

New Year's Day 2016

The Bishop of Chelmsford's Sermon

Say the Lord's Prayer and mean it!

"Lord, teach us to pray"

- Luke 11.1

It is a sobering thought, but over the past ten days more people have probably seen the new Star Wars film than attended church.

The Church of England had the ingenious idea of showing a fifty-seven second advertisement for prayer before the film. This brief and beautiful little film featuring the Lord's Prayer, each line spoken by a different person speaking out of a different situation of need or desire, passed all the various tests that any advertisement has to and was also given a U certificates by the Board for Film Classification, but as you probably know – it was all over the newspapers a few weeks ago – the cinemas themselves decided to ban it. Worried that their 'oh so sensitive and impressionable' customers would be offended by such a film they thought it better to stick to advertisements that just sold aspirations and dreams of a better lifestyle and the products that you needed to consume in order to get there. Cars, mobile phones, designer label clothes, perfume and popcorn are all fine to sell before you settle down to watch the film. But not prayer. It is too unsettling. Perhaps the Church of England's biggest mistake was that this advertisement had no product to sell. A glow in the dark nativity set to put in your front garden alongside Father Christmas and his red nose reindeer led sleigh would have been acceptable. It would have bowed the knee to the consumer gods who must, of course, always be kept satisfied. But prayer is too disturbing. Too non material. Too replete with the dreams and aspirations of another kingdom where we are measured by love, not bank balances or possessions or looks. And although I was distressed by this decision (and was one of the bishops the Church wheeled out to lead the defence for our advertisements), I therefore can't help feeling that the cinemas had a point.

The Lord's Prayer is deeply offensive. It is offensive to xenophobia, race hatred and prejudice of every kind, for it says that God is our Father, and that we are sisters and brothers, and that we are one humanity inhabiting one world. It is offensive to selfishness and self-reliance and self-sufficiency. It says we must seek God's will and God's kingdom. It is offensive to pride. It says we need to be forgiven and should be forgiving to others. It is offensive to consumerism and excess. It says we need to learn to live with enough. It says give us our daily bread and help us not to ask for anything more.

No wonder the cinemas banned it. This prayer goes against all the things the world holds dear. It offers us something that is free; and it sets us free from thinking consumption and excess is the answer. Say this prayer and your life will be changed. Say this prayer and you will live by a different set of values. Say this prayer and you enter into the life of another kingdom.

When the disciples turned to Jesus and said to him, 'Teach us to pray', these were the words he gave them. The Lord's Prayer is the heart of all prayer and the pattern for all prayer. It starts with three hearty praises – your name be hallowed, your kingdom come your will be done. So our prayer must always begin with adoration and thanksgiving; and it must always be shaped by an heartfelt seeking after God's will in all things and for all people. It finishes with three humble petitions – give

us our daily bread, forgive us our sins, save us at the time of trial. So our prayer ought to shape our desires, teaching us what we want and what we need. We don't pray in order to change God's mind on something, as if God does not know what is happening in the world or the troubles we confront, or as if God will only listen if we secure enough signature sin the prayer petition, or grit our teeth and pray hard enough. Prayer changes our minds. We even begin to become the answer to our own prayers as our hearts and wills are conformed to the heart and will of God. As St Paul said to the Church in Rome –

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect.
(Romans 12. 2)

This what saying the Lord's Prayer does to you. It is dangerous stuff.

Throughout Christian history, many of the greatest spiritual writers have said that if you were able to say the Lord's Prayer once and truly mean it you would be in heaven.

Well, we can't say the Lord's Prayer in the cinema before watching Star Wars, but we can and do say this prayer in our homes and in our churches today and every day. But when I look around after I have said the Lord's Prayer I can't help but notice that I am still here rooted in the earth, and so are all the other people I'm saying it with! I can only conclude that I have not yet learned how to say it and truly mean it, and that God still has more work he wants to do in me. So I need to keep on saying this prayer so that the ideas and values it enshrines about living God's way can gradually change me.

For me, and for most of us, this will probably be the work of a lifetime. But, by happy coincidence, this is exactly how much time each one of us has got! God has given each of us precisely one lifetime to live to his praise and glory, and as children of his Kingdom.

The Lord's Prayer is deeply offensive to the muddled and confused values of the world. But to us who are being saved it is the power and beauty of the gospel and the values of the kingdom encapsulated and condensed into a few short sentences and given to us to say each day so that we may be changed and shaped by God.

Make it to your New Year's resolution: say this prayer each day and try to mean it.

+Stephen Chelmsford

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