

The Lord's Prayer

The Church of England Pilgrim Course is a course for the Christian Journey. It has been adopted by our parish as a response to those who attended the Alpha Course and who expressed the need to learn about the Christian faith at a deeper level. It is an 'innovative and inspiring programme for enquirers and new Christians. It approaches the great issues of faith not through persuasion, but participation in a pattern of contemplation and discussion in the company of a small group of fellow travellers'.

The first programme undertaken looked at the question: 'How do Christians know and worship God'? The question was addressed by taking a fresh look at the Lord's Prayer. Many of us have been reciting this prayer from early childhood without giving its contents much thought. It was therefore not only stimulating but also exciting to take a fresh look at it and I share with you here, as I have with the Pilgrim group, some of my own reflections.

The first thing to be said about the Lord's Prayer (*Matthew 6:9-13, Luke 11:1-4*), is that it is authenticated by scholars as coming directly from the mouth of the historical Jesus. The opening, 'Our Father' echoes Old Testament Jewish prayers that would have been so familiar to Jesus. It is the prayer of God's family and is made intimate and confidential by Jesus who calls God by the familiar 'Abba'. So here we are in a family relationship with God. 'Who art in heaven' affirms God's home. However, it is also our home. It is where we belong in an intimate relationship of love and trust in the here and now. 'Hallowed be Thy name' has its roots again in the Old Testament where God is regarded as beautiful, powerful and holy. So we stand in His presence in awe and reverence and approach Him in humility. 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', is a reflection of the coming of God's kingdom that was so central to Jesus' teaching. Much has been argued by scholars about the Kingdom of God and Rowan Williams reflects that perhaps we should think of the kingdom not as a specific place or system but just as the state of affairs when God is in charge. Essentially, to let the world be transparent to God as king so that His will and purpose may show the world the depth of His love that is at the root of all things. Indeed, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God can come in unexpected ways and not as a great clap of thunder at the end of time, but rather can come secretly into our midst. For example, in odd moments when people go the extra mile or take extra risks. So here we pray to let the world show God, to let Him come through. 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' echoes of Hebrew poetry and asks that we respond to God's beauty as reflected in the planets and by all creation. We pray to be brought into tune with the whole universe.

Now follows three petitions, the first of which is 'Give us this day our daily bread'. There have been masses of critical scholarship done on this phrase as to its exact meaning. However, most scholars agree that 'daily' refers to the stuff that we need to survive. The early Church Fathers favoured the bread we want for tomorrow. Perhaps even, give us the bread we shall eat in the Kingdom of God. Essentially, it is a foretasting of that great banquet and celebration where the universe is drawn together by Jesus into the presence of His Father. For many Christians this is a link to Holy Communion. On one level we can understand this phrase as the bread for today or the food to keep us going. On the other hand, it is a foretaste of the bread of heaven. It is a foretaste of enjoying the presence of Jesus in heaven at His table or as the Gospels put it, at His 'banquet'. So there would seem to be diverse but interconnected meanings and layers of interpretation of this phrase. Having said this, what is it that we actually do need to keep us going? Indeed, according to Jesus we cannot live by bread alone but rather by a hope for tomorrow that God supplies in His heavenly bread.

The second petition prays, 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. Perhaps this is the hardest bit of the Lord's prayer to pray because with forgiveness comes the willingness to change. Indeed, it takes a lot of nerve to come before

God and ask for forgiveness because I have forgiven someone else. However, perhaps it is saying that it is through God's forgiveness of us that we learn to forgive others. There is a sense in which in our capacity to forgive we show that we ourselves have been forgiven. So it is a bit of a vicious circle of if I do not forgive I cannot be forgiven. If I cannot hear the word of forgiveness and let it change me then I shall not be able to be free to forgive. The early Church Father Tertullian said that forgiveness is a bit like teaching a child to do something. The parent does it carefully a few times, then steps back and says now you show me. In like manner, God forgives us and then steps back and says now you show me how to forgive.

The third petition, 'Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil', should perhaps be viewed within the context of Jesus' own time. He often taught on the theme that a great time of trial was coming. We could be coming to a time when we will have to decide how God matters to us. We really will have to put our lives on the line. So here we pray that when the time of trial comes, when things get really tough, we will have the resource to meet it. The word 'temptation' tends to mean for us the impulse to sin but it means more when put into its original context. It is asking God not to push us into crisis until He has given us what we need to face it. Again, this is connected to the petition to 'deliver us from evil', to set us free from fear, sin and the selfish habits that keep us prisoner and make us unable to face crisis. In the original context, it most likely meant 'save us from the evil one' because it is in the time of crisis that the devil is really making hay with us. Whether or not we believe in a personal devil, the idea that the principle or the power of evil can come in to make the most of our weakness and fear can still make sense today.

The doxology, 'for Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever, Amen', is a fitting conclusion to the prayer because it summarises the previous petitions and brings focus back to honouring and glorifying God. It recalls the first three petitions, the glorification of God's name as Father, the coming of His reign and power of His saving will.

For centuries, the Lord's Prayer has been central to the Christian Church essentially because it is a clear example of Jesus' instruction to us. In order for the prayer to remain thus, a deeper understanding of the contextual basis of these words and insight into their meaning is important. From the focus on God's honour, kingdom and will to the focus on our present, past and future needs, the Lord's Prayer is an all encompassing prayer that remains infinitely relevant for today's praying Christians.

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