

## The Lord's Prayer: Address 1: *Our Father ... Hallowed be your Name*

Kenneth Bailey, one of the more interesting writers on the New Testament and its background, not least because he spent 40 years living and teaching in the Middle East, tells a story from the Latvian Church, shortly after fall of Soviet Union. He was speaking with young adults who had grown up entirely under the communist regime, and he asked how they came to faith... no churches, no secret bibles, no saintly grandparents to tell the stories; they had a totally atheistic upbringing... *except*, said one:

*At funerals we were allowed to recite the Lord's Prayer. As a young child I heard those strange words and had no idea who we were talking to, what the words meant, where they came from or why we were reciting them. When freedom came at last, I had the opportunity to search for their meaning. When you are in total darkness, the tiniest point of light is very bright. For me the Lord's Prayer was that point of light. By the time I found its meaning I was a Christian.*

That story can take us back much closer than most of us will experience to life in the early church. Take a snapshot even from the 4<sup>th</sup> century:

St Cyril of Jerusalem gave a series of addresses in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, during Lent, to instruct those to be baptised at Easter in the teachings of the church and the sacraments.

The very last of these was on the Lord's Prayer. And we find that the Lord's Prayer was to be said just before communion, just as we do, but only by those taking communion, i.e., those who had been baptised. So those being newly baptised at Easter would join in praying the Lord's Prayer for the very first time at communion at their baptism service.

That is the importance the early church attached to it: it was known as the prayer of believers. It was a privilege to recite it; it wasn't something shared with the general public. There was a real reverence ascribed to the prayer, and I wonder how much of that we are really in touch with today.

In the Liturgy, the priest can introduce the Lord's Prayer with the words, "we are *bold* to say...", reflecting the Eastern Orthodox tradition (inevitably much longer), "*Make us worthy, O Lord, that we joyously and without presumption may make bold to invoke Thee, the heavenly God, as Father, and to say: Our Father...*"

But how 'bold' do we feel? Should we seek to rediscover, or at least make plain, that implied reverence? And can we feel our way back into the meaning of the words that Jesus himself may have used? In that respect we are faced with an immediate dilemma over the words themselves: do we use the version in Matthew or Luke? (see wee crib-sheet attached).

Scholars agree Luke has the oldest form in respect of *length*, whereas Matthew's is more original in respect of *wording*. [so you'll see 'debts' and 'debtors' – that's one up for the C of S!] But Matthew's has been expanded and embellished, which is typical of what happens in liturgical prayers – and his form of the prayer would be used in a Jewish Christian community with a well established liturgy, where such embellishment would be quite normal; whereas Luke's form would be used in a Gentile community, probably learning much about prayer and liturgy anew, with a much more tentative approach. In that context it would be much more scary to think about taking words *away* from so precious a prayer, than it would be to *add to* it in Matthew's community, which was used to doing just that.

In Luke, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, as John had taught his disciples. That was customary in religious groups at the time, so the request is not surprising, a unifying bond among the disciples with Jesus himself in prayer. His response was immediately surprising, using that word *Abba*, 'Father', the words used within the family. It was highly unusual to address God like this; not unique, but very unusual.

If that was how he experienced God in his own prayer, then in this prayer he is saying to his disciples, you too can share this relationship. Just as in John's Gospel (ch 17), when he prays that they may be one, even as he and the Father are one, he is saying that the closeness of the Father-Son relationship is extended to them through him.

And we know how important that was to Paul, in Galatians: 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba, Father!', and in Romans, 'When we cry 'Abba Father, it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God'.

More than that, Jesus forbade the disciples from using the address *Abba, Father* as a courtesy title for anyone in normal speech, (*Do not call anyone...*) but to reserve it for God alone, their one heavenly Father.

In the Old Testament, when God is spoken of as Father it is generally as the father of Israel, of the nation, who delivered and rescued his people by a mighty hand, though in the Prophets the mercy, tenderness and faithfulness of the Father is evident; but for Jesus' understanding of the Father we have to turn to the parable of the Prodigal Son and waiting father, for here he takes the heart of his prayer – the prayer offered to us his followers – straight to *God's heart*, to their loving Father, by using that familial address, *Abba*.

