

7. The Church's Fruitful Partnership: Publicise Gospel Mercy

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[0 : 0 0] Well, you might like to turn up with me to Matthew chapter 5, to the passage we read there, page 810 in the Church Bibles. Well, this is the last of our little series on the Church's fruitful partnership in mission.

And I want to think today about publicizing the Gospel's mercy. Now, let me say first of all that the primary task of the Church is above all else to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

That was the Lord's command very explicitly in the Great Commission. Go, he said, and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you, commanded to the apostles.

And therefore, it is a ministry of proclamation, of teaching the apostolic Gospel that builds the Church. By calling people into the Church, through the Gospel's power to save, and by building these people up into the living stones that we're called to be.

So, make no mistake, proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the absolute priority of the Christian Church, in every place, in every age.

[1 : 3 0] Now, that is not because spiritual things are more important than physical things. If you can separate, make that distinction.

It's not because of that, but it is because eternal things are infinitely more important than temporal things. So, let's be very, very clear about that.

Let's never get fooled by anybody who wants to tell you, no, no, no, the Kingdom of God is all about now. It's all about making a difference in this world. Not just thinking about the future.

Don't listen to anybody who says that kind of thing. That simply and flatly contradicts the Lord Jesus Christ. My Kingdom, he said, is not of this world.

And nor is the Gospel, therefore, primarily ever about this world. It is about the new creation. It is about the eternal world to come. So, never forget that.

[2 : 3 4] If you forget that, and you focus primarily on this world, you have abandoned the true Christian Gospel altogether. Absolutely. So, never forget that.

But, there's another thing that we mustn't ever forget either. And that is that in the coming of Jesus, the eternal world of life to come has broken into this present world of time and space.

The invisible God, the eternal God, has revealed himself supremely to us in our world, in the flesh, in human flesh and blood, in our humanity, in the incarnation.

That's what Christmas is all about. So, John chapter 1 says, No one has ever seen God, but the only begotten who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

We have seen his glory, says John, full of grace and truth. And, it's in the Gospel of this Jesus Christ, God the Son, that our lives have been touched and transformed as individual believers and also as the Church of Jesus Christ.

- [3 : 47] We're made ambassadors of God. We are living witnesses to that truth, the truth of the God who became incarnate. And, we are to be witnesses to that truth, likewise, as that truth becomes incarnate, in flesh, in us and in our lives.
- Now, last Sunday, we thought a little about that truth in our own lives, bearing witness to the truth for life that is in the Gospel. We thought about it in terms of our individual lives, the Christian character and conduct that commends the Gospel of Jesus Christ in this world.
- Remember, we're saved, says Paul to Titus, not by good works, of course not, but we are saved, he says, for good works. So that even those who oppose the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ might have nothing whatsoever evil to say about us because they see the quality of our lives and their mouths are stopped.
- Not only negatively, but remember that lovely phrase, in everything we are to do, he says, we are to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour. We are to beautify and show as beautiful the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- And that's our calling as Christian believers, for our lives to adorn the beauty, to adorn the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The alternative to that, of course, is far too awful to contemplate, isn't it?
- [5 : 12] That because of us, God's name should be blasphemed among unbelievers. That was God's charge, wasn't it, at one time to his people Israel.
- Because of you, my name is blasphemed among the nations. It's a terrible thing when that happens, isn't it? I'm sure you felt as I did just some months ago when there was that terrible story about that man in the United States.
- Remember, he'd been discovered to have kidnapped that little girl and held her hostage for about 20 years, wasn't it, in a tent in his garden. Sexually abused her, had children by her.
- And yet, what was he doing? Every weekend and every day, he was out of the street giving out Gospel tracts and preaching the Gospel. Well, that blasphemes the name of God our Saviour, doesn't it?
- And absolutely, understandably so. But no, we are to be the very antithesis of that. We are to beautify the name of our salvation that we were singing about.
- [6 : 18] But what is true for us as individuals is just as true for the church corporately. Because not only is there great power in genuine Christian character, there is also great power and great witness when genuine Christian communities are witnessed and are seen and heard in our world.
- And the corporate message of the church is also absolutely inseparable from the corporate life of the church. The message is inseparable from the medium that proclaims it.
- And so the church as a whole must advertise and display and embody the grace of God in Christ in our corporate life just as on our corporate lips.
- Together, part of our partnership and mission is that we are called to publicize the Gospel's mercy to the world. And that's just what Jesus is talking about, isn't it, in the passage we read here in Matthew chapter 5.
- You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. People are to see you and to give glory to your Heavenly Father.
- [7 : 33] You are here to publicize the glorious mercy of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's look at verse 17.

