

Matthew 6:9-13 (Lord's Prayer)

Pentecost +13A. Readings: Exodus 12:1-14, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

In Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ, a few lines from the Lord's Prayer:

Aboon dabashmaya – Our Father in heaven,
nethkadash shamak – Holy is Thy name.

In the name ... +

Today Father John, Father Jim and I begin a series on that prayer that most of us know well; that we (and millions before us) have probably said more than any other over the years. A prayer that is said in every corner of the world each day, by someone, wherever there is Church. ... The Lord's Prayer. A prayer of which it has been said, by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, spiritual leader of Anglicans throughout the world: *If someone asked me to write out the Christian faith on the back of an envelope, I could not do better than to write out the Lord's Prayer.* He also said:

"It's not an easy prayer. It's not a prayer that pretends and it's also a prayer that requires our lives change. ... that will only happen when we learn how to depend freely and lovingly on the God who made himself Our Father."

We're going to take it in stages, just a couple of lines at a time, over six Sundays, from today to Thanksgiving Sunday. And on the way I expect we'll notice that every reading of Scripture we hear in our services does in some way relate to this prayer.

A little bit about the Lord's Prayer as a whole. It's a short prayer, found in the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke, and in a second-century document called the Didache. In the first case, it was part of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount; in the second, a response by Jesus when one of his disciples asked, *Lord, teach us to pray.* By the time of the second century, it was a central prayer for Christian communities, and one that only baptized Christians prayed in their worship services.

But what is our relationship to the Lord's Prayer?

In our worship we hear every week – and we'll hear it again in a few minutes – the formula, "As our Saviour Christ has commanded and taught us, we are bold to say: 'Our Father. . . .'"

We are **commanded** – and we need **to be bold** – to pray as Jesus did.

But consider this: that in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, where Jesus was caring for and teaching followers, joining in the prayer **doesn't** come across as just a command: It is just as much an **INVITATION**. It's an invitation, not just to pray, but to pray **as Jesus did**. **To share in his prayer life.**

The disciples and followers of Jesus, back then, had an idea of the importance of prayer in Jesus' own life. They had followed and heard him, and seen him going off, longing to pray to the Father.

We today know more – the whole story of the crucifixion and resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the sending of the Holy Spirit; which the disciples did not at that time know. Christian faith has come to understand through those events that the one God is in 3 persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – a community of love. We're invited to take part, in our small way, in God's own life. We can not only believe, but **experience** some of God's life of love.

In a way it's like our Exodus story today, when God broke into the world and changed things, invited the Israelites on their walk to freedom in ancient Egypt. Here was Jesus Christ, Son of God, part of God, breaking in to the hearts of the disciples and us, inviting us to take part in God's own life! If we think of it this way – it was an amazing moment when Jesus taught us to pray.

Today's segment of the prayer is simply this: **Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.**

The opening words of the prayer are: OUR. FATHER. Each word is important. They set up the relationship between me and you and God. They set the stage for the rest of the prayer.

First the word **Our**. Our means: more than one. Me, and you, and perhaps others too. Together.

Saint Augustine was a brilliant and holy 4th century writer, who said that the "our" in the Lord's Prayer, also shows that what a person seeks for her or him self in praying, he or she should also seek for everyone else. So that single word! – **our** – tells us a lot about the generosity and giving of God, and about how **we** should be with one another. Together. And giving and loving. Something we recognize when we greet one another in the name of Christ, as we did this morning.

And next that so important word, Father.

For what does a parent do for a child? Love the child, unconditionally, even when it has not yet earned anything at all, even when it strays from the path that the parent wants for the child. And in practical terms, this love includes teaching and leading and forgiving and not giving up.

Of course we are not that perfect father or mother, and that's another story for another day. But God is. For us, to call God "Father" calls for his love and calls us to **want** to be a good son or daughter.

Abba - Daddy - Father – is what Christ cried out in Gethsemane, the night before he was crucified. It's a word that, in Aramaic, is at the same time familiar and respectful. Fr Robin Ryan, a Roman Catholic priest, wrote this about how he came to understand not just the idea, but the experience of that real relationship with God, by seeing a parallel with a real human Dad and his child in Jerusalem:

One day, as I made my way through the gate and into the crowded narrow street, I found myself behind a young Israeli couple walking with their two boys, who were about 4 and 6 years old. For just a few seconds, the youngest child fell behind his parents in that crowd. I could see that he suddenly became very frightened. Just then, he called out, "Abba." His father immediately turned around, took his hand, and he calmed down.

