

“DARING DOXOLOGY”

(*The Lord's Prayer – 6*)

Romans 8:31-39 (p. 1097)

Today marks the end of these studies on the Lord's Prayer. Let me review the five petitions that constitute this timeless prayer:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. That is: Father, please be yourself. Remind us, first, that we're speaking with you.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth. That is: Father, please overrule our lobbying for what we want, and show us that when your will is done, your kingdom happens.

Give us this day our daily bread. God, don't let us forget that your grace, like manna, has a short self-life, but it's new every morning.

Forgive us our wrongs as we forgive those who wrong us. Remind us, Father, that only the forgiving heart is open to being forgiven.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. You made us free – to resist or give in to temptation. But you alone are strong enough to overcome the evil one. So help us to find in your Son the way to live our lives, the truth to live them well, and the life that will last forever.

Well, there you have it. The End! “*But wait!*” you say. “*There's more. Didn't you forget the closing: 'For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen?' Isn't that how Jesus ended it?*” Well, not according to a lot of biblical scholars. You won't find that final doxology in Luke's version of the prayer. And in Matthew's version you'll often find a footnote that says: “*Some manuscripts add: 'For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen.'*”

In other words, someone added that doxology to the end of this prayer that Jesus taught. Who did it? Who were the people who dared to add a post-script to our Lord's own words? And why did they do it? Well, it turns out that the answer to both questions is fairly obvious.

As to who did it – it was the early church who had adopted this prayer as part of their worship. When they got to the end of it, it was as though they couldn't contain themselves. They had just asked God for everything! And they had done it with a world-defying confidence that God could and would honor their requests.

And as to why they did it, why this confidence – the answer lies in that little three-letter hinge-word “for.” That is, “*Father, we dare to ask you for all these*

things, and trust you to honor our prayers, for (because) thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever!”

A friend once confided in me that he enjoyed watching me as I recited the Lord’s Prayer. He said to me, “*Alan, do you realize that you can’t say the end of the Lord’s Prayer without smiling?*” I’d never thought about it until he mentioned it. But it’s true. There’s something about that final doxology that affects me that way.

I suspect something like that must have taken hold of those early Christians. Here they were, surrounded by the kingdom of Herod, the power of the Roman Empire, and the glory of Greek civilization. And yet they had the unmitigated audacity to burst out with this defiant doxology: “*No, Father, it’s all yours! Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen!*”

How could they make that bold proclamation? There is only one answer that makes both historical and practical sense. They had become utterly convinced that the same Jesus who had taught them this prayer, who had been crucified, dead and buried, was now alive, he was with them, and he would never leave them again.

The first sacrament of the church wasn’t a memorial service. It was communion with their risen Lord! All the earliest hymns of the church celebrated the resurrection. That’s why we Christians worship on Sunday. It’s because Sunday is Resurrection Day! How appropriate, then, on Sunday for us to proclaim together triumphantly: “*Father, thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever!*”

Whatever happened to that spontaneity, that fire in the belly of the early church? Can you still find that kind of enthusiasm today? Sure you can; but where? Maybe it’s a matter of picking the right church. Do you suppose our Pentecostal brothers and sisters have a corner on enthusiasm; and do Presbyterians really deserve the title “God’s Frozen Chosen?” I don’t think so. I’ve been to holiness churches where they generate a lot of heat, but not necessarily much light. And I’ve been to some so-called “main line” churches where the Holy Spirit was doing some remarkable things.

No, the key to enthusiasm is in the heart, much more than in some denominational structure. Remember, the word “enthusiasm” comes from the Greek “en theos” (literally God-filled). In other words, people are enthusiastic because God fills their hearts with himself. And unless I miss my guess, God finds it a lot easier to fill those who are willing to exercise their imagination. I believe that’s true.

In George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Saint Joan*, there’s a marvelous little dialogue between Joan of Arc and one of her officers.

St. Joan says: “*You mustn’t talk to me about my voices.*”

Officer: “*How do you mean, ‘voices?’*”

She replies: *“I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God.”*

Officer: *“They come from your imagination.”*

“Of course!” she replies. *“Of course! That’s how the messages of God come to us.”*

Shaw was taking a jab at those who are suspicious of imagination. Sadly, I’m afraid most of us are. Most of us have had our imaginations largely erased from our mental computers at a rather tender age. We’re taught early on to treat imagination as somehow childish. And then we make the foolish mistake of equating “imagination” with “imaginary” by which we mean “unreal.” And of course, if we think something is unreal, it’s easy to discount it (or dismiss it altogether).

