

# *The Lord's Prayer*

*An exposition of the prayer  
of the Christian church*

Bruce Barber

## Lenten Studies 2017

This material has been re-edited from an earlier version published by *The Forum on Faith and Society* (1993)

The present version has been prepared for congregational studies in North Melbourne and Hawthorn during Lent, 2017.

The studies will treat the text in four meetings:

Week 1 Sections 1-3

Week 2 Sections 4-6

Week 3 Sections 7-8

Week 4 Sections 9-12

You are encouraged to read the material each week in preparation for contributing to a discussion about it in the sessions. Scriptural passages important for each section are indicated under the number of each section.

Bruce Barber is a now retired minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. From 1973 to 1985 he was engaged in an experimental ministry in the then North Melbourne Methodist Mission, with a focus being the largely well educated “unchurched” in a rapidly gentrifying inner-city community. These addresses, compiled in those years, constituted one attempt at a retrieval of a foundational Christian text in such an environment.

In the years from 1977 to his retirement in 2001, Bruce was Dean of, and Lecturer in Systematic Theology in, the United Faculty of Theology, Melbourne.



### The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial and  
deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours  
now and for ever. Amen.

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## Foreword

Having attempted in an earlier series to provide a commentary on the Apostles' Creed, a certain momentum was established which led to the decision to attempt something similar, with another even more central confession of the Church – the Lord's Prayer.

Like its predecessor, what follows makes no attempt at being original (although what is taken to be important and what is regarded as being less helpful must always express a writer's originality), but was compiled with a particular congregation in view, and to meet certain needs within the life of that congregation.

Each phrase of the Lord's Prayer is introduced by "a text", either an extended passage or a single verse. The exposition of the Lord's Prayer, which could stand without any such support, is taken in association with these readings. Each was used in the Sunday services, supporting the theme, as it were, of each of the phrases of the Lord's Prayer.

The actual text of the prayer is one that is beginning to be adopted in Catholic and Anglican liturgies. It is used in what follows both to express an ecumenical solidarity and, even more importantly, to encourage a new generation to learn the Lord's Prayer in a language more nearly suited to its own day. What is lost in familiarity and association to an older generation will, it is hoped, make understanding and faith a greater possibility for our children.

The preacher offers this volume conscious not only that for himself the Lord's Prayer is a prayer committed to memory so quickly, but so slowly learnt by heart, but also that Christians can never discover too frequently that "this is certainly the very best prayer that ever came to earth". (Martin Luther).

*Bruce Barber  
North Melbourne  
August, 1980*

## Preface to the second edition

The following expositions of the Lord's Prayer were prepared and delivered at the morning worship of a particular congregation over ten years ago. At the time they were made available to interested people by the Hotham Parish Office in bound manuscript form, and they have been used from time to time by local church groups in the intervening years.

Their publication in this form is the result of the initiative of the Forum on Faith and Society, to whom my warm thanks are due.

Since they now have a more public presentation, detached from the liturgical context, I am acutely aware of their heavy dependence on significant scholars, which requires acknowledgement. Those who are familiar with theological sources will readily identify not merely the concepts but at times the actual language of such figures as Jacques Ellul, Gerhard Ebeling, Helmut Thielieke, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Yoder, Joseph Sittler, Alec Vidler and doubtless others, the names of whom from this distance escape me. If there is any "originality" in what follows it will essentially be that of threading others' pearls on to a string which one hopes will not break under their weight.

I have chosen to make very few changes apart from removing what today would be regarded as extreme sexist language. Undoubtedly some readers will not regard the modifications made as sufficiently rigorous, but the extent of recasting required to meet all sensitivities is, in my own view, out of proportion to the final result.

I would like publicly to thank Mrs. Dot Stevens who undertook the initial task in 1980 of typing and assembling the material from my dubious handwriting.

If the publication of these sermons assists people ten years later to focus on the heart of the Christian faith when that centre is arguably less accessible, I shall consider their further publication worthwhile.