Very, very important for this aspect of mission that we have as a living witness, as a community of faith. It's very disappointing that there's a paragraph break there and a new heading in some of our Bibles.

It shouldn't be at all. Verse 17 comes right after verse 16. What Jesus is saying here after talking about the calling of his people to be light in the world, he is saying immediately that I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.

What's he saying? Well, in the broadest sense, the whole of the law and the prophets, the Old Testament scriptures, is the story of God and his chosen people, the people that he has called to be lights to the nations.

So, way back in the law, you read later on, Deuteronomy chapter 4, for example, you'll see that God gave his law, he gave his instructions for holy living living to his people Israel.

[8 : 50] He gave it to them for the sake of mission. He said, this is so that the surrounding nations will look at your life and your lifestyle as my people and they'll say to themselves, what great God is this that these people serve, that has such perfect and righteous laws?

What kind of God is he that these people are witnessing to? That's why he gave his law for mission. And when you read the prophets, you find exactly the same thing.

God's people are called to be the light to the nations of the earth. And that very language is used several times, for example, in the prophet Isaiah. You are the light to the nations that my salvation might reach to the ends of the earth, says the Lord.

Now, of course, at the same time, the prophets constantly lamented, didn't they, the failure of God's people to bear that bright and shining light. And in fact, Isaiah's promises there that God would send at last a true servant who would not fail, a true servant whose light would shine to all the world and whose light would cover the whole earth, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, to come.

But that didn't mean for a moment that the role for God's people would be over. Christ came not to abolish God's plan for the world, but to fulfill it.

[10 : 10] Through his perfect work of salvation in Jesus, God would fulfill that and also through the ambassadors that he would call to follow Jesus to be his true church. People to be renewed and transformed through Jesus Christ, to be a true community of the Spirit of the risen Lord, to be a people who would shine that light to the very furthest extent of the nations of the world.

And so, you, says Jesus here in Matthew 5, you, my followers, my church, you are the light of the world. You are the fulfillment of everything that this story has been about right from the beginning in the Law and the Prophets.

And you can't be hidden, says Jesus, that's impossible. You will shine. You will publicize to the world what the world will think of me, your Lord.

And so, the question for the church of Jesus Christ is this. Will the light, will the message that we shine to the world together as the church, to our communities, to our city, to our nation, will that light adorn and beautify the name of our Lord and Savior?

Or will the message that we shine from our life to the world do the opposite? Will it besmirch? The name of our God and Savior.

[11 : 38] Of course, we want it to be the former, don't we? We want verse 16 to be true of our churches, that people would see our good deeds and give glory to our Father in heaven.

We want our churches to publicize the gospel mercy through our corporate life, just as we want to proclaim the gospel message in our corporate lips. and don't underestimate ever the power of a genuine Christian community, of a really distinctive Christian counterculture in our world.

Don't underestimate that. We should be confident in the power of genuine goodness to impress itself upon our world. Gospel mercy is genuinely winsome.

It is winsome, it will have an effect, not always winning people to Christ, no, that's true, because the human heart is perverse by nature, we know that.

The light shines, but remember Jesus' words, men love darkness rather than light often, because their deeds are evil. And the light of God's mercy seen in other people often shames people.

[12 : 55] Often arises opposition. That's what Jesus warns in verse 11 that we read, you see. You will be opposed, you will be reviled, you will be persecuted sometimes for your sheer good living and good works for Jesus.