You’ve doubtless heard it said, *“Ah, it’s just your imagination.”* People apply those words to what they might consider unfounded fears, or unwarranted pain. But it doesn’t stop there. People will sometimes apply that phrase, “it’s just your imagination,” to matters of faith. And when someone says about my faith, *“Ah, it’s just your imagination,”* I begin to get defensive.

I marvel at St. Joan’s willingness to say what she believed. If I had been in her place, I probably would have kept my “voices” to myself. But, of course, St. Joan spoke out – and she did it because she knew she was right. She had learned things from her imagination that others around her (people who were every bit as intelligent as she) had missed. The fact is that they couldn’t learn what she had learned because they couldn’t imagine them.

St. Joan can teach us an immensely important truth; one that we need to be reminded of rather often. The truth is this: What we learn from our imagination is often more true and more real than things we might learn only from what we would call “the facts.”

Just consider for a moment some of the things we would never know were it not for the gift of imagination. There would be no music, no art, no literature. Those are all products of imagination. Think how stale, how bland this life would be were it not for imaginative artists and writers and composers. Imagination is one of God’s precious gifts.

Of course, being a gift of God doesn’t guarantee that it will be put to good use. We are, after all, free to use or abuse whatever gifts God has given us, including our imagination. Ghandi, for example, used his imagination to inspire millions to seek a nonviolent way of life. Hitler, on the other hand, used his imagination to promote a bloodthirsty racism that nearly tore the world apart.

And of course, the gift of imagination can either be used or abused when it comes to matters of faith. Some people’s religion, for instance, is based on fear. They behave in a particular way because they’re afraid of what will happen to them if they don’t. Now granted, there is such a thing as a healthy fear. But if you

have a religion that is based on fear, and then couple it with an active imagination, the marriage of those two can spawn all sorts of ugly offspring. Put fear and imagination together and they'll produce anxiety, jealousy, bickering, rivalry, deceit, hatred; and they'll do it all in the name of religion.

On the other hand, look at what happens when religion is based, not on fear, but on a relationship with the God whom Jesus teaches us to call "our Father." When you know that the One who is in charge of the universe loves you as his own dear child; when you're motivated to do your best not out of fear, but out of love and respect and loyalty; and then add to that a lively imagination – all sorts of wonderful things begin to happen.

When faith in a loving heavenly Father is wedded to imagination, relationships start to change. You begin to see that person you always considered your enemy as a potential brother or sister in Christ. You start to see circumstances in a new way. Something you might have called a catastrophe begins to look strangely like an opportunity. You even begin to understand faith differently. Instead of seeing faith as belief in a set of doctrines (many of which you don't really understand) you realize that faith is daring to imagine what reason can't imagine and what fear wouldn't dare imagine.

The author of the letter to the Hebrew put it this way: "*Faith is the substance of things hoped for, it is the evidence of things that can't be seen.*" That, folks, is a priceless description of what happens when an active imagination teams up with a trust in God our Father. And God knows how much we need to begin to dare to imagine what He can do through us, if we only give Him a chance.

Let me give you just one example. The letter to the Romans (from which our scripture lesson came today) was written by a man who, early in his life, thought he had all the answers. He was absolutely convinced that the followers of Jesus were spawning lies and had to be eradicated. He was on a one-man crusade to destroy every Christian he could find. And then it happened. This man (whose name was Saul) met the risen Jesus (the same Jesus that Saul was sure was a figment of heretical imagination). When that happened, all his certainties were blown away and he was obliged to exchange what he thought he knew for what he never would have dared to imagine.

Years later, after a remarkable life he never would have dreamed of living, after going through nearly every trial and test a person could endure, this Saul (who by then had adopted his Greek name, Paul) posed this question in his letter to the Romans, chapter 8: "*Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, pain, or persecution? Can lack of clothes and food, danger to life and limb, the threat of force of arms?*"

Then comes his resolute answer, born of an imagination bonded to his faith in God our heavenly Father: "*No! In all these things we win an overwhelming*

victory through him who has already proved his love for us. I have become absolutely convinced that neither messenger of heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in God's whole world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That was Paul's memorable way of saying what the early church had discovered about Jesus: Neither Herod nor Pilate could overrule him. Neither established religion nor imperial Rome could silence him. Neither the cross nor the grave could hold him. Neither death nor all the powers of hell could defeat him. No wonder the early church, when it had prayed this prayer, could not resist bursting forth with this daring doxology: "*Father, we make bold to ask you for all these things, and we ask with confidence.*" Why? "*For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. So be it!*"

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