*February 1991*

### **Preface to the third edition**

Some thirty seven years after their initial compilation and delivery at the then monthly services of Holy Communion in the congregation of the North Melbourne Methodist Mission, the suggestion has been made to consider a further republication of these addresses. The viability of such a proposal has occasioned genuine misgivings. Clearly, after such a long interval, to presume that a reissue is feasible presents a good many challenges. Significant contextual changes over the ensuing years are many and varied. The wider culture generally finds itself much further distant from any real exposure to Christian faith, and churches frequently appear to be more interested in other matters than giving themselves to deeper immersion in their basic texts. Then, too, it is obvious that an author's own subsequent living with such a text as the Lord's Prayer exposes profound inadequacies with any former attempt at expounding a document of such pivotal significance.

However, the vicissitudes of the day certainly suggest as much as ever a requirement to give public shape to the Church's irrevocable charter to be steward of that objective faith, hope and love that has been given to it. In this confidence, this revised third edition, with an extended introduction, has been undertaken.

*February 2016*

# 1

1 Kings 8.20-29, 36-39  
Romans 8.26-27  
Matthew 6.5-9

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## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER

Wherever liturgical Christian worship takes place, an invitation will be offered for the congregation to say together *The Lord's Prayer*. Such a bidding has been able to be taken for granted in Western societies for centuries, even if its very familiarity may readily lead to an unthinking formulaic recital. It is increasingly apparent, however, that where the wider community is present at funerals or weddings in a Christian context, there is either a refusal, or an incapacity, to respond to the invitation.

This is not the place to offer an explanation as to why this is the case, but as a way of introduction to the Lord's Prayer it may prove useful for us to appreciate, at least in part, what Christian prayer is in comparison with other forms of prayer. We might also consider the changed situation today as compared with New Testament times and the greater part of the history of the church, so that the whole phenomenon of prayer has become unconvincing, if not totally irrelevant, for great masses of people not only without but also within the active life of the church.

There are, we are told, just so many reasons for not praying. Here are some of them:

Can one still pray when one sees clearly the lack of answers to most prayers?

What significance can prayer have which is addressed to a God who decides arbitrarily, it seems, what he is going to do?

Is it possible to imagine God's will being changed because of our prayer?

If God is really God, how could he modify his decision as a result of human stammering?

If God is really God, has he not already foreseen everything, including our prayer, which is then useless?

If God already knows the needs of his creatures, because he loves us, why should we need to ask?

So the questions come. That they should do so is inevitable, given that they are invariably learned responses from the sort of descriptions of prayer as we find them in standard dictionaries. Here is one taken at random: prayer is “*any activity aimed at entering into communication with a being or beings not normally apprehensible to the senses, but believed to be no less real and generally more powerful than human beings.*” The picture such descriptions convey is that of prayer as “a heavenly telephone”. If there is a hot line to Moscow, why should there not be a device for communicating with someone who is even further away than the Kremlin? We all understand this picture of prayer as a kind of instrument, a gadget. I hold my prayer as a person would who is listening on the telephone, and I talk into it. We have become so used to this way of understanding things that those who are satisfied with it, as well as those who find it unconvincing, assume that prayer is something which we engage in when we want something we cannot easily obtain, or when we fear something which we do not know how to avoid by our own means. And if conditions change, if we are able to satisfy our own desires or reassure ourselves against our own fears, we will, it seems, quite simply give up praying. That is to say, prayer exists only for want of something better. “If it does no good, it does no harm”, goes the popular sentiment. This is prayer on the “off chance” and, in the last analysis, the prayer of unbelief or, to use the language of the New Testament, the prayer of the Gentiles.

So it is that dictionary definitions of prayer, understood as they are in the prevailing culture, invariably illustrate three fundamental assumptions. The first is the assumption that all human prayer is the same: that Christian prayer is only one illustration of a universal phenomenon. The second is the assumption that prayer is natural to human beings, as – for example – in the twentieth century wartime observation that “there are no atheists in foxholes”. The third assumption is that prayer is a human work quantifiably measurable, its consequences likely to be taking effect in proportion to its magnitude.

