

The Lord's Prayer

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name*



In the ancient world beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition, belief in many gods was usual. The task of religion was to keep the gods happy in order to ensure life ran smoothly. Judaism, however, held that there was but one sovereign God, creator and redeemer – the Holy One of Israel. Life under God was a matter of worship, of obedience to God's law and of commitment to truth and justice.

For Jesus this is a given. But he extends things by putting the concept of Father at the centre of his teaching about the nature and character of God. This brings to the fore the importance of coming into a trusting and intimate relationship with a faithful and loving God. (Read Matthew 6:25-33 and 7:7-11). In speaking to God, Jesus used the word 'Abba', an Aramaic word that denotes intimacy – a little like the word 'daddy' (Mark 14:36).

At the same time, to 'hallow' a name is to declare the one who bears that name as holy. So to hallow God's name is to honour him. We do that by declaring that he is our God and by living rightly and obediently before him. When God promises to act to restore his people and to bring them back into relationship with him by renewing their hearts and lives, he does so to establish the honour of his name among the nations. (Read Ezekiel 36:22-36).

Notice that Jesus' prayer emphasises the corporate nature of faith. God is *our* Father. He is known and worshipped in the community. His name is honoured by the quality of the relationships between believers and by how the Church witnesses to his mercy, love and holiness in the world.

*Your kingdom come, your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.*

To hallow God's name, as we have seen, is to honour him by living in a right relation with him as 'Father' and in obedience to his will.

This is both a personal commitment and an aspiration that all the earth might share in the worship of God and enjoy his loving reign. To express this, the second petition of the Lord's Prayer picks up the Hebrew image of God as King and Jesus' own extensive use of the language and imagery of the kingdom of God/heaven.

Jesus' understanding of the kingdom, expressed through his words and deeds, is wide-ranging. It involves encountering the God who seeks out the lost and generously provides for those who call upon him. It brings forgiveness, healing and power to confront evil. It expresses God's loving kindness, especially towards the poor, the weak, and the outcast. It entails the transformation of human hearts, the establishing of community and the renewing of society. It is something to be both received as a gift and actively pursued by mirroring God's nature and work. (See Matthew 4:23-5:12; 13:24-50; 18:23-35; 20:1-16; 22:1-10; Mark 3:21-27; 10:13-27; Luke 17:20-21; John 3:1-5).

To pray for the coming of God's kingdom is to celebrate the presence of his reign in the person of Jesus and those who belong to him; to express the desire to discover and obey his will for our own lives; to imagine and want to co-operate with God in establishing the kind of world he wants everyone to enjoy; and to look forward to the time when the goodness, grace and glory of God will bring everything to perfection.

Give us this day our daily bread

With this bidding The Lord's Prayer builds a bridge between the coming kingdom of God and our everyday lives, and between our material and our spiritual needs. Bread is a staple of life and a metaphor for the things of the Spirit.

In passages that follow the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about their physical needs, what they should eat or what they should wear (6:25-32), but to trust God who will surely provide such things for those who ask in faith (7:7-11). He also says that they should strive not for material things but for the kingdom of God (6:33), a temptation he had himself resisted in the wilderness by recalling the biblical maxim, "one does not live by

bread alone” (4:1-4 cf. Deut 8:3). The scripture goes on, “but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”, a reminder that Jesus himself is the “bread of life” (John 6:35-51) and the word of God (John 1), in whom all our hungers are satisfied. One of the foremost ways in which God provides and feeds is through the word and sacrament of the Eucharist, to which the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand points (Mark 6:30-44; John 6:1-14).

The word translated “daily” can mean ‘day by day’ or ‘enough for today’. We should pray for what we need each day, but (like the Israelites in the wilderness – Read Exodus 16) not seek more than we need. Some commentators understand the petition to be a prayer that God might ‘give us today, the bread of tomorrow’ – that is, it is a prayer for the arrival of God’s kingdom when all will be fed at the heavenly banquet (see Luke 14:15; 22:28-30; Revelation 19:9).

*Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.*

In the traditional wording of The Lord’s Prayer we pray, “forgive us our *trespasses*”. This carries the idea of going somewhere, or doing something, that we shouldn’t have – we have crossed the line. In Luke’s version of the prayer (11:1-4) we find the familiar word ‘sin’, which essentially means ‘missing the mark’ - in Paul’s language, we all “fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). In Matthew (6:9-13), the word used means ‘debt’ - we owe God our allegiance and obedience.

Whatever vocabulary is used, it is a fundamental truth of our human condition that, in thought and deed, we have been less than the person we ought to have been, a situation from which only God can rescue us (See Romans 7:15-25) because God alone can forgive sins (Mark 2:7). For Paul, sin is not so much a catalogue of wrong actions, it is a defining condition that alienates us from God, but from which Christ brings release and reconciliation (Romans 5:8-19).

In Matthew, Jesus emphasises the relationship between the giving and receiving of forgiveness: those who do not forgive others, will not receive God’s forgiveness (6:14,15); those who have been forgiven by God are bound to forgive others (Read Jesus’ parable in

Matthew 18:25-35. Also the story of the woman with the ointment in Luke 7:36-50). Forgiveness is a founding principle and essential element of the Church's common life (See Matthew 5:23,24 and 18:21,22; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13) and of its message to the world (Luke 24:45-48; John 20:23).

*Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil*

The biblical word 'temptation' is closely associated with the concept of testing. God tests Abraham with the instruction to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1ff). Jesus is tested by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) in order to prove his faithfulness as God's Son. Such an understanding avoids the suggestion, ruled out in James 1:13, that God might lure us into sin. Such testing that God provides, or allows, serves to prove our character and strengthen our faith (see 1 Peter 1:6-7). According to Paul, God promises to "provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10:13). We are, of course, often tempted by the things of this world, feeding on our inner desires and weaknesses. In this way we might be led into doing something that is unwholesome, unhealthy or just plain wrong. In praying not to be led into temptation, we are seeking God's help to avoid that which is harmful and which might cause us to fall away from God and the way of health and holiness he wishes us to walk in.

To be delivered from evil can mean one of two things: to be released from the grip and power of "the Evil One", that is the Devil, or to be protected from the impersonal forces of wickedness and wrong that in a fallen world, inhabit the heart of human beings, societies and nations. In biblical parlance such "evil" is the root cause of sin and suffering, but it is being overcome through the ministry of Jesus (See Mark 1:21-42 and 3:20-27). It is ultimately against such "principalities and powers" that believers contend, drawing on the power and protection of Christ (Ephesians 6:10-17).