

Sermon, The Lord's Prayer Trinity I 2006

You know that the sermon, any sermon, is addressed to the preacher as well as to the congregation? It's no business of mine to think I can set myself up here, six feet above criticism, and talk down to you all. I do have a special dislike for patronising sermons – *Thought for the Day* on Radio Four every morning must win the prize – sermons in which the preacher talks to us in that Noddy language, as if we're about six. But there is a world of difference between what's basic and simple and what's merely simplistic. Today then I want to refresh your acquaintance – refresh my own acquaintance as well – with something basic and simple: The Lord's Prayer. Let's just go through it together now.

We note that it starts with "Our". Of course each individual stands before God and his own conscience and must take personal responsibility. But when Our Lord told his disciples to begin this prayer with "Our", he was reminding them – us – that we are a community of souls. Each man is responsible for himself, but no man is an island. "Our" stands for our shared concerns, our shared life together.

But the prayer moves in the very next word from ourselves to God. And what a sensational move it is – for we are told to think of God as "Father". The word used by Jesus is truly astonishing. It doesn't mean as in "When did you last see your father?" Or "Just wait till your father gets home!" It was the Aramaic word "Abba" which means "dad" or "daddy". It is the affectionate word, not the stern title.

Now for a simple prayer isn't this stunning? In the first two words we are identified as a community of souls under God. "Our Father". And this God who made the sun and the other stars, Maker of all things, Judge of all men, we are told to call him our dad. The Lord's Prayer is more revolutionary than you think.

"...Father, who art in heaven". So the moral rules are not ours; they are not set by the community; morality is made in heaven. Morality is transcendent and values are absolute and not to be mucked about with as our petty committees, commissions and politicians think fit. So here we are living "our" lives, but living them under God. "There is no life not lived in community and no community not lived in praise of God". I have always loved that line from T.S.Eliot. But T.S. Eliot takes seventeen words to tell us the truth. Jesus takes only two: "Our Father".

"Hallowed" means holy, awe-inspiring. Can there be anything more awe-inspiring than the commandment to call the ruler of the universe your dad? This is a brilliant setting up by Our Lord of what looks like a contradiction in terms. God is close enough to be called dad, but he is strange, transcendent and terrifying enough to be hallowed. All creation and all values emanate from this hallowed centre who is God himself.

Think of Moses. When he met God in the wilderness at the burning bush, God said "Take off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the ground whereon thou standest is holy – hallowed – ground". It's meant to be scary. Or Isaiah in the temple in the year that King Uzziah died: "I saw the Lord, high and lifted up". And we get images for what cannot be put into words, coals of fire, eyes within and without, his robe filling the

temple. And then we get those mysterious words repeated three times: “Holy, Holy, Holy”.

So when it gets to that part of the service, listen to the Sanctus. The choir sings “Holy, Holy, Holy... Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus”. And the music of the Sanctus, whoever it’s by, is always strange, striving to convey the strangeness, the otherness, the hallowedness of God. Sometimes as in Faure or Schubert the Sanctus is ethereal, remote, literally otherworldly. Again in, say, Mozart or Lenglens it can sound terrifying, almost angry: in for example the great C-minor Mass K.427, the massed choir hurling antiphonal ecstasy into the vault

The composer, like the poet who wrote the story of Moses, like the prophet Isaiah, is trying to find notes or words for what is beyond all notes and words – the Being of God.

Isn’t it odd? I started by telling you that I was going to remind you and remind myself of the Lord’s Prayer – something simple and basic. And we’ve been talking and thinking about this together for ten minutes already – and we’ve only covered the first half dozen words! These are all simple words, but they are heavy, they pull their weight; they are, you might say, worth their weight in glory. Now I’ve done it again: for the Hebrew for “glory” means “weight”.

“Hallowed be thy *name*”. The name was a mysterious thing for the biblical writers. Remember when Jacob is wrestling with God all night and pesters him to know his name. I don’t think he was expecting the answer, “Well actually, it’s Kevin!” The name of a thing, especially of a person, was regarded as revealing its nature. This is so because words and things are connected mysteriously. And of course the puzzle over this precise connection between words and things is solved and resolved in the doctrine of the Incarnation – in which the Word is made Flesh.

So, if God’s name is not Kevin and it’s not – as the little girl thought – Harold be thy name – what is it? And the answer is that we don’t know. If you read the Old Testament you’ll find God is called “The Lord” or “Most High” or “Almighty” – but those are not names, they are titles. And in the New Testament, God is just “o theos” – the ordinary Greek word meaning “the god”.

When Moses asked God for his name, God said it is just “I AM”. And that name in Hebrew is always written as four consonants. So it is never pronounced – because – why? – because it is too holy to pronounce, because God’s name is holy: “hallowed be thy name”.

Except this is not quite true. The plot thickens. That mysterious name of God is pronounced once a year, and then only by the High Priest in the temple. And where in the temple, do you think? Why in the Holy of Holies – because God is the holy of holies. And what is the High Priest doing in the temple that one day in the year? It is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement for the forgiveness of sins.

Come forward again into the New Testament and think of the forgiveness of sins. How are Christians forgiven? We are forgiven “through Jesus Christ Our Lord”. The new revelation in the New Testament is that the transcendent, remote, literally

unspeakable, God, the Most High, the Holy of Holies, is given a name. And his name is Jesus. And Jesus is a translation of the Old Testament Joshua – and “Joshua” means “deliverer”. And this is (so to speak) the Christians’ Yom Kippur. For it is Jesus who saves us from our sins. We are saved by calling upon his *name*

This is the miraculous and amazing truth. You couldn’t make it up. The Maker of all things draws us close to him and reveals himself in his name; and his name is Deliverer. You remember how even Moses was not allowed to see God face to face? There is the nice little story in the Bible of when Moses asked to see God. And God said he couldn’t. He told Moses to hide in a cleft in the rock and God would pass by and God would show him his “back parts” – literally in the Hebrew his arse. Who says there are no jokes in the Bible?

But then the miracle of the Incarnation and the gift of Christ, the deliverer of our souls. And God’s name is made known. It is Jesus. And his disciples looked on his face. And we – think of this - we handle the being of God in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.

It’s time to stop. But we’re only halfway through this simple prayer, The Lord’s Prayer. I’m glad to be reminded of it. But I will not have us surfeiting and so sickening. I will finish the exposition another day