**Lent Service 21st February 2021**

**Matthew 6.5-15**

**The Lord’s Prayer**

We start our exploration into the prayers of Jesus. There are seven prayers recorded in the gospels where Jesus prays to his heavenly father. Today we look at the first one and the best known one: the Lord’s Prayer.

It starts with the request from the disciples: Lord teach us to pray.

The reality is that we are all beginners when it comes to prayer. Genuine prayer is something we need to learn over again. These disciples in first century Palestine would have had a culture and a habit of daily prayer. They would have practiced the discipline of prayer from their early youth. The general Jewish practice of those times was to devote three hours to prayer daily. Each began and ended with the confession of the one God through the reciting of the Shema ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone (Deut 6.4).

Despite this, routine prayer looks very different when an outstanding role model is seen in action, because its not a technical skill that can be mastered in a classroom setting. The basic learning environment is the ‘inner room’ a safe place free from distractions to which you can withdraw and where your hearts can be opened. Jesus refers to this in Matthew 6.6 before he tells them the Lord’s prayer. The term for room ‘tameion’ in Greek signifies a kind of storeroom in which treasures were kept.

In our own country at this moment in time there apparently was an uptake in prayer at the start of this pandemic. ONE in 20 adults have started to pray during the lockdown, despite not praying before said a Tearfund Survey in May last year. [[1]](#endnote-1) Nothing like a crisis to get people thinking of their own mortality and perhaps whether God is there and God will help?

Even in our deeply secular and skeptical society people still allegedly pray. Although most prayers are prayers in a crisis rather than a conversation as part of a relationship with your Creator. Corrie ten Boom asked ‘Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tyre?’ By which she meant do you just resort to prayer in an emergency – like you would a spare tyre. Or is prayer viewed as your steering wheel, a means for releasing God’s power and guidance in our lives on a daily basis, strengthening us to handle wisely the struggles we face in our lives.

These studies will probe deeper into the way Jesus prayed as recorded in the gospels.

The Lord’s prayer is well known and yet maybe not known. The study notes give more insight into this prayer and I just want to expand on a few notes in this talk.

It can be very familiar to us today, yet in its time it was quite radical. In teaching his disciples how to pray, Jesus ushered in a new era of freedom and intimacy. He didn’t specify when they should pray, unlike the Jewish practice of his day. He didn’t set particular times for the activity. He just said ‘when you pray. Not if, but when.

In contrast to the Old Testament’s reserve to speak the name of God, Jesus calls God His Father *Abba*, a respectful but familiar and loving name*. Abba* meant father and was in Aramaic the language Jesus spoke. The Greek word pater means father. In the Greek text, *abba* only appears once, in Marks account of the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14.36) but the concept of *abba* is behind the Greek use of Pater.

In the ancient Near Eastern Society the word father when used to represent deity evoked a sense of unconditional and irrevocable authority, similar to that of father figures in patriarchal societies. It also embodied a sense of being responsible for guarding and supporting and helping all who belonged to the family circle. But God is rarely Addressed as ‘father’ in the Hebrew Bible. From approximately 120 ‘father’ references only 15 evoke a religious sense. God is only spoken of as a father in relation to the people of Israel as a whole (Deut 32.6; Ps 68.5) or to the king, but never in relation to an individual or to humankind in general. Set against the background of the rarity and relative formality of the ‘father’ language applied to God in the Old testament, Jesus’ revelation of God as father was conceptually different and fundamentally new. Jesus applies ‘Father’ to God 170 times in the gospels which implies that on the lips of Jesus, *Abba*, was the designation for God.

Scholars believe the term *abba* originates from baby language. But it was not restricted to small children, it was also found on the lips for grown up sons and daughters as an expression of profound respect. Both nuances – the intimate ‘daddy’ and the respectful ‘father’ are carried in the Aramaic term; the two are not mutually exclusive. In family contexts it had a warm familiar ring similar to the expression today of ‘dear father’.

I remember my father, being a man of his generation, whenever he was called upon to say a prayer he would have this deferential respect and address God with thees and thous. It was like he was talking to the Lord of the Manor and docking his cap and tugging his forelock as he did it. The other extreme is the language that some people use where Jesus is my boyfriend and God is a mate who you can slap on the back down the pub. The original term seemed to be somewhere in the middle between these extremes.

