

Our Father

OT Reading: Psalm 8

Gospel: Matt 6:7-13

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.

...

For thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Martin Luther once called The Lord's Prayer "the greatest martyr, for everyone tortures and abuses it". What he meant was the way in which we, day by day rattle it off mechanically, and often thoughtlessly. However, as the old Latin proverb tells us "*abusus non tolit usum*", or "abuse does not negate proper use".

So, in an effort to rightly use the prayer which many of us learned as children and have said so often that it has become a part of us, we will be spending the next few weeks taking a closer look at what we are actually saying when we use the prayer which Jesus gave us.

The prayer begins by telling us not only who God is, but also who we are: Take the first two words, "Our Father", "Notre Père", "Отче наш", (Oht-che nah-sh) "我们的父亲"(Wǒmen de fùqīn). These words are spoken all over the world, every second of the day. The first of them, "our", tells us that we are all related before God. We are all one. When we look at today's racial, creedal and nationalistic divisions, "our" reminds us of the sin of putting asunder that which God himself has joined together. "Our" tells us that the answer to Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper"? is "No, you are your brother's brother".

And so to the second word, "Father". God is rarely referred to as Father in the Hebrew Bible, and then usually as a metaphor, rather than direct address. That changed with the incarnation, when God was revealed as the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). Jesus himself spoke of God as "*Abba*", the Aramaic familial name, and invited us to do the same. In doing so, Jesus' intention was in no way to remove God's majesty and power. He was simply making that majesty and power more approachable.

Of course we know that God is not a father in the human sense, any more than she is a mother. But, as one pastor has said, "Anthropomorphism is indispensable to the believer; it is dangerous only to the literalist" (William Sloane Coffin). The words that follow, "in heaven" indicate that God is beyond human characteristics, eternal and transcendent. But God is also immanent and active within his creation, a powerful presence within each of us, experienced as

love. So, as Jesus calls God “*Abba*”, he also invites us to speak of God in personal terms.

“Hallowed be thy name”. This is derived from the Greek word *Hagios*, which is usually translated as holy, but may also mean different, or separate. A church or an altar is *hagios* because it is distinct from ordinary buildings or tables. God’s name is separate from other names just as his nature is above and beyond all others.

In Biblical times, a person’s name was taken as more than something by which a person is called. It also described one’s nature or character. The name Adam means earth, from which he was made, Isaac means laughter, from Abraham and Sarah’s laugh when told of his upcoming birth. Jacob means supplanter, or the one who stole his brother’s birthright.

Even today, some names arouse various emotions or reactions because of what they represent: Churchill, Hitler, Mother Teresa. So it is with the name of God. The Jews had different words for God, *Elohim* and *Adonai*, meaning “Lord”, but these were descriptions, rather than names. When Moses asked God for his name, the answer was, “I AM WHO I AM ... tell [the Israelites] I AM has sent you” (Exodus 3:14). God’s actual name was so special and so holy that his people didn’t utter it for fear of demeaning or using it incorrectly. Instead they honoured and treasured it.

Throughout his life, ministry and death, Jesus showed us how to honour God, and to hallow his name. When we pray, “hallowed be thy name” we are seeking to live as he did, to avoid demeaning his name by our words and actions. Of course, we often fail, fiddling our tax returns, gossiping, quarrelling with neighbours or turning our backs on the poor and the needy. When we do so, we are effectively demeaning the good name of God, who loves us as a father, and welcomes us when we return, as did the father of the prodigal son.

If you pay careful attention to the prayer, you will also note that it is not we who do the hallowing, but God who does it through us. God’s name then, is not something we possess, but an action of God that transforms our lives by giving us new destinies, new identities, new names. It is noteworthy that significant moments such as baptism, confirmation or marriage may result in a person being given a new name. In biblical times an encounter with God might result in such a name change, as Abram became Abraham, meaning father of a multitude, Jacob

became Israel, the one who wrestles with God, and Simon became Peter, the rock.

The words “Hallowed be thy name” remind us that our first words to God should be praise of his holiness, the very essence of God that fills our lives. Our prayer today also ends with praise: “For thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, forever and ever”. These words are not thought to be part of the original text in Matthew or Luke and in some services they are omitted. But they are important. They are derived from the farewell prayer of David, “Thine O Lord is the greatness, and the power, and the glory and the victory, and the majesty ... thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all” (1 Chronicles 29:11).

Kingdom, power, glory – big words, dangerous words. Tyrants and dictators build kingdoms and defend them with walls and armies. Threats to worldly power are met with violence, tear gas and rubber bullets. Glory is sought with legacies, statues and edifices.

Not so with our Father in heaven, whom David’s prayer lauds as Lord over all. God the Father, whose kingdom encompasses time and space, whose power upholds all of creation and whose glory lasts forever; God the Son, who willingly gave up his greatness, power and splendour to live in poverty among us, and who prays for us all to be one, as He and the Father are one; God the Spirit, who dwells within each one of us, so enabling us to become new men and women as participants in his heavenly kingdom, his power and his glory, forever and ever. **Amen**

Martha Taft Golden
Benefice service during
corona virus lock-down
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