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Hear our prayer

Leader article

The Lord's Prayer in the Gospels

The Lord's Prayer is found in both Luke's Gospel (Luke 11.2–4) and in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 6.9–14). Matthew's version of the prayer is, with a few exceptions, used by all Christians in their worship. There are also links with contemporary and historical Jewish prayer, which should not surprise us.

It's important for us to note that the prayer's inclusion in the Gospels is not incidental; the Gospel writers did not simply overhear it and decide to note it down. In Luke's Gospel, the Lord gives this prayer in response to the disciples asking him to teach them how to pray, and in Matthew's it is included during the Sermon on the Mount. In both cases, then, it is presented to us as the Lord's definitive teaching on prayer. For this reason, it has long been considered the pattern of all prayer.

The doxology ('For thine is the kingdom . . .') does not appear in Luke's version, nor does it appear in the earliest manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel, so most scholars consider it to be a later addition. It is certainly the case that Byzantine Christians, as well as contemporary Jews, were

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used to adding doxologies like this to the end of prayers. However, it is likely that the earliest written version of the Lord's Prayer is not to be found in the Gospels, but in a collection of catechetical, liturgical and moral teaching called *The Didache*, which most scholars date from the first century. Here the Lord's Prayer is part of the eucharistic celebration and the doxology is included.

The prayer itself

Structure

The prayer begins with approaching the Father's presence in adoration. In the use of the word 'our' we are swept up into the corporate nature of prayer; the prayer of the individual is united to that of the wider communion of the Church.

There follow the seven petitions; the first three focus on God, the source of life and the object of our love; we place him first and not ourselves.

- hallowed be thy name;
- thy kingdom come;
- thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.

We do well to remember that our Lord first uttered this prayer himself, and that in his life, death and resurrection these particular petitions were fulfilled. In praying them now we make them our own, asking that God's name may be honoured in our own time, that his kingdom may be

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further extended, and that his will be better performed until the final realization of his kingdom on earth.

- give us this day our daily bread;
- forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;
- lead us not into temptation;
- deliver us from evil.

The further four petitions ask God for what we need and so draw us towards him. Our daily bread and the forgiveness of our sins are necessary for daily life and growth in grace; withstanding temptation and deliverance from evil are necessary for our victory over sin and evil.

The petitions

Hallowed be thy name

To hallow means to make holy. In fact, we cannot really hallow God's name ourselves – only God can make holy – so here we are praying that we may fully appreciate God's holiness. At the outset of the prayer we are faced with the immense majesty of God and his purpose that we ourselves might be holy as he is holy (Ephesians 1.4). This goes to the heart of who God is, what he's like and what he has in store for us.

At the Mass we pray these words as the gathered body of Christ, in his very presence.

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Thy kingdom come

The kingdom of God is God's kingly reign. Jesus himself teaches that the kingdom of God has come near (Matthew 3.2, 4.17; Mark 1.15); it will reach its fulfilment when he hands the kingdom over to his Father. Until then we pray for the realization of that final reign of God.

As we pray this in the context of the Eucharist we realize that this kingdom and its fulfilment are in our midst on the altar. This extraordinary encounter encourages us to work more and more for the fulfilment of God's reign.

Thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven

Here we are calling for the realization of God's will on earth as it is already kept in the heavenly realm. But there remains the difficult question of what God's will is. Ultimately, God's will is for all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2.4). By prayer we not only learn what God's will for all of humanity is, but we also actively choose what God would want for us.

At the Mass, of course, we are in the presence of the one who has done the Father's will perfectly ('not my will but yours be done', he said on the eve of his Passion (Luke 22.42, NRSV)). Here we see how the eucharistic sacrifice lies at the centre of this prayer and of the Christian life. In uniting our wills to that of our Lord we pass *with him* from death to life.

Give us this day our daily bread

There is something bold and trusting about this petition (cf. Matthew 7.9). We give thanks that God gives us what we need as a generous Father, and so this request actually tells of God's generosity. It acknowledges the relationship we

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have with the Father, and also our dependence on him for our needs. Specifically, it acknowledges that there are needs we cannot meet ourselves, both material and spiritual.

