
Prepare Six Envelopes

Luke 11: 1-13

A Sermon for the Festival of Preaching on September 29, 2020 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

‘Prayer is the centre of the Christian life.’ That’s a remarkably uncontroversial statement. But 30 years in ministry have taught me that almost everyone feels inadequate about prayer, and the tiny percentage of those who don’t, have little idea how much they intimidate the rest. The great divide lies between those for whom prayer is about words, often a lot of words, largely ones we say to God, from a written text, spontaneous conversation, or meticulous intercession list, and those for whom prayer is about leaving words behind, in the quest for contemplation, listening, and meditation.

Jesus suggests we keep it simple. ‘Pray in this way...,’ he says, introducing the Lord’s Prayer. But this creates a problem. He says, ‘When you’re praying, don’t heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.’ Yet, for those of us who’re in the habit of saying the Lord’s Prayer once, twice, or three times a day, how does it not thereby become the heaping-up of empty phrases? How does the Lord’s Prayer do what it says on the side of the tin, i.e. become the foundation of every other prayer? And how does such a general prayer become vital in our very specific circumstances of the pandemic?

Those are the questions I want to explore together this morning. I’m guessing over the last six months, every single person on this call has experienced fear, despair, paralysis, denial, confusion and frustration. And I’m imagining to everyone at this festival, prayer has seemed at the same time more useless and more necessary than before. I suspect it seems the Lord’s Prayer is not enough. I want to show you how the Lord’s Prayer is actually plenty – in fact, more than enough for such a time as this. I want us together to rediscover the Lord’s Prayer in the midst of this distressing time.

Ok, here we go. Theresa May finally accepts defeat and clears her office at Number Ten. She leaves on her desk, for her successor, three envelopes. Beside them she places a note: ‘Open one of these when you get into trouble.’ Within a couple of months Boris gets tangled in the web of Baroness Hale’s spider brooch. Boris opens his first envelope. It reads, ‘Blame your predecessor.’ Months later, Boris realises his closest adviser has driven to Bishop Auckland during lockdown for his wife’s birthday outing. Boris opens his second envelope. It says, ‘Do a cabinet reshuffle.’ A week or two ago, Boris finds that his bright idea of breaking international law meets with opposition the world over. He opens the third envelope. This is what it says. ‘Prepare three envelopes.’

The pandemic has changed very little. But it’s intensified almost everything. What it’s intensified most of all is our deepest fears. We have many kinds of anxieties in our lives. But they boil down to two. One is the macro anxiety: ‘Am I living a purposeless existence in a pointless world in a meaningless universe, which is, however, full of urgency and demand – yet will eventually revert to nothing?’ The second is the micro anxiety: ‘I feel so vulnerable, so fragile and so alone, and life could go down the plughole at any moment.’ These two fears stalk our lives. I wonder whether, alone in the night, you ever think, ‘If I stopped my frenzied activity, constant communication and perpetual distraction, and actually thought about one or other of these anxieties for any length of time, the panic would be uncontrollable.’

How do we deal with these two anxieties? There’s two conventional ways. Fervid busy-ness; or perpetual diversion. They’re really the same; and together they simply create a different form of anxiety. What the pandemic has done is to reduce our options for busyness and our avenues for perpetual diversion. That’s why we hate it so much. So what other options do we have?

There is a way. We’ve been given a gift. It’s a tiny gift. But it’s also an indescribably huge gift. It’s 70 words long. And we can recite it several times a day – in fact as often as anxiety strikes. It takes as long as rubbing our hands together when we accidentally poured too much hand sanitiser on them. That gift is the Lord’s Prayer.

The Lord’s Prayer appears in slightly different form in Matthew and Luke’s gospels, and when we say it today we add on some extra words about the kingdom, the power and the glory that actually come not from the gospels but from First Chronicles. So today I’m going to talk about the version we’re familiar with, minus the additional part. I want you to think of the prayer we know so well as actually like six envelopes that Jesus leaves on our desk, with a note in Jesus’ handwriting saying ‘Open when anxiety strikes.’ Imagine Jesus getting ready for the ascension and whispering to Peter, ‘Back in the upper room I’ve left six envelopes. You might want to think about opening one of them once the fire of Pentecost begins to wear off.’

