

The Lord's Prayer - Biblical commentary

“Our Father which art in Heaven.....”

These are not the actual words Jesus gave us to speak when we pray. ‘The Lord’s Prayer’, from the 17th century Book of Common Prayer is a translation of the words written in Greek in St. Matthew’s Gospel. A similar version is recorded in St. Luke’s account. Did Jesus give his disciples this prayer in Greek? This is unlikely, although it was the language of the occupying Roman power in those days.

According to Luke, one of Jesus’ disciples asked him to teach them to pray, as John the Baptist had taught his followers. Why did they need to be taught to pray? Wasn’t it common practice?

In the synagogue, scriptural readings were in Hebrew, and the psalms would be sung in Hebrew. Jesus could certainly read and understand this. I surmise that prayers in the synagogue were probably in that ancient tongue; as certainly they were in the temple at Jerusalem.

But the common speech of the land in Jesus’ day was Aramaic: Jesus must have used this language in addressing the crowds and talking with his family.

We know that Jesus felt close to God and addressed Him as ‘Father’. Which language did he use when alone with God? This is not ours to know. But as he chose his followers from his Galilean neighbours, I am sure he taught them to pray in easy Aramaic.

I do not believe that Jesus responded to the request by teaching them just one prayer. ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ is most likely a summary of his course of teaching them to pray, with all the elements we should be using in our prayers.

Firstly, we can approach God as ‘Our Father; we can trust in his loving relationship and care for us. He is ‘in Heaven’, that is, in another world or dimension: we cannot see him or locate him in a place or object, but he knows and sees us, he is close by.

The given prayer pattern moves on to worship.’ Hallowed’ is something more than ‘highly respected’ or ‘revered’, containing a sense of the awe and worship due to the Maker of all things. We need more than a line in a short prayer to move us into that worshipping mode! Giving God thanks for all his gifts and the wonders of his creation may be part of the way we ‘hallow his name’! We pray that ‘God’s Kingdom’ might come. When God’s reign is fully established, the poor will be lifted from poverty and exploitation, disease and disability will be overcome, war and crime will no longer happen. Our intercessions are directed towards establishing this good outcome. When we see God’s will being done we shall live in loving harmony with all our fellow human beings ‘in Earth as it is in Heaven’.

The part of prayer for our daily needs, ‘Give us our bread for today’ is surprisingly terse: our intention is directed to building God’s kingdom. When we ask for forgiveness, we need to declare our willingness to forgive others. “Forgive us....as we forgive them....” (See Matt 18; 23 - 35 for a parable underlining this need.)

‘Lead us not into temptation...’ God does not deliberately put us into the way of temptation: we actually need to be given strength to resist the temptations that inevitably occur. Much of the evil from which we need to be delivered arises from within us when we surrender to such temptations. Of course there are also oppressive evils which impinge upon us and our fellow people from which we might pray for deliverance.

The honorific ending, “yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory” only occurs in Matthew’s Gospel, and not in all the ancient manuscripts. In Matthew’s text Jesus

then reverts to emphasising the need to forgive others before we can receive forgiveness; this suggests to me that the concluding praise was probably added to the prayer as a suitable conclusion in the early church.

Luke, however, follows the prayer lesson with Jesus emphasising that we should recognise God as our loving Father willing to give his children good gifts, particularly the Holy Spirit to those who ask for it (Luke 11: 9 - 13).

Both accounts are consistent with Jesus’ teaching. They were written down years after the occasion, and after such time it is not always easy to remember the sequence of events: but Jesus’ teaching shines through.

All Christian denominations have preserved and used the Lord’s Prayer, and when we meet as part of our quest for unity our worship often concludes with ‘the prayer that Jesus taught us’. I feel most strongly that this should not be a ritual incantation in an ancient tongue, but that we pray it as honestly as our understanding enables us. After all, the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory belong to God our Father.

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