That distinctive truly Christ-life counterculture of genuine Christianity is very, very powerful, powerful. But it's always a double-edged sword, isn't it? Because it embodies and it publicizes in the flesh, if you like, the living truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And the gospel is always a double-edged sword, it cuts both ways. And so when Jesus says that the church is salt and light to the world, well, when you think about it, that's a rather offensive thing for the world to hear.

if the world needs light, well, it implies that the world is in darkness, it's confused, that it needs enlightening. It implies that the world is decaying and rotten and needs the disinfection and the saving of the salt of the Christian church.

That's quite offensive to many people, understandably so, of course it is. And that often happens, doesn't it? Just think about an honest, hard worker in a workplace.

[14 : 17] Well, that tends to be somebody who is rather resented and disliked by the lazy workers because he shows them up, he shows what they're not doing. And obviously because of that, even godly, gracious living of Christian communities is often opposed, it's often persecuted.

It's not that that kind of witness has no power, it's because it does have power, it has power to expose people, to challenge people. But at the same time, Jesus is also clear that that genuine flavoursome seasoning of warm light from the gospel, when it's lived out in the flesh, it truly is attractive, it is winsome.

And it can, in the end, overcome even the most entrenched prejudice and perversity and evil. And so we're called, says Jesus, to shine.

To publicize gospel mercy to the world in our lives together as the church of Jesus Christ. Now we're called to do that not just because it's a good evangelistic tactic, of course not, but because it's the gracious fruit that is real, that shows that the gospel mercy of God has taken root in our lives, that it's changing us individually, that it's changing us as a community of God's people.

It shows that what we say and what we believe is genuine. Read James chapter 2 later on. He's very plain, isn't he, the apostle James? Faith that's real is visible.

[15 : 51] It's publicized by our works. The faith that feeds and clothes a brother in need, says James. The faith that visits orphans and widows in their affliction, that fulfills the royal law of loving our neighbor as ourself.

love. James is talking about that royal law of love, of course. Because the God who gave the law is the God of mercy and compassion and love.

Publicizing God's mercy was at the very heart of his law given to his people in the Old Testament. You know, the book of Leviticus is hardly ever spoken about today without scorn and contempt.

Oh, it's these isolated texts in the Old Testament that we can brush away and get rid of. Just listen to some words from Leviticus chapter 19. Don't bother looking them up. Straight after, by the way, those greatly reviled words in Leviticus chapter 18 about sexual purity.

Here's God's word to his people. When you reap the harvest of your land, don't reap to the end of your field, right up to the edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest, and neither shall you strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard.

[17:07] You shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner. I am the Lord your God. You shall not steal or deal falsely. You shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely and so profane the name of your Lord.

I am the Lord. You shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God.

I am the Lord. And you shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness you shall judge your neighbour.

Nor shall you go round as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbour. I am the Lord. And so on and so forth.

The book of Leviticus is full of gracious and merciful laws, commands to care for the widower and the fatherless and the sojourners, commands to be generous to those who have got less than you have, commands to be just and fair in all your business dealings and all your transactions.

[18:17] Why don't you think if our governments and our banks operated along the lines of Leviticus chapter 19, the world economy would be in a lot better place today? I think so. See, publicising God's mercy to the world was at the very heart of his law.

And, of course, publicising God's mercy to the world was at the very heart of the ministry of Jesus Christ, wasn't it? As he displayed in person the mercy of God's gracious law.

Just read on in Matthew chapter 5 from where we've read and you'll see what Jesus says about loving our neighbours, loving even our enemies as well, going the second mile even with them.

Read on in the Gospels of Jesus Christ to see exactly how his life matched perfectly with his lips. Think of how he pleaded even with his enemy, Judas, right to the very last.

Think of his words as he was hung upon that cross, beaten and spat upon and mocked and reviled. Father, forgive them. Publicising God's mercy was at the very heart of our Lord's ministry.

[19:39] And when we look into the early church and the rest of the New Testament, you find exactly the same thing. Constantly they too publicised gospel mercy. Acts chapter 2, as we studied some time ago, what were the believers doing?