Bread, of course, is the most staple of foods, and is representative of sustenance more generally. But hunger is not only physical; it is also spiritual. We need to be fed spiritually if we are to thrive and grow. We also need to accept the responsibility to address the spiritual hunger of our neighbours. God alone can provide the bread that has come down from heaven, Jesus Christ, whom we receive in the Eucharist. This food not only encourages us and reminds us of God's goodness to us – it is his very offering of himself. This heavenly bread binds us together to Jesus so that we become what we receive: the body of Christ, sharers of and participants in his divine life.

Notice that the bread is also described as 'daily' (*epiousios*), not weekly or occasional, or even for when we feel in particular need of it. This Greek word is used nowhere else in classical or contemporary Greek literature. In the Eucharist it is not, of course, bread any longer after the consecration. It is the source of superabundant life, and following on so soon from 'this day' there is an insistence on the regularity of this heavenly gift. In regular celebration of the Eucharist we are fed with Christ himself in word and sacrament.

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

This petition asks for forgiveness, but what it requests is dependent on what we must do first. It is conditional and demanding.

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In one sense, holiness simply means being without sin. The Church has been gifted the means to forgive sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But while we have confidence in God's forgiveness, we acknowledge that God's mercy cannot take root deep within us if we ourselves have not been forgiving. Here we are shown in an uncompromising way the unity of the body of Christ (1 John 4.20), and the effect of our sin on our brothers and sisters. We are to be formed more and more in God's image and likeness.

Lead us not into temptation

Our trespasses, our sins, are rooted in our propensity to give into temptation; we are reminded of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, the temptation of Adam and Eve, and of the testing of the people of Israel in the wilderness.

The Greek here means both 'do not allow us to *enter into* temptation' and 'do not let us *give in to* temptation.' Fortitude and strength are needed to avoid temptation, which would have us reach for something which appears to be good, but which is in fact base.

Deliver us from evil

'Us': again the whole Church, not just the individual. We are all affected by evil and need God's grace to resist it.

In exploring the Lord's Prayer, we have learnt how central the interdependence of the body of Christ is to our prayer and our faith. We cannot live the Christian life alone, and it is only within the community of the Church, formed by the Eucharist, that we can be sustained and guided towards our heavenly home.

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Questions

1 If God knows what we need before we ask, why should we bother praying?

This is a reasonable question which shows an understanding of God's sovereignty and his omniscience.

The truth is that *we* often don't know what we really need, and sometimes we may even be tempted to think we are able to cope on our own without God's help. In fact, prayer is not about informing God of particular needs or about letting him know of something awful which has just happened – God is by his nature omniscient, all-knowing. One of the reasons we pray is to increase our awareness of our reliance on God. Our wills will ideally be in harmony with his will, not vice versa, and prayer offers us the opportunity to discern his purposes and listen for his promptings and guidance.

Prayer at its most basic level is really about experiencing the relationship God wants to have with us. We pray because a healthy relationship with another involves sharing our concerns and our hopes. Our friends or spouses often know what is concerning us, but that doesn't stop us talking things through with them. This helps us to share our burdens and strengthen our relationships. The same is true of our relationship with God in prayer. Prayer does not change what God knows. Instead, prayer changes us by helping us to understand God's will.

There are a number of basic kinds of prayer:

Blessing, adoration and praise These kinds of prayer are our response to God's gifts to us, and involve an

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acknowledgement that we are creatures of God who is our Creator – they are attitudes of homage. We praise God simply because he is God, not because we want something from him. God is, by his very nature, worthy of our praise.

Contrition We need to be forgiven our sins principally because we need to be restored to friendship with God when we have distanced ourselves from him. We also need to ask for forgiveness so that we may be enabled to pray and listen in purity of heart, without the distractions and distortions sin brings.

Petition We are probably most familiar with this kind of prayer. While we should always strive to accept God's will for us, petition asks God to fulfil particular needs, spiritual or material – needs which, as we have seen, God understands already. Prayer of contrition, of asking for forgiveness, is, in fact, one of several kinds of petitionary prayer.

