

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	27 July 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Sixth Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

Today's gospel tells us of Jesus teaching his disciples a prayer that the Church has used ever since he taught it: the prayer that is often referred to as the Lord's Prayer or the Our Father. For Christians used to saying it, day in, day out, week in, week out, it becomes ingrained into us in a special way, and even many people who never go to church much are familiar with it. It's still just about possible to assume at a funeral or a wedding, that the majority of the congregation will be able to recite it from memory. But familiarity can breed contempt: there is also the danger that because we say this prayer so often and know it so well, we can recite it rather unthinkingly and mechanically, which is why it is good that today's gospel gives us an opportunity to look at it more closely.

The prayer in the very simple form that we hear it in Luke's gospel is a bit like a triangle. At the top of the prayer is an address to God; in the middle two wishes uttered before God and at the base three petitions: things for which we ask God.

So first the address: the prayer is addressed to 'Father', in Greek, Pater, in Hebrew Abba. The significant thing about this is its intimacy – its very personal quality. Jesus is telling his disciples that it's almost as if when they pray, they should start by addressing God as 'Dad'. To get some perspective on this instruction, we might think about the great Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle four hundred or so years before the birth of Jesus. Both of these great thinkers thought it was entirely obvious that God exists. Plato calls God the 'form of the good': the ultimate good thing of which all the good things we see are just pale imitations. Aristotle says God is the 'prime mover': the force that sets all things in motion and holds them in being. But the form of the good and the prime mover are very abstract: they are there but they don't love you: you could have no relationship with them in any sort of personal way. By

contrast, Jesus characteristically says that when we approach God, we should address him lovingly, personally, directly: 'Father, Pater, Abba, Dad'.

The prayer moves on from that first address to the middle section: two wishes uttered before God: 'hallowed be your name' and 'your kingdom come'.

The first wish 'hallowed be your name'. In the Bible, your name is something very special: the distinguishing mark of your identity; of who you are. And so this first wish expresses our wish that God's name might be held holy; that it might be loved, respected and honoured. But, whilst we may often pray these words, how many of us casually say things like 'oh my God' or text 'OMG' when things go wrong, or in other words use the Lord's name as a swear word or an expletive. An even greater misuse of God's name is regularly in the news. For example, on 10 September 2001, Osama bin Laden wrote in his Dispatch to Terror Agents that they should invoke God's name at times when they were about to unleash terrible violence. 'When the confrontation begins,' he chillingly wrote, 'strike like champions who do not want to go back to this world. Shout, Allahu Akbar – God is the greatest – because this strikes fear in the hearts of the non-believers.' For Jesus, teaching his disciples the Lord's Prayer, the name of God is not to be used as a swearword, still less turned into a murderous weapon. It is a name that is to be loved and honoured, treasured and hallowed: 'in him our hearts rejoice', says the Psalmist, 'we place our trust in his holy name'.

The second wish the prayer expresses is 'your kingdom come'. It's a prayer that God will establish his rule, bring in his kingdom in a world that is manifestly not what it should be. That prayer and that hope were central to Jesus's own teaching, in which he often describes the Kingdom of God in images and parables. Hope for the Kingdom God – the reign of God – to come was likewise central to the faith of the earliest Christians, one of whose prayers consisted in a single Hebrew word: maranatha, meaning 'our Lord, come'. It was a prayer that Christ would come back and establish his kingdom on the earth: a kingdom of justice, peace and righteousness in which Christ's just and gentle rule would be known in all places. And when we say 'your kingdom come' or 'thy kingdom come' in the Lord's Prayer, we continue to express the simplicity of that hope that seems more and more urgent in our difficult and uncertain times.

Moving to the three final petitions at the base of the triangle, the first is 'give us each day our daily bread'. 'Help us not to go hungry' we might see as a prayer not just for ourselves but for the millions of people who, unlike us perhaps, will be without enough food today; a prayer that the good things God has

abundantly provided may be shared and justly distributed. It's also a prayer that we may be satisfied with what we have been given today, and let go of anxieties about what might happen to us tomorrow or in the future. And Christians understand this daily bread also to refer to the consecrated bread we receive at the Lord's table in the Eucharist: the living bread of Christ's presence, which gives us a little taste of the feast of his coming kingdom.

The second petition at the base of the triangle: forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone indebted to us. Help us first of all to find and to receive mercy, help us to know God's grace in our own lives. The late Pope Francis wrote a book entitled *The Name of God is Mercy*. He meant to emphasise that giving grace, forgiveness, mercy are not just different things God may happen to do at different times. Rather, mercy is God's name: his distinguishing feature: essentially bound up with God is. And the core of Jesus' moral teaching is that we should reflect this in our own conduct, by ourselves showing mercy: loving our neighbours as ourselves, forgiving them from the depths of our hearts: forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone indebted to us.

The final of the three petitions is not to be brought to the time of trial; of temptation; of testing; to be able to resist as Jesus was in his own temptations in the wilderness. In this final petition, we ask to be kept safe by God and free from harm, including the harm we cause to ourselves by those things we are tempted to do.

What an amazing prayer is the prayer that Jesus gave his disciples when they asked him to teach them to pray. It is the foundation of all Christian prayer, perhaps even of all Christian theology. May it never become dry and repetitious for us but a continual spring to refresh our life in Christ.