They were sharing everything so that nobody among them was in need. In Acts chapter 6, as the church grew, they instituted and organised relief efforts so that the poor widows who had no state security would be cared for in Jerusalem.

Acts chapter 11, you find the Apostle Paul himself organising a relief mission from other parts of the ancient world back to help believers in Palestine who were suffering famine.

Just the same love of God's mercy from the Old Testament and in Jesus' ministry writ large all over the New Testament. Paul summarises it perhaps quite effectively in Galatians chapter 6 when he says this, so then, wherever we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone and especially to those who are of a household of faith.

You see? Of course we have special responsibilities to those in the church, those who are Christians because they're our family. They're our family forever and ever. But also, he says, we're to rejoice, to do good things to all.

[21 : 02] And that's the way it's been, friends, all the way through the history of the Christian church. And we must challenge those who are very hostile to Christianity, we must challenge them to be honest enough to acknowledge those facts.

There are many, many facts like that. It was the Christian church that helped to civilise the whole Roman Empire, that made it take an interest in welfare that it had absolutely no interest in before.

It was Christians who went out and took the babies in that had been left out exposed on the city's rubbish heaps because they were the wrong sex or the wrong colour of hair or whatever it was.

It was Christians who took babies like that in and started adopting them. It was Christians who invented the whole concept of orphanages to look after abandoned children and foundlings and so on.

It was the pervasive relief efforts of the Christian church in ancient Rome that embarrassed the whole empire to start taking notice of those that were in need. In the fourth century, the emperor Julian wrote to an official that Christianity was spreading rapidly throughout the empire precisely because of its high reputation for philanthropy, for helping people.

[22 : 21] It disturbs him greatly because it showed up the hollow callousness of their own paganism. It's disgraceful he wrote, quote, the impious Galileans, that's the Christians, the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well and all men see that our people lack aid from us.

That's the emperor Julian in the fourth century. The power of a community publicizing gospel mercy, both to bring great gladness to many but also at the same time to bring bitter resentment to others who are shown up by it.

Friends, that has been the story of Western history. It's the same story with the history of medicine. So many of the great medical and nursing advances have come through the influences of Christian people and the Christian church, devoted to sharing the mercy of Christ with those who are suffering.

Just one modern example, very notably, is the whole hospice movement, caring for the terminally ill and the dying. It is overwhelmingly through Christians that that whole movement has begun and has developed.

Dame Cicely Saunders in this country, pioneering that work. Christian people today still all over the world. Some of them I know personally, taking the care of terminally ill people and establishing hospice movements in all parts of the earth.

[23 : 51] It's driven, almost wholly, by Christian people and by Christian influence. Are ardent secularists at all interested in the care of the terminally ill?

No, they've got a much more simple solution. They're pushing the agenda of euthanasia. Think back to the 18th century and all the great social reforms that we now take so much for granted in this country.

All the improvements that came in the factories, all the legislation that banned children being put up chimneys and having terrible diseases to clean wealthy people's homes.

Think about the reforms that took place in mines. Think about penal reform and all sorts of other things all through history. Who were the people who pushed and drove these things? It was men like the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, a committed evangelical Christian.

It was the men and women of the Clapham sect. It was people like William Wilberforce and others who campaigned relentlessly for the abolition of slavery. And on and on and on we could stay here all afternoon giving examples of that.

[25 : 01] So much of what we take for granted today in our society in the West has been through the influence of the Christian church and Christian people seeking to publicize the mercy of God and so bring help to people's lives.

That's why it's such absolute folly of our secularist governments today that are trying incessantly to destroy and stamp out the very faith which was the cause of all of these things that we take for granted that our society is built on.

It's like soaring away at the trunk of a tree whose branches we're sitting on and depend upon for our stability. It's the power of a Christian community in action.

And that's true also on the local level in all kinds of much smaller ways. At a prayer meeting recently we were hearing we had a lovely letter from our brother Imran who's working in Pakistan and he was speaking about how they are going out into the villages and providing clean water and building schools and hospitals and providing help, mercy to poor and downtrodden people in the highlands of Pakistan.

