

## MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 21 June 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

*3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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### Welcome & Intimations

**Opening Hymn** : 'How blest are they who do not stray' (CH 1)

**Children's Talk**

**Children's Hymn** : 'Lord, I pray' (CH 541)

### Prayer & Lord's Prayer

**Readings** : Amos 5:21-24 (*Good News Bible*) & Matthew 6:1-18 (*colometric translation*<sup>1</sup>)

*[Matthew 6:1-18:]*

- 1 But you must be aware  
that you do not do your righteousness for the people  
in order to be looked at by them,  
or you will not have a reward with your father in heaven.
- 2 Therefore, whenever you do a deed of kindness,  
do not sound a trumpet before you,  
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the alleys  
in order to be praised by the people;  
for sure, I say to you, they already have their full reward;
- 3 but if *you* do a deed of kindness,  
your left hand shall not know what your right hand does,
- 4 so that your kindness happens in secret,  
and your father who watches in secret will pay you back.
- 5 And whenever you pray, do not be as the hypocrites;  
because they really like it,  
in the synagogues and on the corners of the wide places,  
to stand praying,  
in order to show it to the people;  
for sure, I say to you, they already have their full reward;

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<sup>1</sup> A colometric-concordant translation. See: F.H. Breukelman, *Bijbelse theologie. I,1 Schrift-lezing*. Een verhandeling over de kolometrische weergave van bijbelse teksten als hulp bij het lezen en als grondslag voor de exegese (Kampen: Kok, 1980) – probably a good reason to learn Dutch. Some information about colometry, as distinguished from stichometry, in classical texts was already in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition (1910 pass.), now on [Wikipedia](#). More can be found in: Bruce M. Metzger, *Manuscripts Of The Greek Bible. An Introduction to Greek Palæography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), which is on [Google Books](#) now.

6 but *you*, whenever you pray,  
you shall go into your inner room, [cf. 2 Kings 4:33]  
and having closed your door, you shall pray to your father in secret;  
and your father who watches in secret will pay you back.

7 But when praying you will not use a flood of words, like the foreigners,  
for they suppose that through their many words they will be listened to;  
8 so do not be like them, [cf. Isa. 1:15]  
for your father *knows* what you are in need of,  
before you ask him.

9 So you shall pray like this:  
Our father in heaven, [cf. Isa. 63:16, 64:8]  
your name shall be holy, [cf. Ezek. 36:23]  
10 your kingdom shall come,  
your will shall be done,  
likewise in heaven and on earth;  
11 our bread for this day give it to us today; [cf. Prov. 30:8]  
12 and do forgive our debts,  
as we also have forgiven those who are in debt with us;  
13 and bring us not into temptation,  
but do rescue us from the evil one.

14 For whenever you forgive the people their trespasses,  
your heavenly father will forgive you;  
15 but if you do not forgive the people,  
your father will not forgive your trespasses.

16 But whenever you fast, do not become like the sad-looking hypocrites,  
for they make their faces ugly, [cf. Isa. 58:5]  
in order to show to the people they are fasting;  
for sure, I say to you, they already have their full reward;  
17 but *you*, whenever you fast,  
anoint your head, and wash your face, [cf. 2 Sam. 12:20]  
18 in order not to show to the people you are fasting,  
but to your father in secret,  
and your father who watches in secret will pay you back.

**Hymn** : ‘Dear Lord and Father of mankind’ (CH 485)<sup>2</sup>

### **Sermon**<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The words are from a long narrative poem by John G. Whittier, ‘The Brewing of Soma’, published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1872. It describes Vedic priests going into the forest and drinking themselves into a stupor with a concoction called ‘soma’. They try to have a religious experience and contact the spirit world. It is after setting that scene that Whittier draws his lesson: ‘Dear Lord, and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways...’ (*Comment on [NetHymnal](#)*). Of course, we will need to look through the 19<sup>th</sup> century far-too-male first line...

<sup>3</sup> Main sources for this sermon: Maarten den Dulk, *De bergrede*. Steunpunt van de vrijheid (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001), and: Hein Stufkens, *Een ketterse catechismus*. Schets van een spiritualiteit voor morgen (Kampen: Ten Have, 2008).

Today we have reached the very heart of the Sermon on the Mount. And that is about... prayer. That may seem a safe subject in a church, but actually Jesus is pretty critical about it. Prayer is central, definitely, but not before having done a serious exercise in criticism of religion.

There is this story about the tourist who goes to Jerusalem and visits the Western Wall, the Kotel. He is absolutely non-religious, but gets intrigued by the orthodox Jews praying intensely at the Wall. After watching them for some time, the tourist asks one of the men what he is praying for. The man says, 'I pray for peace.' The tourist asks, 'Any results yet?' Then the praying man raises his arms in despair and sighs, 'It's like I'm talking to a wall!'

It is a joke, but a true one. We all certainly have felt like that, perhaps even many times. What is the use of asking God? It is good to know that Jesus is very critical before he comes to giving his followers the prayer that travelled all around the world.