It is not my desire to caricature in all this but to attempt a summary of a view of prayer that is not far from any of us. In any case, it is important to feel the force of this understanding if we are to appreciate how far it is from the view of prayer which Jesus and Paul understood. And that is as good a way of saying how critical it is to absorb the fact that Christian prayer is not simply ringing the changes on any sort of general prayer, but is quite distinct; it is a radical critique of every manifestation of what we have been describing.

The fact is that we need to acknowledge two critical presuppositions if we are to understand better what is involved in the invitation to make the Lord's Prayer our own. The first presupposition is that Christian prayer is unique and the second is that the Lord's Prayer urges the future into the present.

### **1. Christian Prayer is unique.**

The best way to substantiate this assertion is to offer some New Testament texts which illustrate how the sort of popular assumptions about prayer already suggested are radically controverted in the New Testament. So, for example, consider the following:

Hebrews 7.23 – 8.2, where *Jesus* assumes responsibility for human prayer;

Romans 8.22-27, which informs us that *we* do not know how to pray;

Matthew 26.36-41, describing Christian prayer as a call to *watch over* Jesus' prayer;

1 Thessalonians 5.16, making Christian prayer something not episodic but *unceasing*;

Matthew 6.5-9, the introduction to the Lord's Prayer, indicating two foundations: first, that Jesus has to *teach* his disciples to pray, and, second, that your Father already *knows* what you need.

If we put all this together we can see how far we find ourselves from the bland designations of prayer in the dictionaries and in popular understanding, illustrating again that, as with so much else in the Bible, it is very difficult to be confronted by anything more radical than this Christian reconstitution of "prayer".

What then is the difference between any old prayer and truly Christian prayer? In a sentence it is this – the general concept of prayer is a response to human emptiness, human need, our lack of one thing or another; Christian prayer, on the other hand, is a response to fullness: the richness and abundance that is the life and being of God which waits to take expression in the world. Depressing emptiness on the one hand, anticipatory fullness on the other. What might that mean?

For a start, the latter is certainly the understanding of Jesus in our reading from Matthew: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: 'Our Father...'" Here Christians are commanded to pray – and we note in passing that the only reason for praying is that we are commanded to do so by the Lord – and, second, we are told that Christians are commanded to pray, not in the first instance because of our human needs but because of God's "need". If we cannot achieve that turn around in our understanding, then let us as Christians give up all pretence of praying, and be like contemporary Gentiles who have no interest in understanding a need that God has, and so do not pray.

The fact is that the Lord's Prayer is given to us as the quintessential Christian prayer because Christian prayer is quite different from "spontaneous" prayer which in various crisis circumstances might spring from human hearts. As already suggested, we need to learn that with regard to prayer that may qualify as Christian it is the case that Jesus had to teach his disciples to pray. His disciples were Jews, but Jews know how to pray. So Jews, too, had to learn a prayer different from "spontaneous" prayer. In the same way, Christian prayer is learned prayer – the opposite of talkativeness, of careless words, of uncertain, inappropriate words centred on our own need. The "Our Father" is clearly not an expression of our self-identified needs. Christians above all should have grasped that it is futile to dissolve into numerous laments before God over what we suppose to be our needs. Either God knows our human needs, even those of the millions of starving, homeless refugees in the world, or they are not really genuine needs, but merely contrived advertising "necessities" projected by our consumer society. With all this sort of thing put to one side, says Jesus: "Pray then, like this ..."

The model furnished by Jesus is then the anti-consumer prayer *par excellence*. For it is centred on God's needs, not ours, and therefore as far as we are concerned, it is centred on his fullness not our emptiness. It requires that we realize that God has need that "his name be hallowed" by the entire creation, and that "his will be freely obeyed, loved and recognised by us; that we realise that God is not far away at the end of a royal telephone, but in Jesus has come close to us all – so close that he can't live as he would without us, and for this

reason only, certainly we can't live as we ought without him. In his need he comes so close to us that what is lacking for him is for us unimaginable fullness.