And what's happening? People see that love and that mercy and they come to them and say, can I have a copy of this Bible that we see you reading that makes you do these things? don't underestimate ever the power of a truly Christian community.

[26 : 36] Our world, our society, our city needs to see the light of God's mercy. Our communities are so fractured, aren't they? By sectarianism, by ethnic rivalries, by the fallout from family breakups, from marriage troubles.

So many young people in our society, so confused, so disillusioned. Where are they going to find light? Where are they going to see health and wholesome human existence as it should be?

They're not going to find it across the road in borders among all the self-help books. But they should find it here in the Church of Jesus Christ. One historian said that the reason Christianity made such an impact in the Roman Empire was that it said, it offered, he said, a coherent culture that exhibited true and healthy humanity in a world of confusion and corruption.

Isn't that so desperately needed today? Not just in the Roman Empire, but in our society, in Britain today, in the West. And that's what we are for, friends, as the Church of Jesus Christ. We are to be a pillar and buttress of that truth of God in our world.

We are to be what we are in Jesus Christ. A community that points to where we're going, to a truly redeemed and renewed humanity for a recreated world.

[28 : 04] That's what we're here for, to point the way. See, the Church, the Church of Jesus Christ is like a recovery ward. A recovery ward of people of all kinds who are being restored to true humanity in the image of Jesus our Lord.

We're not any better than any other people outside in the street or anywhere else. We're just as sick as they are in our hearts deep down. But the difference is, we have found the great physician.

And he's enrolled us in his recovery program. And he's promised us full restoration at last. And that's what we want to share, isn't it? Not as an evangelistic tactic.

Nothing as cynical as that, but surely as the natural desire of our hearts to share good news that we rejoice in. To share the mercy of the gospel of Jesus that we have discovered.

But of course, of course, such a thing will speak powerfully to those who know deep down in their hearts, as every human being does, that they are created for something far more, for something far better than the fractured world that we live in and that we experience.

[29 : 23] It will speak powerfully to them and show them the very thing that they've always known they ought to be looking for. I think I've mentioned to you before about an American evangelist called Voddy Baikum.

Great, huge, enormous black man who you could imagine playing American football very effectively.

I heard him at the conference at Parkside Church, Alistair Begg's church. And he told us, as part of the question and answer session, something of his story. He was brought up in West Coast America, in California, by a single mother who was a way out hippie who turned to Buddhism and all kinds of things.

His whole upbringing was chaotic and confused. But the way that he came to find the truth that is in Jesus is that somehow he stumbled into the company of a Christian family.

They opened their home to him. He began to experience and see in their family life and in their values and in the way that they lived, something of stability and of beauty and of reality and of strength and of truth.

[30 : 32] And that was the road that led him to the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm sure we've experienced situations that are similar.

I can recall my own childhood and remember a student who came around our family when I was just a very young child. And there was a time when they must have been there for Sunday lunch or something like that and either myself or my sister had been misbehaving.

Must have been my sister because I didn't tend to very often. But whichever one of us it was got a bit of a good scalping and much deserved it was too.

But at the sight of that this young student burst into tears and began crying. I remember my mother telling me she was very worried about it. I thought, oh my goodness, she's terribly offended at me smacking the children.

What she said was, I long to have parents who cared enough for me to do that to me.

[31 : 37] What she was seeing was an experience of genuine Christian love and discipline and care. Something she'd never seen and never known.

Don't underestimate the power of genuine Christian community to publicize the love, the mercy, the care of our God and to show that to a world that is seeking but doesn't know what it's looking for.

So what can we do as Christian churches? Well, of course, it depends where we are and what our community's needs are and what we have and what we can do.

But surely the answer is there are things we can do, all kinds of things. All of us can open our homes just like that. It's very easy to a lonely person, to somebody who's never known that before.

But surely as a fellowship, as a congregation of God's people, there are all kinds of other things that we can be doing and thinking about to publicize God's mercy to the world. Things to help marriages which are in so much crisis in our world.

[32 : 47] People in a terrible mess with addiction who need help on the road to restoration and recovery. People who are struggling with family issues and children, all kinds of things.