Note that Jesus first of all makes a statement:

*Do not do your righteousness for the people  
in order to be looked at by them.*

This is the central guideline for all religious acts: no hypocrisy, no faking, no boasting. Because if we do so, we are trying to manipulate either the people, or God, or both. We want praise, we want results, we want heaven to do as we like. Jesus is absolutely clear: do not do that!

What we should do is always to connect deeds of kindness and compassion to words of faith and hope. Because God does not answer prayers, if we do not answer each other's cry for help. If you count carefully in this third and central lesson of the Sermon on the Mount, you will notice that the word 'people' is used seven times. If you think that it a coincidence, you're wrong. True religion is all about *people* – that is: people in their connections to God and to the world.<sup>4</sup>

Long and lofty prayers, pomp and circumstances in worship, having your name in capitals on the charity listings, dramatic self-sacrifices for a better cause – it is all totally against the true heart of prayer. True prayer nourishes a humble heart, and simple acts of compassion become a prayer in their own right.

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<sup>4</sup> The church does not exist for religious purposes in the narrow sense of performing the typically religious duties like prayer, worship and ritual. The church as a whole, and each congregation independently, must always be connected to all three realities of people, God and world. All three are to be distinguished, but never separated. The Sermon on the Mount reflects this threefold structure of the church through Jesus' three lessons: on love in relationships (Matthew 5:21-48), on religion (Matthew 6:1-18), on caring in the world (Matthew 6:19-7:12). If you are in for some German philosophy, the Jewish scholar Franz Rosenzweig is the most profound guide in this: Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt am Main: Kauffmann, 1921) [English translation: *The Star Of Redemption*. Translated from the second edition of 1930 by William W. Hallo (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971)]. Rosenzweig wrote the major part of this in the trenches of World War I.

In 1127 – some of us may still remember – in the cathedral of St Donaas in Bruges, the Flemish count Charles the Good was murdered while he was kneeling down in prayer. Part of the reason why they called him ‘the Good’ was, that day by day he gave generously to the poor. But actually he always kept a carefully selected group of twelve beggars to sit at his doorsteps and follow him on his journeys, so he could publicly show his charity. The day two beggars got into a fight in which one was killed, Charles’ main concern was to replace the dead man as soon as possible.<sup>5</sup> So Charles the Good actually made a rather poor example.

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There is another thing we should carefully take in. While Jesus says ‘the synagogue’, we should actually hear ‘the congregation’.<sup>6</sup> In the days Matthew wrote down his gospel, the majority of Jesus people were still connected to a synagogue, even if they already had become a more or less separate Jewish sect. Jesus’ words are not addressed at the others – or as many scholars even say: at the Jews – but they are really aiming at *us*.

To do righteousness there are three ways: doing charity, praying and fasting. Doing charity and fasting are two ways to connect to the people and the world and make it look more like God’s good creation. Mind: *only* if practised in total honesty and without any hypocrisy or showing off.

Charity is about helping people as we meet them in daily life. Jesus’ first lesson concentrated on that. It is all about loving and reconciling. Fasting touches on the contents of the third lesson, which we will read next week. In short, fasting is an exercise in detaching ourselves from our dependence upon material things. As we should not get stuck in damaged relationships, we should not get trapped in material concerns either.

But now about prayer, because that is the heart of Jesus’ lesson today, and also the heart of the Sermon on the Mount as a whole.

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Probably prayer is the most obvious as well as the most problematic part of religion. Prayer, in an abundance of forms, has always been part of all religions, as long as people exist. It was there when our ancestors buried their dead at Kilmartin, when pharaohs were enshrined in their pyramids, when Israel was in Egypt’s land, when

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<sup>5</sup> I am pretty sure this story is correct, but I could not find where I read it. Probably with Jacques Le Goff, George Duby or Johan Huizinga. A similar story exists about Saint Louis, king of France (1214-1270). Charles the Good was born in 1080/6 in Denmark. After his father’s death his mother returned to Flanders. The huge anger among the Flemish knighthood about his murder by members of the Erembout clan was not as much incited by the count’s generous charity, as it was by the hunt for his huge fortune.

<sup>6</sup> The Greek noun συναγωγὴς (*sunagogos*) reflects the Hebrew noun קהלה (*qahal*), both meaning ‘gathering of people’, and the English noun ‘congregation’ comes from the Latin verb ‘congregare’, meaning ‘to gather in a group’ – so, it’s all synonyms.

Jesus healed and taught the people, when Mohammed moved a mountain, when Buddhist monks walked all over Asia, and throughout our own days on earth. You could say that all people of all times are united by prayer.

But what is it?

Prayer is not just *asking*, but moreover *praising* God.

Prayer is not just *words*, but moreover a way of *listening*.

Prayer is not merely a *ritual*, but moreover a *way of being*.

Prayer is the basic attitude by which people can connect God and the people and the world within the circle of their daily life. The old Celts knew that, and so did the people in the Highlands when they continued to use ancient Celtic blessings to accompany their activities of daily life.<sup>7</sup> Like the Jews, with their 100 *berakhot* per day,<sup>8</sup> they said a wee blessing on everything they did: getting up, lighting the fire, making a meal, going out, meeting strangers, milking the cow, fishing, building a house, launching a boat, giving birth, going to bed.

