with him in these complex cave systems, living like outlaws. David begins to train them up as a crack team of elite fighting men, ready to defend David from the Israelite army now motivated by King Saul's rage, anger, madness, fear and jealousy. David learns a crucial lesson here, in the wilderness, targeted by two angry armies looking to kill him...when you live a life how God wants you to live, there is no need to fear.

Living the life that God wants us to live removes from us all fear...I think that is starting to sound a little bit like, if we are empowered to resist temptation, we will fear no evil?

Anyway, back to David and our story takes a very strange and curious turn here...the details of which lead me to believe this must be historically true. The King needing to respond to a call of nature is not something that the writers of the scriptures would make up, if its in there then its there for a reason—it happened!

Why? Well without being too indelicate, to do what the King needed to do, he had to lay down his shield and his sword, remove his armour, take off his robes and take a seat! In that cave at that moment the great King Saul was as vulnerable as a new-born baby. David's elite fighting forces, hiding at the back of the same cave say to David, "This is it! this is your big chance...go on...you know you want to; you know you can"

It felt to them like a God given opportunity, and here is the truth for us, sometimes we use God to justify what it is that we want to do too. But David is better than that, at this time in his career he knew what it meant to be pure and virtuous (he maybe couldn't retain it later in life?) but at that moment he was a true hero and was wise enough to understand that sometimes things are not God given gifts, but are God given tests. Things that present us with an opportunity that is just not exactly right, and not in line with Gods will, might just be a test.

"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil".

To kill the King, even a king driven mad with fear and rage, can only be a bad

thing: regicide. David instead cuts off a corner of Saul's robe, simply because he can, but the moment that he does, he feels bad, he knows that he has shown disrespect to the king, albeit a King who wants him dead. But David is right, the subtle thing about temptation is the way that it is the tip of a slippery slope. It is so easy to justify our wrongdoing;

"Well, no-one will know!" ... "It's such a little thing!" ... "the crime is getting caught..." ... "Doesn't the end justify the means?", and my favourite that I have used many times... "Its easier to get forgiveness than permission", ...well its good to confess isn't it!

Bottom line is it's all wrong, and David confesses to Saul, right there is the cave, "I'm sorry I shouldn't have done this, two wrongs never make one right". Yes Saul is acting wrongfully but it is not David's responsibility to deal with that. Have you noticed how, when we have a high sense of justice, we also have a low sense of mercy...? "They did soooooo wrong, and now they are going to get all they deserve, right?!".

It is the world and all its false securities that often draw us away from God's will. Martin Luther wrote that anything in which we place our hope and trust easily becomes our god. We replace the God of all Creation with gods of fame and fortune, of comfort and security. The tempter plays with our mind, tricks us into making compromises, encourages us to be comfortable Christians rather than peacemakers and advocates, convinces us that being good is good enough, being socially acceptable rather than faithful.

When we pray that God might lead us not into temptation, we also ask to be delivered from evil. What we are doing is asking to experience Gods love and his grace filled presence, in our lives.

It is easy for us to focus on injustice, sickness, poverty and neglect, and for us therefore to be tempted to despair and disbelief in a loving God, rather than to recognise the richness of his protection in our lives. We pray the Lords prayer as we take steps into the challenges of life, asking God to graciously protect us. Our prayer is for Gods help to stand against temptation, but it only really makes sense when we also commit to making Gods name hallowed and seek to make his will be done in our lives. Remembering that Jesus sets us free not to be enslaved to temptation and evil, but to be free to serve God and each other, for ever and ever, AMEN.

