

The Lord's Prayer

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Preached at St. Bartholomew's, Woodinville, WA Sunday, November 4, 2007

As we come to the petition, *forgive us our trespasses*, I am reminded of the story in the *Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, where the prophet has a vision of God in all of his glory. God is high and lifted up, his retinue fills the temple, he is surrounded by angelic beings who continually glorify him saying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord GOD of hosts". The building is shaken, and filled with God's glory. As he sees all this, Isaiah immediately becomes aware of his own sinfulness, and he says, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Now at this point in The Lord's Prayer, having sensed the Sacredness of God's holy Name, having been caught up in the longing for God's kingdom and felt the powerful movement of the Divine Will, we too find ourselves tragically aware of our own sinfulness. Von Hugel writes, "The more holy I find God, the more wicked I feel myself to be". How different this is from what we normally seek, which is self-validation. Yet when our souls come in contact with the majesty and the holiness of Almighty God, we at once realize the truth of our situation, and see ourselves as we are. In this petition we hope that God will set aside our impatience, gloom, self-occupation, unloving prejudices, reckless tongues, feverish desires, base impulses, along with all the damage they have caused. Let's consider the word 'trespasses': it implies the crossing of a boundaries that weren't meant to be crossed. It reminds me of when I was a young man, trying to resist the temptation to go deer-hunting over the boundary of our neighbor's property, which was marked "no trespassing". Of course he simply had the best land for hunting, I almost couldn't help straying over. This is the same quandary faced by my 3 yr old, who finds it hard to resist the temptation to scale the book case and jump off the top, or to commit some other trespass. A 'trespass' is a mark of excess: we say, do or think things that are beyond what is permitted. Often we hurt ourselves and others; certainly we offend against God. In some versions of The Lord's Prayer, instead of the word 'trespasses', the word 'debts' is used: *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*. If 'trespass' describes sins of commission, then 'debts' describes sins of omission. St. Augustine points out that evil is the taking away—the lessening—of the original goodness of something. God has made all things and pronounced them good, but when through malice or carelessness men misuse what God has made, it turns to evil—it falls into the unreality of this sinful world. We often either trespass the boundary, or fall short of the mark. "Forgive us our trespasses", is not just a petition in The Lord's Prayer, but it is a whole type of prayer, called 'confession', that is present in any healthy prayer life. *We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done*. Now for the second part of this petition: shockingly, The Lord's Prayer describes God's forgiveness as conditional (it to be granted "as we forgive those who trespass against us"). Inevitably we tend to say this 'tongue in cheek', because who among us really wants to be forgiven by God in the same way that we have forgiven others!? Yet that is the clear message of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. (Matt. 18:21ff, The Gospel Lesson for Trinity 22, BCP 221-222) The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is an excellent summary of the issues we typically face with forgiveness: "How often do I have to forgive my brother for the same offense? How does the debt owed to me compare to the debt that I owe? Can I expect the forgiveness of God, if I don't forgive others?" Most of the trespasses that have been perpetrated against us are been merely irritating; some have been deep and injurious. We are all owed small and great debts. Forgiveness

does not mean that we have no memory of the injury that has been done to us. 'Forgive and forget', is never what really happens – the memory of the injury still bothers us whenever it comes to mind. But in order to be forgiving, we have to be ready to set it aside each time it comes to our minds, and to be willing to move on and do what is right for the person who has done us the injury. Not only does this seem impossible for us to do, it is impossible, unless we can live in the power of the Holy Spirit, and see things the way God sees. Evelyn Underhill writes, "The Christian doctrine of forgiveness is so drastic and so difficult, where there is a real and deep injury to forgive, that only those living in the Spirit, in union with the Cross, can dare to base their claim on it." Yet if you and I want to be admitted to the Kingdom of Redeeming Love, the price we have to pay is our willingness to behave as citizens of that Kingdom, even under the most difficult conditions. Christ showed the example by his cross; great saints have shown us how to follow in his footsteps. The Church is still the agency of Divine forgiveness in a harsh, vengeful world: as members of the Church, let us always be ready to *ask for* and just as quick to *offer* forgiveness, showing ourselves to be good citizens of the Kingdom of the Father.