Obviously we have gravely neglected that skill to recognise God as being present in our world. As a result of centuries of rational thinking and behaving, we have placed God at a far distance. 'Up in heaven' – but where might that be? Jesus clearly preached God's kingdom *on earth*. Like Methuselah, and Abraham, and Moses, and Elijah, Jesus walked with God, here on this earth, in a most natural way. He calls us to follow him on that path. Prayer, as an exercise in listening, could reconnect us to that reality. We could find traces of God in nature, in people, and especially in our own body, mind and soul.

As soon as praying is reduced to asking God to do things for us, it tends to become a problem. Whether we ask the wrong things, or do not ask it the right way, or whether God just does not seem to listen (like the man at the Western Wall felt), there never is a straight line between asking and getting. So, why pray?

Recent research in The Netherlands has revealed that 60% of the population does say a prayer sometimes. They feel it makes sense. But only half of them ever comes to church. So there is just as much prayer outwith the church as within it. I would think that the situation in Scotland is pretty much the same.

These people pray in two different ways. The first way is to look for inner silence, not necessarily focusing on a God 'out there'. The second way is a rather impulsive quick prayer, a call for help, letting off steam, a thank you.

The first way of praying is interesting. It is about making space, listening to one's inner

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<sup>7</sup> As collected by Alexander Carmichael at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and published as [Carmina Gadelica](#) (6 Vols., 1900-1971). The first two volumes are available [on-line](#). A good introduction to Celtic prayer (but there are more), is: Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way Of Prayer*. The Recovery of the Religious Imagination (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> A short introduction to (orthodox) Jewish prayer can be found in the on-line [Jewish 101](#). An introduction (Howto) to Muslim prayer can be found [here](#).

voice, opening up to silence. In terms of faith it is about meeting God in the stillness of our own inner being. This kind of prayer is probably the most fundamental. Modern brain research seems to suggest that there is a very biological reason for this.<sup>9</sup> A human being is at its best when all stress is removed, all senses are focused, and the mind is free. Ever since people walk the earth meditation techniques have been used to enter this state of mind. Prayer as a way of becoming silent is both spiritually and biologically the most healing way.

The second way, saying a quick prayer, is equally honest and dubious. Why do we ask for support from up high? Have we really done or tried all we can? And why would we pray if for the rest of our time we do not do anything religious at all? But then, why would we *not* ask for help if in dire straits? Did not Jesus tell us we could? And didn't he say that to all people?

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Jesus taught his followers to pray 'Our Father...' We have heard the words and at the beginning of this service we have prayed it. In all simplicity it contains all we need to say, if we want to pray with words:

*Our father...* – we direct our prayer at God, without any need for any intermediate, because God is a God-with-us;

*Your name... kingdom... will...* – we remember the kingdom of heaven that is to come and already exists on earth;

*Daily bread... forgiving... no temptation...* – we only ask for the basics we need, like food, forgiveness and the absence of evil.

These words make us focus on God, while at the same time they urge us to share our daily bread, to be forgiving towards others and to avoid walking into the pitfalls of evil. Good prayer is the root of just action.

The beauty of the Lord's prayer is that all can say it. I remember an occasion when we brought together Christians and Jews and Muslims in an attempt to overcome the divisions of racism, and the rabbi and the imam, the chazzan and the muezzin all joined the minister and the priest in saying the Lord's prayer. A unifying moment, overcoming all our limitations.

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Now I would like to end our learning today in a meditative rather than a thinking way. I would ask you to listen to a song, written and sung by Simon de Voil, who lived and worked with us on Iona. It is a prayer, a classic one written by St Francis. But Simon has changed the words to become his own. Now listen...

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<sup>9</sup> I learned this from Tjeu van den Berk, *Het mysterie van de hersenstam*. Over basisfuncties, psychosomatiek & spiritualiteit (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001) – of which unfortunately no English translation exists.

*(Simon de Voil, 'Prayer of St Francis')<sup>10</sup>*

Amen.

**Hymn** : 'Prayer is the soul's sincere desire' (CH 546 – *tune: 809 Dublin??*)

**Offering brought forward**

**Prayer of Intercession**

Lord, teach us to pray.

Our Father –

*(silence)*

Your name, your will, your kingdom –

*(silence)*

Give us bread, to share –

*(silence)*

Forgive us, as we have forgiven –

*(silence)*

Save us from the evil one –

*(silence)*

In silence we remember those we know  
who need us to remember them.

*(silence)*

So we pray to God, our Maker,  
through Jesus, our Teacher,  
with the holy Spirit, our Guide.

Amen.

**Closing Hymn** : 'Lord, make us servants of your peace' (CH 527)

**Blessing**

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<sup>10</sup> By kind permission of the author. This song is on the CD *Sacred Earth* (2008). Have a look at Simon's [MySpace page](#), or [buy, download & burn](#) your own copy of his CDs.