Let's start with the first three envelopes. They address our first anxiety: 'Am I living a purposeless existence in a random world in a meaningless universe?' We'll take each envelope in turn. Here's what's written in the first envelope. 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.' What does this tell us? It tells us there *is*, actually, a purpose: God wants to be in relationship with us. There is one who is in another realm from us, a realm infinitely more real than this one. Who yet relates to us not as an impervious despot or cynical manipulator but as an embracing parent. It tells us there's something bigger and more significant and more real than the universe: which is called heaven. If only God lasts forever, and what lasts forever is the only thing of absolute value, everything in our lives is valued according to how much it relates to God. To say 'hallowed be thy name' is, at a stroke, to reappraise the value of all our commitments, our projects, and our desires. Just like that.

A month ago I walked past my old school. I looked into my first-year classroom, which had changed disturbingly little. It took me back to when I was 11 and took a test in that very classroom. In italics at the top it said, 'Read all the questions.' Then it provided 12 questions, about a variety of trivial things. 'Spell rhododendron backwards.' 'Calculate the score of the alphabet if A=1, and B=2, and so on.' The last question said, 'Put your pen down and don't answer any of the questions.' Which made all of us in class feel foolish, because none of us had followed the instructions. We'd answered all the questions, which we wouldn't have had to do if we'd read them all first. Only the last question made sense of all the others. The Lord's Prayer begins with words that make sense of everything else. God is beyond everything, yet seeks relationship with us, and we must prize this truth above all things. Simple, yet staggering. That's our first envelope.

Let's open the second envelope. Here we read these words: 'Thy kingdom come.' Only three words. But so full of significance. We know God wants to be in relationship with us. 'Kingdom' says what relationship means. That full quality of healthy encounter – with God, ourselves, one another and creation – is what God has in store for everyone and everything. We long for a world in which justice is done, mercy shared, goodness is honoured, cruelty ended, selfishness dismantled, and kindness prevails. 'Thy' is a warning. It tells us that until God finally brings that full expression of healthy relationship, we'll continue to live under other forms of kingdom, whether of others' devising or our own. Some of these may be bad, others not so bad; but whether bad or good, they aren't God's kingdom.

I bet you've got your own checklist of how the world would be so much better if you were in charge. It's hard to say '*Thy* kingdom come' and renounce the desire to say, '*My* kingdom come.' A lot of people have been convinced that all would be well if only they were in charge. Few if any've been proved right. And then there's the word 'come.' 'Come' tells us that the kingdom is something *God* brings, not something *we* achieve. It's great if our efforts align with and anticipate that kingdom; but that kingdom isn't primarily about affirming *us*. It's about saturating the world with the glory of God. That's our second envelope.

Are you ready for the third envelope? This is what our third envelope says: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' God's given us freedom. We can use that freedom to depart from God's ways or to seek God's ways. It's not that the universe is meaningless and our lives purposeless; it's that there are multiple possible directions of travel, and our own will is part of that mix. But we're seeking to discern, discover and direct our lives in the trajectory that will ultimately prevail. This envelope also delivers us from any idea that all that matters in life is being ready for eternity. It longs for God's will for formed and restored relationships to be experienced on earth now, just as much as they'll be enjoyed in heaven forever. The way to prepare for heaven isn't to withdraw from earth and bide our time till we can be fully with God. It's to recognise what full, true and restored relationships with God, ourselves, one another and creation look like. And it's to do whatever we can to seek that such relationships pervade our bit of earth right now. Build new and good ones; restore and heal bad and complex ones.

I don't know if you've ever used a Magimix to chop and blend food for a recipe. Sometimes it feels like you have to put the parts together a dozen different ways before suddenly it all goes whizz and is done in seconds. Our lives are a constant searching for the 'whizz' that is finding God's will. But be careful about searching for God's will. You may find it. And once you do, you may find the living it harder than the searching for it.