There are endless ways, aren't there, where health can be shared with the people around about us. And we're all, as a congregation, called to publicize the gospel's mercy.

Does that seem an impossible challenge for us? Well, of course it is a real challenge and on our own it would be impossible. But listen, the God who has called us to this is the God who has put the spirit of his son into our hearts.

The spirit of perfect, vibrant, merciful, winsome, true humanity. He's in our hearts. He's in the midst of our church. He's shed the light of his love and his mercy in our hearts by his Holy Spirit so that we are able to shine that light out to others.

That's why he's come into our lives. Of course it's a challenge to us as a church. Isn't it a marvelous privilege to be given that task, to share with the world?

[34 : 03] And what an encouragement as we struggle to live together as churches that publicize gospel mercy to the world. What an encouragement.

Look again at verse 16 of Matthew chapter 5. Isn't that something worth living for?

That they might see not only our individual lives, but that people might look at our corporate life here as a congregation, as St. George's Tron Church. That they might look to us and give glory to our Father in heaven because they see in us evidences of his mercy.

That's a great, great calling for us to aspire to together, isn't it? So let's be thinking constantly, together, about how we can publicize the gospel's mercy to our communities, to our city.

That's part of our calling, to be fruitful partners in the glorious mission of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's essential if we're to live the whole of our life for the cause of Jesus.

[35 : 23] So as we come to the end of this series about partnership in gospel mission, let's just remind ourselves quickly of the various aspects of that as we work together to make a truly fruitful partnership here.

First, remember, we need to know why it is that we have this mission at all. We read it in 1 Timothy 2, verse 5, because there is only one God, and there is only one way to that God through the one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.

And this God desires, doesn't he, that all people should be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. And therefore, he says that we, as the church, must first of all, prioritize a gospel mindset.

So that the mission of Christ is the driver in all that we do. That the mission of Christ is the decider in every decision that we make together as a congregation. And then we're called, aren't we, to pray for the gospel means.

Reminding ourselves that only God can open the eyes of the blind. And so we must pray for the world, for those who need to hear the gospel. And pray for the workers, for those who will proclaim the gospel. And pray for the word of God itself as it goes out in every form, that it will run freely and be glorified in the lives of others.

[36 : 38] And then having prayed for the workers, Jesus says also, we're to pay for the workers. We're to provide for the gospel mission. Rejoicing, to be generous, so that we can ensure that the work of Christ can be done without hindrance.

That's a privilege that God grants to every one of us who has a pocket. And then we're all also to have a role in proclaiming the gospel message, he says.

Whether ours is a special role, called and set apart as an evangelist or preacher-teacher. Or just through the opportunities that every one of us has in our everyday lives to speak a word in season for the Lord Jesus.

And in the opportunities we have, week by week, together as a fellowship, gathering, as we proclaim the gospel message. And then also we're called to personify that gospel message in our individual lives, in the winsome Christian conduct of lives that radiate the fragrance of the Lord Jesus.

Wherever we go, we take his blessing with us. And then finally, as we've been thinking today, as a community, together, as a corporate body to publicize the gospel's mercy to our community, to our city, to the world.

[37 : 54] That's what it means to be part of a truly fruitful partnership of gospel mission. It's pretty comprehensive, isn't it?

Pretty all-encompassing, not much is left out. Of course it must be. If we're to live the whole of our lives for the cause of Jesus Christ.

Can't do that, can we? Unless his grace and his mercy and his mission touches every single part of our life, as individuals and together. But if we really know and understand the wonder of what is ours in Jesus Christ, why on earth would we ever want to live any other way?

Listen again to Peter. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

Publicize the gospel's mercy to the world. Let's pray. Lord, what a great calling, what a great privilege, that you should trust us to go out into the world and let people listen to us and look at us and form from that their opinion of you.

[39 : 43] Help us, we pray, to paint in our lives, in all that we are and all that we see, such a glorious and attractive and winsome picture of Christ our Saviour, that truly people would look at us and listen to us and give glory to our Father who is in heaven.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.