
When You Haven't Got a Prayer

Matthew 6.7-15

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel for Baccalaureate 2007 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

The story goes that a Duke student died and went to the pearly gates and St Peter said, "What do you really, really want?" The man replied "I'd like to be at Cameron Stadium – when the capacity had been increased to five million. I'd collect the ball on a rebound under my own net, race past the opposition's flailing defense, and soar into the air for a slam dunk. I'd then put my hand to my ear and hear the adoration of the fans, all singing my name." St Peter said "I think we can fix that up for you." So the student found himself at an enormous Cameron Stadium, and before he knew it he'd collected the ball on a rebound under his own net, raced past the opposition's flailing defense, and soared into the air for a slam dunk, before putting his hand to his ear and hearing the adoration of the five million fans, all singing his name; whereupon he was back under his own net, doing the same again: 4-0. By the moment the first time out was due, it was 48-0 and he'd broken all known records. He looked over to St Peter in the crowd and said "How about a time out." "No time outs here," said St Peter. So the student played on till 20 minutes were gone, and by this time it was 250-0, and he shouted over to St Peter, "How about a break." "No breaks here, said St Peter, "This is eternity." "You mean," said the student, "I'm going to spend eternity simply slicing through the opposition and soaring for slam dunks?" "Yup," said St Peter. "Sounds more like hell than heaven to me," said the man. "It's what you wanted," said St Peter.

Four years at university are about learning to want the right things. The prayer often called the Lord's Prayer trains us to ask for the right things. It's always thought of as a Christian prayer but in fact almost every way it's a good Jewish prayer. It talks of God in ways that in fact most of my Muslim friends would be quite comfortable with. The prayer that begins Our Father is actually five prayers. The first and last of these frame the prayer by talking about and honoring God, with phrases like Thy will be done, and Thine is the kingdom. In between are three direct requests.

The first request is, "Give us." "Give us today our daily bread." In other words, help us live in the present tense. Let us not be so burdened by guilt or scarred by hurt that we live in the past, and let us not be so anxious about the unknown or driven by a particular goal that we become prisoners of the future. Give us enough, says the prayer. Don't give us so much that we don't know sensibly what to do with it or so little that we can't see past our own need. Make us attentive, alert, present. Whenever you see a person who's so sleepy or so angry they can't hold your gaze you see a person who can't stay in the present because they're overwhelmed by the past. Whenever you see a person who can't hold your gaze because they're fumbling for their cell phone or fiddling with their appearance you see a person who can't stay in the present because they're distracted by the future. "Give us." That's a request to be given the grace to live in the present.

And then there's "Forgive us." In other words, take away the burden of the things we have done and the burden of the things others have done *to* us. Now, you've been here four years. In that time you may well have taken a few things that didn't belong to you. Other people's ideas, other people's time, other people's innocence, other people's trust. You may have spoken loudly a few things you later realized were a bit more complicated than they seemed at the time, and you may have kept silent about a few things when you now wish you'd said something. But you may well feel you've been hurt out of all proportion to any damage you've dished out. Something you thought you could rely on, someone you thought would always be there, some moment when what you thought you could take for granted crumbled beneath you or was snatched away from you.

Religion means many different things to many different people, but as far as I'm concerned this is the business end of the operation: discovering forgiveness. I want to say a few words about what forgiveness means.

You may try to be nice about it. You may try to pretend it didn't happen in the hope that will make it go away. But one way or another, sooner or later, you realize you've been done a terrible wrong. And then, quite probably, you pass through a moment of hatred for the one who hurt you. This hatred may take you by surprise – it may be such a powerful feeling it takes over your life. You may be confused or ashamed or alarmed that you could feel such hatred. Later you may realize that hatred was a kind of self-protection. It was a refusal to be

crushed, a repudiation of something not right. It was an assertion of your determination to go on living and not be destroyed by the hurt. That kind of hatred can consume you, at least for a time. But eventually you come to be able to tell a bigger story, a story in which you can recognize the deluded motives of the person that damaged you. You realize that the people who hurt you didn't really know what they were doing, even if they thought they did. And so to offer forgiveness doesn't mean to cancel your earlier hatred, but to allow yourself to be gently dispossessed of that hatred, as you recognize that that hatred was part of a whole series of events, mostly outside your control.

That's what it means to say "Forgive us... as we forgive." It means allowing ourselves to be dispossessed of our hatred. And of course others will need to be dispossessed of their hatred if they are to be reconciled with us. It doesn't mean wrong things weren't done: it means saying "Those wrong things done to me or by me will not for ever determine the meaning of my life." To be permanently consumed by hatred or resentment is to imprison yourself, because it's to confine yourself to a world in which the only things that matter are the bad things that have been done to you. And that's a very small world. People often say "How can I forgive if the other person doesn't say sorry?" The answer, I believe, is that if you allow yourself to be dispossessed of your hatred, and begin to see the misdeed as part of a whole world gone astray, you can forgive. But that's not the same as being reconciled, which almost always requires one or both parties to say sorry. To be reconciled usually involves you, if you're the hurt party, letting go of the idea that the one who hurt you will ever fully understand what they've done. "Forgive us." That's a prayer to be given back the past.

And then the last request in the Lord's Prayer is about the future. "Deliver us." It's about offering God our fear. Our fear is that the future will bring challenges that are too much for us, either because we are weak or because the challenges are superhuman. This third request comes in two halves. There's our fear of ourselves: "Lead us not into temptation". And then there's our fear of what lies outside us "Deliver us from evil". However much you may feel you are ready to move on to the next stage of your life, my guess is you still have in your hearts today a good deal of fear. There's a lot you don't know about yourself, and this prayer is a plea that you won't be put in a situation that's too much for you. Lead us not into temptation. Don't let me grow into a person who one day can't recognize the ideals I hold dear today.

And of course none of us knows what lies around the corner that we can't control at all, so the last request is "Deliver us." This prayer comes last for a reason. If we deeply trust and deeply know that we have, and will continue to have, everything we need; and if we have been released from the burdens of the past, the burden of hatred and the burden of guilt; then there is only one request left: "Deliver us from that which is bigger than us and can destroy us.."

I once said to a man, there are three things you need to ask for – give us, forgive us, deliver us. All you need for the present, the past, the future. I said to him, I wonder which of these prayers you find hardest to say. I wonder which of these is your biggest fear. He said, "None of them." He said when he was five years old his mother left and he got used to taking money out of his drunk father's pocket and doing whatever he had to do to get by. He wasn't afraid of anything. Our conversation took place in a penitentiary. He was, as we spoke, serving time for armed robbery. He had insulated himself from fear. But he had cut himself off from what he really needed.

Think about that man for a moment. He had tried to create a life for himself where he would never need to say this prayer. Where he could block out the past, with all the hurt he'd received and the damage he'd done. Where he convinced himself not to think about the future. And where in the present he made sure he didn't depend on anyone. He was living a truly impoverished life.

But you have the chance today to walk into a truly abundant life. You have the chance to make the past and the future your friend. On your last weekend at Duke, I commend to you this prayer. It contains everything you need for your new life. For the present, Give us what we need, and the grace to recognize what matters. For the past, forgive us what we can't undo as we forgive what others have done to us. And for the future, don't let us be taken to something that's too much for us, or face something that will destroy us. Give us, forgive us, deliver us. When you haven't got a prayer, try this one. God bless you.