When I was at theological college, many years ago now… Feminist theologians were raising the gender problem of talking about God as a Father. At its deepest and best Christian theology has always maintained that male and female were created in God’s image. That God is both male and female and also that according to the second commandment we are not to make God into our image, certainly not to assume that God is male. Theology will stress the analogical and metaphorical language of scripture. God is like a Father. But equally God is like a Mother.

Sadly, for some the relationship with the parent has not been a good one. Children have been abandoned, ignored or even abused. Therefore, even Jesus has to clarify that the analogy of a Father is that of a good father – when he talks further in the Sermon on the Mount about how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to your those who ask him. (Matt 7.11). Prayer is about an intimate loving relationship.

All of this got lost at theological college when we had prayers to the Eternal mysterious One, ground of our being. It didn’t quite have the sense of personal intimacy.

So, what we are left with is the language of the Bible and the language that is embedded in our worship for over two millennium. That is the usual justification for maintaining the use of Father. But that’s why we have discussion groups so you can go discuss…

The point of using abba father in the prayers of Jesus was to model an intimate personal relationship

Our father, reminds us that that we are part of a bigger family, drawing on those allusions to election of God’s people and salvation, and even when we pray alone, we are reminded that we have brothers and sisters around the world who share in this prayer. Even those we regard as our enemies, those who have hurt us have the same heavenly father.

The study book notes how the first half of Jesus prayer is often called the ‘you petitions’; it points us to worship God the Father as we emphasize making God’s name holy, praying for the coming of God’s kingdom and God’s will. The second half can be called the ‘we petitions’ because it helps us to give God our requests as we ask for our daily bread, for forgiveness and for protection over evil.

The structure of the prayer in Greek in also fascinating if you are into the symbolism of numbers. While seven as the number of petitions indicates completeness, even more significant for grasping the big picture is the fact that these petitions are arranged in the form of a chiasmus: a rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order, such that two key concepts from the original phrase reappear in the second phrase in inverted order. The sentence "She has all my love; my heart belongs to her," is an **example** of **chiasmus**. Our Father who art in heaven: hallowed by your name. your kingdom come, your will be done

It is a summary of the proclamation of Jesus.

The First three petitions are all four words long in Greek – 12 words in total (again a significant number in Jewish tradition). The fact that in the Greek text of all three ‘your’ petitions ‘your’ is positioned at the end suggest its emphatic nature. It brings into focus the need to seek god’s glory first, not our own.

The structure points to the priorities which should govern the loves of Christ’s followers. The first group of petitions highlights that God’s concerns are to be put in first place. Our concerns can come only after that and they are to be committed to God (forgive us, do not bring us… rescue us…) the order is significant as we are often in some sort of mess, being pressed by urgent needs and we want God to sort things out for us. Tom Wright notes that the Lord’s Prayer strikes us with the realization that ‘there’s a larger world out there’. More importantly ‘there is a larger God out there’. Who is not just a celestial cleaner up and sorter out of our messes and wants’ but is a living God who has a good and perfect will that is to take its due place in our lives’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The first petition concerns the sanctification of God’s name ‘hallowed be your name’. Name here in the ancient Jewish context bearing a deep meaning denoting God’s innermost being, the essence of his character and activity and holiness: standing above all other names. Who does the hallowing is ambiguous? Amy Boucher Pye in her study book says this is an example of the divine passive voice. What is the divine passive voice?

Most writers know the difference between active and passive voice. In active voice, there’s a clearly identified agent performing an action:[[3]](#endnote-3)

Tiger Woods made a hole in one.

The subject of this sentence, Tiger Woods, is the agent who is performing the action: making a hole in one. In passive voice, the subject isn’t performing the action; it’s being acted upon by the agent:

A hole in one was made by Tiger Woods.

Most experts agree that active voice is preferable over passive voice wherever possible, and most writers know this. However, did you know that there’s another form of passive voice? This one is called divine passive voice. In a sentence using divine passive voice, no agent of action is ever identified:

A hole in one was made.

