

## **The Lord's Prayer: 'Hallowed be your name'**

*Holmbury St Mary and Wotton, June 2020*

It was always going to be one of the most extraordinary weekends of my life, and it certainly didn't disappoint. Arriving at Sandringham on a Saturday evening in January 2017; being introduced to Prince Philip and some of the guests, before being ushered into the presence of Her Majesty, who was playing a game of patience; climbing into a Landrover an hour later, and being driven by the Queen to a lodge in the Sandringham grounds, where Prince Philip was preparing a barbeque; preaching to the Royal Family the next morning, before going to visit the Queen's stables in the afternoon and admiring the mighty Estimate, who won the Gold Cup at Ascot; this was a weekend like no other.

And there was a moment on the Sunday evening that I'll never forget. Most of the guests had returned home; supper for four had been served; and the Queen had invited me to sit beside her on the sofa, where we looked through some of her photo albums together – pictures of royal trips and family holidays and events that will go down in history. She even invited me to fetch one of *my* photo albums, which I happened to have with me.

By now I was feeling quite relaxed, conversation was flowing freely, and I'd almost forgotten how extraordinary this all was – that is, until a moment when Her Majesty looked up from the photo album, and I caught her profile, and a thought suddenly flashed through my mind – 'It's the Queen!' From my earliest childhood that face had adorned every coin I'd ever spent, every bank note, every postage stamp; so that catching that profile was an awesome thing. And that's despite the friendly, homely surroundings of a sofa, an open fire, a photo album and Willow, the last of the Queen's corgis, lying at my feet.

'Our Father': it's a friendly, homely start to the prayer that Jesus taught us: not 'Sovereign Lord', not 'Almighty God', not 'Great Ruler of the Universe', but 'Our Father'. Of course human fathers are a very mixed bag: they range from the amazing and admirable to the absent and abusive; but there's no question about the kind of father that Jesus was envisaging here: a God who is Love, always delighting to hear from us, to meet with us, to strengthen us and cheer us on our way.

But in case we get too comfortable as we sit beside our Father on the sofa, the open fire before us, and a corgi at our feet, Jesus' prayer continues (in its more modern translation), 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name'. It's a shock, perhaps, taking us from the intimate to the majestic in just the blink of an eye. And yet we need those moments, you and I – that sense of God's majesty - if we're not going to become a little *too* relaxed in the presence of the King of Kings. Lose the intimacy of 'Our Father', and our faith becomes a burden, an endless attempt to curry the favour of a distant deity. But lose the majesty of 'Hallowed be your name', and our faith becomes a security blanket, a warm and fuzzy feeling where God's my best mate, and where all worship and reverence and Christian service and sacrificial obedience go out the window.

So what exactly does it mean, 'Hallowed be your name'?

Well, the idea of a 'name', of course, is a fairly straight-forward one - indeed the question, 'What's your name?' is commonplace. My response to that question - Andrew John Watson - is not perhaps as exciting a name as some: my parents had already had two sons before I came along, and used up the more interesting names on them. But having now shared with my wife in choosing the names of four children (and that's not to mention a myriad of kittens, puppies, guinea pigs and rabbits), I know that this thing isn't as easy as it looks. Do we choose family names, perhaps, Biblical names, names with a special meaning, names that just sound good? It's all quite complicated, and once the decision is made we breathe a sigh of relief.

So here I am, and my name is Andrew. It literally means 'manly', which sounds all right to me, and its Biblical connections with Andrew the apostle - the fisherman-turned-evangelist - are ones that I treasure. But imagine if my name were to be connected with a scandal of some kind; imagine if I found myself on the front page of the newspapers accused, say, of putting my hand in the St John's or St. Mary's collection plate, a crime of which I was completely innocent. Well, my instinct then would be, quote, to 'clear my name' - and notice the shift in meaning that has taken place here. My name in this case is no longer 'Andrew John Watson'. It is rather my reputation, my character, my honour, the person that I really am.

And the same is true in the phrase 'Hallowed be your name': that we're talking here about God's reputation, His character and honour, the person He really is. You may remember that story in Exodus chapter 3 where Moses first received his commission as he stood beside a burning bush - a calling to lead God's people out of their slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land - and where he received too the name of God, the mysterious 'I am who I am' or 'Jehovah', which is generally translated LORD in capital letters in our English Bibles. And here Jehovah isn't simply a name to be inserted into a passport application. No, the 'name of God' is His very essence, so that 'Hallowed be your name' - or literally, 'May your name be made holy' - has to do with God's character and reputation, and how He is honoured or not in the world He has made.

Yet here we hit on something of a snag. Because the truth is that God's name is *already* holy - in the book of Exodus it's the holiest thing that there is, so that not taking it in vain comes in as number three in the Ten Commandments. No other gods, no idols, no taking of God's name in vain. Praying 'May your name be made holy', then, is a little like praying 'may the wood become solid' or 'may the fire become hot'. The wood's already solid, the fire's already hot, so why pray the prayer?

And here perhaps is the answer - that whenever we pray the prayer 'Hallowed be your name' (or 'Hallowed be thy name' if you prefer the traditional version) we are asking God so to work in our lives and in the world around us that His name might be acknowledged and honoured, rather than simply being ignored or used as a swear word. It's a dangerous prayer to pray, of course, because it's often through difficult

circumstances that people return to God – crises like the one we’re going through right now. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t pray it.

So here’s a **call to action** from these opening words of the Lord’s Prayer: that we are called to take a long, hard look at ourselves, and ask ourselves the question: Is the name of God hallowed in the way I live my life? That’s not just a question about our speech and whether or not we joke about God or swear or blaspheme, though that’s certainly a part of it. It’s also a question of our lifestyle decisions, our relationships, the way we spend our time and talents and money. And maybe this strange season, in which so much of our normal life is on hold, is a good opportunity to reflect more deeply on our calling to hallow God’s name in our lives.

A call to action; but there’s also here a **call to prayer**: to take a long, hard look at the world around us, and ask ourselves the question, ‘What would that world look like if everyone were to hallow God’s name? 24% of the nation, we’re told in the latest survey, have been tuning into our online services over the past few months, including 35% of young people. 2 million men and women say that they’ve started praying since Covid struck. And that’s not to welcome the appalling devastation that this pandemic has wrought on many people’s lives; but it is to pray that some good might come out of that devastation, as our hearts as a nation return to the Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy.

And so to this morning. And as we reflect on the scriptures together, it’s almost as though we’re sitting beside God our Creator and looking together at *His* photo album: family pictures, events that have gone down in history; even the ultimate royal trip, where God’s Son left the glories of heaven so as to live and love and die and rise again on behalf of us, His subjects.

And just sometimes that moment comes – the moment when God metaphorically looks up from the album, and when we metaphorically catch his profile and a thought suddenly flashes through our minds – ‘It’s God!’ It may happen when we sing a familiar hymn, or in the preaching, or at the most unexpected times and places. But let’s pray for more of those holy moments, those flashes of recognition, of revelation. Because the very best way for our lives and our communities to be transformed, is daily to pray and to live the prayer that Jesus taught us:

*‘Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name’.*