Intercession This kind of petitionary prayer asks God to fulfil the needs of others, not ourselves. This is most like the prayer of Jesus, who 'always lives to make intercession for [us]' (Hebrews 7.25, NRSV).

Thankfulness 'Counting our blessings' and giving thanks to God for the blessings we have received is central to the Christian life. This opens our hearts to God's great generosity and returns thanks to the one who bestows them upon us.

2 What makes prayer difficult, and how can we overcome these problems?

Distraction is one of the things that can make prayer most difficult. We are often distracted by internal and external things. Our own thoughts can sometimes surprise us, and we can easily find ourselves thinking of the many things that need to be done. Before we know it our attention can have shifted entirely from prayer, even if we've found ourselves a quiet and private place to pray. Noise, the demands of caring for others (not least children or grandchildren), tiredness and busyness all cause distraction and turn our minds away from the task at hand. We should not let busyness or lack of peace and quiet stop us trying to pray, however!

- The first thing to say is that the greatest helper in prayer is the Holy Spirit, whose help we can and must seek.
- It's good to give ourselves a fighting chance of avoiding distraction if at all possible, by finding a place and time when we are likely to be alone and not bothered, and not too tired. This may be early in the morning or late in the evening, or it may be a quiet point during the day. It will be a good idea to make sure the phone is out of sight and on silent.
- Our minds are busy, particularly during the working day, so we need to take some time to wind down and establish some calm within ourselves when approaching a time of prayer. We might even need to write down some of the activities we are undertaking that day so that we feel we can leave them aside for a short time without fearing we will forget them.

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- When we are distracted, which is sadly inevitable, it is important to acknowledge the cause of the distraction before trying to refocus.

If we're honest, though, sometimes it seems like nothing is happening at all when we pray. This is a common experience. We know that perseverance is important and necessary, and that God knows we're trying, but it can still be dispiriting. Silence, though, is usual in a relationship, and much of our communication is non-verbal. All relationships feed on the exchange of looks, looks of admiration and adoration, knowing looks, sometimes looks of reproach, and on being in the presence of the other in silence as well as with words. This is not only a one-sided thing, and the same is, of course, true of our relationship with the Lord in prayer. Spending time in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament is a powerful and intimate experience when that all-too-brief moment of Communion is stretched, and we are able to bathe in the Lord's presence for longer, often saying nothing.

It is important to remember too that there are many different forms of prayer, and that the same way of praying may not work for everyone, or be helpful at every point in someone's Christian life. We can simply ask for help from our priests or from those members of our congregations who have been praying for years. Spiritual direction also provides an opportunity to reflect on the life of prayer with an experienced pray-er.

3 What about asking others to pray for me? Should I pray to the saints?

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The Church and the Scriptures encourage each of us to pray to God as individuals and corporately. The prayers of the Eucharist are always directed to God alone, but this does not mean that we should not also ask our fellow Christians, including those in heaven, to pray with us and for us. Prayer for each other is, of course, selfless and it helps us to grow in charity. But it also enables us to discern God's will, sometimes by becoming an answer to prayer ourselves, and strengthens the bonds between us.

In the New Testament, St Paul often encourages his fellow Christians to pray for many things, he asks others to pray for him, and he also tells them that he is praying for them. The Lord himself also asks us to pray for others, and not only for those who have asked us to. It is important to remember that the saints in heaven are our fellow Christians – for we believe in the resurrection of the dead – and that our forebears have asked for the prayers of the saints since the earliest days of the Church.

None of this challenges the Lord's unique identity as mediator between God and man, of course – he uniquely is fully divine and fully human. Indeed, Scripture itself gives us a picture of the saints offering prayer to God in heaven under the form of 'golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints' (Revelation 5.8, NRSV; cf. Revelation 8.3).

When we ask for the prayers of the saints we are powerfully reminded of the Communion of Saints, of our union with all those who have gone before us, and of our heavenly goal. We are never alone on our Christian pilgrimage, for we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews

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12.1), and we can even learn from the way the saints have prayed throughout history, considering the challenges they faced and seeking encouragement from their fortitude. In meditating on the lives of the saints, we will find new insights into the Christian life and examples we can relate to and aspire to.

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