Since there’s no agent, the action in the sentence is considered an act of God—thus, divine passive voice. Granted, this is a tongue-in-cheek assessment because it’s pretty unlikely that the hole in one happened all by itself even though Tiger Woods is sometimes attributed with divinely inspired talent.

Divine passive voice is most useful for obscuring information. Perhaps Tiger didn’t want to buy the customary round of drinks in the clubhouse to celebrate his hole in one, so he insisted that club officials keep his identity secret.

Politicians and other bureaucrats are fond of divine passive voice. It appears to give complete information, and it sounds official, thereby duping readers:

Mistakes were made. (Who, exactly, made the mistakes?)

Gas prices were raised. (By whom?)

Unless you’re deliberately trying to avoid assigning blame or you’re intentionally trying to be vague, writers are encouraged to steer clear of divine passive voice.

However Jesus uses it around 200 times: for example: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted [who by? by God]” ([Mt 5:4](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Matt%205.4)); “Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered [who by? by God]” ([Luke 12:7](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Luke%2012.7)[+](https://www.preceptaustin.org/luke-12-commentary#12:7)).

Mark 2:5+ And Jesus seeing their faith \*said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven (present tense, passive voice = "continually forgiven" = but who by? Divine Passive).”

The use of the [passive voice](https://www.preceptaustin.org/greek_quick_reference_guide#passive) of the verb is “to denote the hidden action of God as the Agent responsible for the activity.

Hallowed be your name? Who does the hallowing? The verb of the petition is in passive voice which highlights the fact that sanctification (making holy) is not a human achievement. The subject of the sanctification is God himself, who works in our lives and becomes glorified through establishing his rule in them.

When we are praying the Lord’s Prayer, we are seeking God’s glory by asking for God’s will to be done. But we are also seeking the mysterious, often hidden action of God in our lives and in the life of the world.

The last comment I want to make on the lord’s prayer is Matthews version says forgive us our debts not sins. On one level Christians are reminded that we are not exempt from sinning and we stand in need for forgiveness: we are in God’s debt

But the expression also anchors the petition for forgiveness in its historical context. Debt repayment was a serious problem for the poor in the ancient world and the position of debtors was abysmal. Jesus refereed to those indebted in parables such as the workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20.1-19) and the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18.21-35). Often the issue of questions over land and debts were often the cause of revolts. According to Josephus, one of the initial acts of revolutionaries in the Jewish Roman War of 66-70 AD was to burn the record office with the intention of destroying the debt records.

The cross of Jesus was seen as the symbolic demonstration of the depth of divine forgiveness, the wiping out of debts (Colossians 2.13-14). As a result, the principle of forgiveness became embodied in the lives of Christ’s followers. We know from personal experience the difficulty of forgiving someone who has wounded us by doing us a great injustice. It is well known that hiding anger and bitterness in the heart can be life threatening because of tis toxic effect primarily on us but also on our environment. Therefore, fostering an attitude of forgiveness, being ready to release the debts of others towards us, effects relief to all. While emotions are hard and slow to heal, forgiveness is a decision made in the domain of the will that I will not be held captive to offences. The Greek for ‘as we forgive them their debts’ is stated in the aorist tense: that they ‘have forgiven’ their debtors. They have made a decision to live a way life in which the victory of the cross is the defining principle. The debt of sin can be overcome only by love and generosity not vengeance.

There of course is lots more that could be said about the Lord’s Prayer. I did the Prayer course with a number of others at the Tab during the summer and Pete Grieg who heads up the 24/7 Prayer initiative has created a number of videos that you can watch on the prayer course website that reflects on each petition and how it can shape our prayer and he tells lost of helpful personal stories to inspire and encourage.

May the Lord continue to teach us how to pray.

Bibliography:

Laszlo Gallusz, The Seven Prayers of Jesus, IVP, 2017

1. https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/1-may/news/uk/more-people-praying-during-lockdown-survey-suggests [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. T Wright, The Lord and His Prayer, SPCK 1996 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.dailywritingtips.com/divine-passive-voice/ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)