Seventeenth Sunday in Trinity – 27 July 2025

Message – Praying the Lord's Prayer

Last week, Ben spoke of prayers of self-emptying. They are a way of being in God's presence, trying to let go of ourselves and all our business, and just be. We are after all created as human-beings, not human-doings.

It is surprisingly hard to just be. Our minds are very busy places. From personal experience, even when we manage to still our conscious mind, our sub-conscious mind is hard at work. So, it is not even just a matter of consciousness but also a matter of receiving the fullness of God's wholeness and peace: stillness in every part of our being.

This self-emptying style of meditation is sometimes referred to as the via-negativa. One of its greatest proponents was the Spanish mystic Saint John of the Cross. John of the Cross wrote a poem about the dark night of the soul. Today, this term is used rather loosely and often in the context of feeling far from God. This is not what John of the Cross was describing at all.

John of the cross wrote an eight stanza poem about his experience. This is a translation of the first stanzas:

> On a dark night,
> Kindled in love with yearnings
> —oh, happy chance!—
> I went forth without being observed,
> My house being now at rest.

His prayer is not from a place of despair; his longings are the kind of longings that reflect wholeness of life, his house, his inner life is at rest. The poem go on to describe his encounter with God and culminates with:

> I remained, lost in oblivion;
> My face I reclined on the Beloved.
> All ceased and I abandoned myself,
> Leaving my cares
> forgotten among the lilies.

The darkness is because we cannot describe God, it is not an absence of or separation from God. Perhaps it is a human glimpse of 'darkness is as light to you'. As with all the mystics, there is both something we can understand and something we cannot quite grasp but sense to be true.

Ben very beautifully connected this type of meditation with Mary sitting at Jesus feet when he visited her and Martha's home. Mary took the time to just be with Jesus. We too are called to take the time to just be with Jesus.

Today's gospel reading however points us in a different direction. The Lord's prayer is not a prayer of via-negativa.

Our liturgical version of the Lord's Prayer is based on the Matthean version *(Matt 6.9-13)*. While the idea that Luke's shorter version is the more original might seem attractive, scholars currently favour the Matthean. The supposition is that Luke had reasons for making it more concise. I am not convinced we can tell which is the more original.

If Jesus said a prayer of this form on a regular basis, which would seem to be the whole purpose of the prayer, the form might have changed depending on the context.

Luke's 'Father' rather than 'Our Father in Heaven' makes for an abrupt start to the prayer. 'Our Father in Heaven' is much closer to phrasing regularly used in Jewish prayers of the day. It could well have been used by Jesus. However, the word used for 'Father' is a more informal one than that used in traditional prayers.

In the Lukan version we are confronted with intimacy with God, there is no sense of God being distantly away in Heaven; we are calling out to our Father who is present with us here and now: an interesting an echo of John of the Cross's experience of the dark night of the soul.

The first petition, one of praise, 'May your name be revered as holy' omits who is doing the revering. This creates a little challenge in translation but if this is a template for our prayers than the omission allows us to fill the blank. 'May all creation revere you name as holy' might be a good starter.

If we take time with this prayer, it allows us to recognise the places where this is not happening, in our lives, in our churches, in our society. It becomes a call for transformation. The second petition of praise, 'May your kingdom come' invites us to reflect on the nature of God's Kingdom and where it is not present in the way that we might hope. A second call for transformation.

In asking these two petitions, there is an assumption that we know what it means to revere God's name and we what God's Kingdom looks like. This is where we part from St John of the Cross's via negativa. We need to be able to say something about God and not just dwell in mystery and darkness.

John of the Cross was mentored by Teresa of Avila who is perhaps the most famous proponent of the via positiva. It is still a form of meditation but one in which we try to enter the stories of the bible, particularly the gospels and life of Jesus, to explore what it is like to be fully a part of the life of Christ. Here we are drawing the image of God in Christ into ourselves and entering into it as fully as we can. It may include inviting Christ to speak directly to us.

There is obviously a risk of deluding ourselves in such meditation. If you undertake such meditation, you will find that Christ says some unexpected things to you and you are left wondering where it came from. The response to many of the mystics in their lifetime shows the controversial nature of revelations received through meditation, particularly if they becomes more mystical in nature.

There are safeguards. As we examine the insights we perceive we have received, we can reflect on their consistency with the gospel as a whole, with the traditions of the church, with rational thinking, and with the views of our friends and spiritual companions. We may even find our friends confirming insights in ways we had not expected.

We are fortunate to have a large number of the letters that were exchanged between John of the Cross and Teresa Avila. As some of their writings place a priority on opposite styles of meditation, there is a tempting caricature of their representing being in conflict with each other.

However, their letters reveal that they both see both kinds of meditation as an essential part of the journey of faith. They have a deep regard for each other. The difference are a more subtle matter of priority than of difference in practices. If we examine the results of their journeys, they seem to have come to similar mystical destinations through these subtly different paths. Their subtle differences appear to have a great effect on the way each finally experiences union with God. Everyone's journey is unique though we can also learn much from one another.

Both Teresa and John wrote to guide others on the journey of faith through meditative prayer. Teresa is clear that meditation is for all of us, both via negativa and via positiva. The two combine as part of a whole. In some seasons we may find one much easier than the other, yet we all need the process of both self-emptying and drawing the image of Christ into ourselves if we are to know fullness of life.

Mindfulness is one of the trends of modern culture. It is a reconnecting with an ancient practice that is present in many different faith traditions. Meditation at its best must have a focus and purpose. Within the Christian tradition we have a wealth of such resources which can transform our

lives, if we will just take the time to be with God, to surrender before God, and to walk with God. Amen.