We often speak of *Abba* being the child's address, 'Daddy'. Ken Bailey also tells a story about teaching a group of Lebanese women about the Lord's Prayer and the significance of the Aramaic *Abba* in ancient times. The women were clearly restless and he asked why. One woman shyly informed him: 'we know this, it is the first word we teach our infants.' Even though their own mother tongue was Arabic, they had preserved this Aramaic word as something precious for their children.

Yes, *Abba* reflects a childlike quality, and if we do not become as little children, Jesus says, we will not enter the Kingdom of heaven. But if we leave it there, we are in danger of missing something vital. For what Jesus says about the Father-Son relationship is much, much more than the sentiment of a modern 'take' on that child-like status. Jesus speaks as the 'Son'.

The *Son* speaks boldly and directly of what is revealed to him by the Father; of what he sees and hears, of and through the Father. It was the privilege of being a son that one should be perceived by others not only to be *like* one's father, but to grow to become *as* the father. But with Jesus it is even more than that, for he speaks of being one with the Father and having come from the Father – in other words, already having that status of equality as the one through whom the Father is revealed to the world.

So when in prayer he speaks freely with God as *Abba*, he is *one* with God and he extends this depth of relationship to his disciples in offering them a *comm-unity* prayer that address God simply as *Father*, or *Dear Father* as the familial *Abba* might be understood.

As he does so, he authorises them to pray as he prays, he empowers them in their role of God's children, God's *heirs*, taking upon themselves the responsibilities of the Son. They share his ministry, they share his mission, they share his journey, even though it lead to the cross.

For such a journey, they *need* to have a child-like trust in their heavenly Father, or they would never take it on. No wonder the prayer was not bandied about in the way that it has become a commonplace today.

Our Father... *Our* Father... our *Father*... *in heaven*... *Hallowed* be your name ...  
A very brief rider about God's hallowed name...

The daily Jewish blessings of the Kaddish prayer begin: *'Exalted and hallowed be his great name, in the world which he created according to his will. May he let his kingdom rule in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, speedily and soon. And to this, say: Amen.'*

These prayers probably go back to the time of Jesus. They express that longing which people held for the coming of the Holy One to rule over the land with justice and mercy; a longing for the coming of the kingdom.

What is it to 'hallow' the name of the Holy One – the One who cannot even be named, for God's name is too holy to utter? What is it to make or keep God's name holy, 'set apart' from common use and revered in a special way only for holy and sanctified purpose?

One might come from the other end and ask, 'How often do we hear, "Oh God!" or, "Oh my Gawd!"...?' - does that matter to you? In other words, what does it mean to *profane* the name of God? So we might say, what is 'holy' in the title we ascribe to 'God' (this God who cannot be 'named') is the *opposite* of what we believe denies or even defiles that sense of holiness. And that's probably easier for us to begin to get to grips with.

The prophets and Jesus himself were clear enough what that means *on earth* – it is when the poor are crushed and the widows and orphans ignored or abused; it is as much about injustice as it is about what we say about God... and this is perhaps why Matthew adds the extra clause 'Your will be done on earth as in heaven', to make sure we take this to heart. He wants us to be clear about that very Jewish longing for the final consummation, when God's name will *cease* to be profaned, but at last all that God's goodness and mercy stand for will be glorified and God's reign, his *kingdom*, revealed fully on earth in our lives. 'Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God' is Micah's way of putting it. There is always an ethical imperative.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, when the son comes to his senses and returns humbled by his foolishness and failure, we are told that "while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." The elder son couldn't cope and missed out on sharing the fatted calf. But as we say 'Our Father, *Our* Father...', we implicate ourselves in the needs of those for whom the Father has care; of all his children; for we ourselves are as nothing without our sisters and brothers who are fellow heirs to God's love.