

DENIS MCBRIDE

THE
GOSPEL
— OF —
LUKE
A REFLECTIVE
COMMENTARY

Heythrop Library
114 Mount Street
London
W1K 3AH
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Chapter Eleven

CHAPTER ELEVEN 145

Luke 11:1-4 Prayer and Discipleship

¹¹ He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² And he said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread; ⁴ and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation."

JESUS' OWN PRAYER MOVES ONE OF THE DISCIPLES to ask for a lesson in prayer, and Jesus happily obliges. In Matthew's account (6:9-13), the Lord's prayer is given in the context of the Sermon on the Mount; Luke's context seems more original. ¹ In his teaching prayer, Jesus reflects his own consciousness of God, he speaks through an awareness of intimacy with God whom he knows as Father, he tells of his emphasis on praise and petition. This is not a private prayer of Jesus, exclusive to him alone: the prayer is couched in the *plural*, not the singular: it is given as the prayer of the community. Jesus addresses God not in the formal terms of the traditional Jewish prayer, but in a uniquely intimate way which many people could find shocking. Jesus calls God, Father, *Abba*, which is the name a child would use to speak to his human father. *Abba* literally means daddy; it is the familiar cry of the mopee who is assured that he is speaking to a loved one, not the hesitant request of the civil servant formally seeking an audience with an anonymous power.

The prayer of Jesus summarizes Jesus' own preaching and theology; it invites the disciples to become involved in

a relationship of family intimacy, of speaking to God as a generous Father with the quiet assurance of a child who has nothing to fear. The first two petitions pray for the fulfillment of God's plan on earth; the other three petitions pray for the various needs of the disciples. The prayer first proclaims the blessedness of God's name; it praises and glorifies the Father's whole being, a being called *Abba*; it asks God to act in such a way that his name will be blessed and praised among men. The prayer involves the disciples in God's passion, his kingdom, his rule of love and forgiveness, and it is that kingdom which the disciple is pledged to spread in his life and work.

The disciples are to pray for daily bread. Scholars disagree over the meaning of the word "daily": some argue that it speaks of present needs, like the daily rations of the soldier; others argue from ancient manuscripts that it is the "bread for the morrow" which speaks of the coming of the kingdom. Perhaps the two ideas are not mutually exclusive: in his commissioning of the disciples, Christ told them to depend for their daily needs on the hospitality of those to whom they ministered: if the people accepted the disciples and offered them hospitality, it was also a sign that they accepted the Lord and the message of the kingdom. For the disciple, being given daily bread was a sign of the spread of the kingdom. In that sense, when the disciple prays for daily bread, he also prays for the coming of the kingdom of God.

Jesus is a sign of God's forgiveness, and the prayer which he offers his disciples now asks for that forgiveness. God's forgiveness is not conditional on human performance: God forgives, and that is the end of the matter. But the disciple's own lack of forgiveness should not stand in the way of God's graciousness, especially if we believe that God's forgiveness works through human forgiveness—"whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven" (John 20:23). In that understanding, *not* to forgive others obscures the forgiving nature of the Father.

The last petition of the prayer asks the Father to "lead

us not into temptation." At first sight, the phrase would seem to imply that God could be involved in actively causing people to succumb to temptation, but the prayer is asking God to use his power so that the disciple does not succumb to temptation. Jesus is later to reflect that his own life has its "times of trial" (22:28), as he is to tell his disciples to "pray that you may not enter into temptation" (22:46). This last petition asks the Father to help the disciple in his time of trial and temptation, and again, Jesus' own experience bears out the answer to that prayer.

The whole spirit of the prayer takes its key from the first word, *Abba*. If the disciple really believes that God is a generous Father from whom there is nothing to fear, and from whom there is everything to expect, then he is challenged in whatever he does by the governing image of a generous Father. If the governing image of God is one of meanness and low expectation, of someone who does not actually *do* anything, then the disciple is likely to be the unfortunate image of that peculiar God in his own ministry. A generous image of God begets a generous image of the human; a belief in the utter forgiveness of God should animate the disciple in his own efforts at forgiveness. The prayer that Jesus offers as a model speaks of a God who cares passionately about what happens in his own family, it speaks of a God who has not fallen in love with long distance, but is as near his children as their calls for *Abba*. The Father is only a whisper away from the cradle of the world.

Luke 11: 5-13 Prayer and Imagination

⁶And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; ⁷for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; ⁸and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything'? ⁹I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs. ¹⁰And I tell you, Ask, and it will be