That scene stopped me ... in my tracks. ... I had read the works of scholars about the significance of this word, but this experience in a crowded Jerusalem street impressed me much more than any of the books or articles that I had read. For that little boy, falling behind his parents in that crowd was a moment of grave danger; it was a "life and death" situation. He immediately called out to his parents in no uncertain terms. He called out in reverence for who they were and with trust that they would respond. And when his father offered him his hand, this child took his hand with confidence.

Just as, in our story of the first Passover in Exodus today, the people of Israel trusted God. Just as Saint Paul, writing to the Roman church, reminded us that the greatest commandment is love. Just as, in our Gospel, we are told by Jesus how to watch for our own souls and lovingly help those who need us to guide them.

"Our Father": these words tell us so much about God's care for us and our need for him.

The next line of the prayer, of course, is "Who art in heaven". And since, now, we have been invited to take part in the life of God, to live our lives with God present – then God's own place, heaven, can be our home too. It's where we belong. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul, having studied the life and teaching of Jesus, said that *we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives*. That same verse in another translation says *our conversation is in heaven*. Paul's words give a sense of both our *belonging in* heaven and of our *talking with God* there. Well, we talk with God when we pray, and it seems the Lord's Prayer in these four little words tells us something about this. God *is* close to us, heaven is there for us *now*.

Praying *together* – to *our* Father – brings us closer to God. As we heard in our Gospel today: *for when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*.

And now to the last line for today, "Hallowed be thy name".

In biblical times, a **name** could carry a lot of information about a person – who is their father, or how someone felt when a child was born (Isaac's name means Laughter!), or many other things. A name could **define** you to others. Think about, say, the names Smith or Hill – just names to us now, but go back 3 or 400 years and they told something

concrete – your occupation or where you live. And indeed the name of God stands for the whole nature of *his* being, as he said in Exodus 3:14, “I am who I am.” God, the creator of the universe. The Jews, then and now, show great care for the name of God, and so do we.

In the first century AD, during Jesus' life on earth, Jewish life was hemmed in with, steeped in, prayer. Prayers at home at the start and end of day, reciting of psalms, prayers in the temple or synagogue. The Qaddish, an old Jewish prayer in Aramaic, is echoed in Jesus' prayer given to his disciples. The Qaddish begins, *exalted and hallowed be his great name in the world.*

So saying “hallowed be your name” was a natural thing for him and his followers.

To followers of Jesus, then, this prayer is for us to honour God. Because it is not **we** who **make** God's name holy. It is, and has been through eternity. I AM THAT I AM, said God so long ago to humanity. So perhaps this line said by us – hallowed be thy name – also means that we're asking God to keep it holy *through us* and how we live our lives. In togetherness before God.

Rowan Williams said this:

... to ask that God's name be hallowed, that God's name be looked upon as holy, is to ask that in the world people will understand the presence of God among them with awe and reverence, and will not use the name or the idea of God as a kind of weapon to put other people down, or as a sort of magic to make themselves feel safe. ... "Hallowed be thy name" means: understand what you're talking about when you're talking about God, this is serious, this is the most wonderful and frightening reality that we could imagine, **more** wonderful and frightening that we can imagine.

So, at last!, to sum up:

Our Father: here Jesus shows our personal relationship with God, and our togetherness with one another.

Who art in heaven: here we know that as we are with our Father in relationship, that we too share in God's place.

Hallowed be thy name: and here we know that God's name I AM THAT I AM is the foundation of all. It **is** holy and we must **respect** it as holy. It is a name above all others.

A wonderful personal relationship with God and one another, and a great awe and reverence at the same time. Pretty powerful for just a few short words.

Whether we pray the familiar words of this prayer that most of us can recite, or pray it in words that we might have to read because the language is a bit different – I hope it doesn't matter which, so long as we pray it **by heart – from the heart.**

Amen.