This is the hardest of the six envelopes sincerely to pray. If you speak to a monk or nun about their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, they'll tell you that the first two aren't as tough as you'd think. The really hard one is obedience. There's only one thing worse than not getting what you want – and that's getting it. There's only one thing worse than not knowing God's will for your life and that's knowing it. Then you have no excuse not to live it. Be careful what you pray for.

Together these three envelopes address our first anxiety. This is what they tell us: God longs to be with us, and will finally pervade both earth and heaven. These three envelopes shape our hearts after the heart of God.

Now for the second set of envelopes. The first three envelopes are about God; the second three envelopes are about us. They address our second anxiety, 'I feel so vulnerable, so fragile and so alone, and life could go down the plughole at any moment.'

Here's the fourth envelope: 'Give us this day our daily bread.' 'Give us.' It's in the present tense. It's about now, today. There's one question that haunts the Old Testament. Will God be enough for Israel? Sometimes God is too much – too holy, too demanding. Sometimes God seems too little – too distant, too little help in trouble. In the Old Testament, bread is always about manna. Manna is a gift from God to prove to the Israelites that, even in the wilderness, God will provide for them. But it's also a test, to see if they'll be content to collect just a daily amount and not try to get enough for the next day too. And in the New Testament, bread is always about the Eucharist. It's always about believing God has given us enough by giving us Jesus; or striving for more – which turns out to be less. This is the great question for us too, never more than in a pandemic: is God enough for us? Sin is always a sign that for a moment, a day or a lifetime, God doesn't seem to be enough – so we go chasing our security someplace else. 'Give us' is the fourth envelope: a request that God will be enough.

Here's the fifth envelope: 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.' If 'Give us' is about the present, 'Forgive us' is about the past. Which scares us the most? The past, which will come back to haunt us, or the future, which is full of unknowns? There's two painful things about the past: the things done to us, which leave us bitter; and the things we've done, which make us guilty. We want justice for the first set of things, so we can be vindicated; but we fear justice for the second set of things, lest we be condemned. 'Forgive us... as we forgive' is telling us we can't have one without the other. Justice shaped by mercy for the first yields mercy shaped by justice for the second. Together they're telling us we can't live in the present unless we and God take steps to heal our past. Be careful when you call for justice; because one day, justice may call for you.

And here's the sixth and final envelope: 'Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.' Temptation is about the things we think we can manage but get bigger on us. We think we can fit them into our story but it turns out we become part of theirs. We become trapped by them. Evil is something that threatens to engulf us. We know we have no power to resist it. Only God's protection can deliver us from evil. Our lives are dominated by anxiety about the future – the things we can anticipate, like temptation, and the things beyond our imagination, like evil. This is a prayer to be free from the fear of the future. At Christmas 1939, George VI quoted the words of Minnie Haskins. 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.' 'Lead us not... Deliver us.' This is saying to God, 'You've provided for our present and healed our past. In the future, be with us always.'

That's the second set of envelopes. They're about the present, the past and the future. If we're healed of our past and freed from our future, we can truly live in the present. These three envelopes show us what salvation means.

That's all the envelopes of the Lord's Prayer. It turns out it's not a heap of empty phrases. It's 70 words that speak into our deepest fears, and beside those fears set the deepest truth there is. If you're saying you're someone who never thinks, 'I'm living a pointless life in a meaningless universe'; and who never worries, 'My life is only a heartbeat away from falling apart': then I'm saying, quite simply, I don't believe you. But if you're surrounded by fightings within and fears without; if you're living through a pandemic, struggling to believe that God is enough, yesterday, today and forever – then hear this good news. God has prepared for you six envelopes, and left them on your desk. They're the only advice you need. Open them. Open them not just when you're in trouble. Open them not just when anxiety knocks at the door. Open them every day, several times a day, as often and for as long as you wash your hands in a pandemic.

This is what they say. God is with you. God is coming to you. God will finally prevail. God gives you enough for today. God heals the hurt and damage of yesterday. God will be with you forever. Whatever happens.

That's it. Do we need anything beyond that? I don't think we do. That's enough. That's plenty. Actually, that's more than plenty: that's everything we'll ever need.