

Christian Living

Darren Sylvester takes a closer look at the prayer Jesus taught his disciples and asks when we recite the 'Our Father' daily, twice daily or at Mass, do we really comprehend what we are saying?

“Our Father”

The shorter version of the Our Father in St Luke's Gospel does not begin “Our Father, who art in heaven” but simply starts with the word “Father” (Luke 11: 2-4). The version found in St Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 6: 9-13) is probably the first prayer we learn as children and the one we pray most often throughout our life.

When we recite the “Our Father” we are speaking to God in a very intimate way, however, it is a communal prayer: “Our Father”, as opposed to “My Father”. When we say the Our Father, we recognize that God is the father of us all.

“Who art in heaven”

No one can tell us conclusively where heaven is. We often associate heaven as being in the sky. I hold the view that heaven is where God is, where his unconditional love and perfect peace can be found. Do we not have heaven in our hearts, communities and Churches? Surely wherever love, kindness and peace are flourishing on this Earth then we are able to visualize and associate the place where 'Our Father' reigns.

“Hallowed be thy name”

It is part of God's plan that his name be made holy. By reciting the “Our Father” we make God's name holy within ourselves and acknowledge that God is the ruler of the world.

“Thy kingdom come”

It is here that we look forward to the time when God will rule the world in full glory and power. We anticipate the time when there will be no more pain, suffering, sadness, poverty or loneliness. This phrase is a good reminder to us all, who are often caught up in the material realities of this world, to focus on the spiritual realities, looking forward to the final reign of God. Asking that God's kingdom will come is of course another way of asking for heaven.

“Thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven”

Just as Jesus prayed during his agony in the garden of Gethsemane, at this juncture we ask the Father to answer our prayers only if it is God's will. God's will may not always be our will. Often when we pray, we pray for what we want, or what we believe we want. However, what we want for ourselves may

not always be the best course of action in the long term. All too often God's will is different from ours; God's will may involve grief, loss and suffering for us, or those we love, in the short term. Be that as it may, we must still try and find it within ourselves to let go and pray for God's will to be done.

"Give us this day our daily bread"

This simple request is a prayer asking for the daily necessities of life; for the nourishment that we all need to live. It is not a personal request, but rather a communal one. It is my opinion that when Jesus taught us this prayer, he intended something very simple – in that we should ask for the basic necessities of life from God. As most people work for their "daily bread", it must not be forgotten that it is still a gift from God.

Asking for our "daily bread" may be interpreted in a way that we are not to store up or amass wealth for tomorrow or next month; but rather to live simply, so that others may simply live! My own interpretation of this phrase is that it is good to foster a healthy dependence of God, really trusting and believing that he will supply us with all our needs.

We must not forget that we may also be the ones chosen to answer this prayer. We may have to distribute the Earth's goods in such a way to enable everyone to receive their "daily bread".

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us"

The essence of this petition is that if we cannot forgive others, then God will not forgive us. In order to be forgiven we must acknowledge our sinfulness and throw ourselves at God's mercy. Looking at the wording of the petition, it suggests that forgiving others is not just an important act, but an imperative one.

When Jesus taught this prayer it is likely that he saw clearly those persons who could not learn to let go of their hates and resentments. It is not until we can let go of hatred and a desire for revenge that we will be open to peace, healing and the forgiving touch of God. In case of any doubt, let us remind ourselves of what Jesus said directly after the "Our Father":

"If you forgive the faults of others, your heavenly Father will forgive yours. If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you".
(Matthew 6: 14-15)

"Lead us not into temptation"

When we are tempted, we are always tempted by something which appears to us to be a good thing. We are rarely tempted by badness, but we may be tempted to do something bad in order to get something good out of it. By asking this we are asking God not to allow us to drift into sin. We are consciously acknowledging both our sinfulness and our weakness, and

requesting that we be placed in God's hands as we know we can't do it all ourselves.

"Deliver us from evil"

When we ask God to deliver us from evil we are asking that we be spared from temptation; from causing misery in the world; and being associated with persons that make choices to inflict pain and suffering on others. We are asking to be delivered from the power of Satan in the world, not just the abstract idea of 'evil'. We are asking to be delivered from any harm or distress; we are asking to be saved from whatever it is that troubles us, or causes us distress and pain.

Whilst the victory has already been won by Christ, unfortunately Satan still has his ways in the world, and we ask God to help us in our battle.

Conclusion

If, at times, you are like me, and sometimes 'switch off' during prayer (or at Mass) due to tiredness, low levels of concentration, occasional disturbances or whatever, then there will have been many occasions where the "Our Father" prayer will have been recited without a single thought being given to what it represents.

By way of analogy, the prayer "Our Father" is like driving the same route to work every morning – we know that we backed the car off the drive, but upon arrival at work can't remember the traffic signals or stop signs seen en route. As we know the journey inside out, we take it for granted. Similarly, because The Lord's Prayer has been instilled in us since childhood, when we recite it daily or at Mass we also, on occasions, take it for granted, not really listening to or discerning the words that we speak as we know them so well.

As we prepare to celebrate Easter let us remember what St Matthew tells us, in that:

"In your prayer do not rattle on like the pagans. They think they will win a hearing by the sheer multiplication of words. Do not imitate them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This is how you are to pray: "Our Father, who art in heaven". (Matthew 6: 7-9)

In reciting The Lord's Prayer we would do well to go one step further and continually reflect on its elements (petitions) as the Lord taught us to.

May the peace and love of Christ be with you and your families during this Easter season.

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