If we have come this far, then we are in a position to understand better what Paul means in his conviction that in the last analysis we do not know what the content of our prayer should be, but that the Holy Spirit “intercedes with sighs too deep for words”. We usually understand this as though the Holy Spirit added a little something to our prayer. We pray, but not very well. Our words then become “the help us” prayer; knowing that our prayer may well be incomplete and so unsatisfactory, fortunately the Holy Spirit helps the situation by completing what we are unable to say. All this, however, is beside the point if we take our bearings from the prayer given to us by Jesus. For it is the *entire* prayer which is the prayer of the Holy Spirit; it is not my little story, my fears and desires which I have to tell to God as I would to a psychiatrist, a judge or a priest. It is the statement, the proclamation in all of its aspects and implications, and now – but only now – including *also* my fears and desires, of the life led with the living God; that is to say, it is not “my” life of which we imagine God knows nothing without being told, but it is the life which I receive from God, and which unfolds in a mutual story, which is to be the content of Christian prayer.

And this brings us to the second critical presupposition which we need to have before us if we wish to enter more deeply into the content of the Lord's Prayer:

## **2. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer that urges the future into the present.**

That is to say, it runs from the “end” backwards, not from the “middle” forwards. What this means is that although the Lord's Prayer is placed in the context of the ministry of Jesus and looks like a model prayer taught by the pre-Easter Jesus, it is rather an “eschatological” prayer.

What does this mean? It means that Jesus' personal address to the Father (“Abba”) in his ministry has been transformed for his Church into a communal address so that Jesus' “Abba” has now become our Father *through his cross and resurrection*. To put it another way, the prayer which the Gospels of Matthew and Luke put on the lips of the pre-Easter Jesus in fact receives its content as the *Lord's Prayer* on the *post-Easter* side of the world's repudiation of the reign of God. That repudiation is seen in Jesus' death on the cross, with Jesus' true identity as Lord being given in his “Abba's” vindication of his ministry in the resurrection. In this way, because the resurrection is now understood to be an event in the being of God, God has become the Father “for us”, as the Father of the Son he has always been.

The Lord's Prayer thus brings the Father's future time into our present. The prayer for the coming of the Kingdom is best understood as invoking the new “time” of God. Turning to the Father of the Son is to be understood as a turning to the future without which there is only an extended present of the triumph of the world's chaos. So the Lord's Prayer is essentially the Christian community's prayer for the establishment of God's “eternal” time in the world, and of our urgent necessity to participate in that time. This is what is meant by the Lord's Prayer being an eschatological prayer through and through. Consequently, everything in the prayer centres on the action of the Father, not our own. It is instructive in this respect that there is, for example, no petition asking God to make us sanctified, devout, believing persons.

As we make our way through each of the petitions of the prayer, we will need to keep before us this action of God calling us into a radically new future that God intends for his creation as an ever-present gift. Christian prayer, then, begins, continues and ends in the reality which is God. If Christians should still want to speak of prayer as a problem, of difficulties in praying, and so on, that is in reality to raise the problem we have of faith in this God in the world today. When people in all sincerity ask: "What meaning does prayer have for human beings today?" a compelling answer must take the shape of the unique character of Jesus' prayer. In any event, and in all ages, true Christian prayer has always been an expression of faith in the God who has identified himself, and come amongst us, in the person of the Son. If, for the Christian, prayer becomes impossible, dead, troublesome or uncertain, that does not spring in the first instance from all the usual causes we have heard again and again. The sole basic problem – and here one should speak only in personal terms – is that I do not make the decision to repent of the conventional view of prayer, since I do not take seriously the commandment of Jesus: "Pray then like this..."

Jesus' prayer, then, is a mirror in which we are called to contemplate our situation. In his prayer we see ourselves as the Father sees us. Since this is a real encounter with God, not to pray should not cause us to shut ourselves up even more in the hard fact of the absence of faith. We should rather attempt to take to ourselves that attitude which becomes the open door to all prayer, and with our New Testament contemporary confess: "I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9. 24).

And if the "Our Father" of Jesus is a mirror in which we see reflected our true selves before God, should we not have the courage to continue in, and better learn, his prayer, which as we know is committed to memory so quickly but is so slowly learnt by heart?

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# 2

1 Kings 8.22, 23, 27-30  
Matthew 4. 17

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## OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

In making our way through the Lord's Prayer it will be necessary to have in our minds one thing by way of introduction to each phrase. And that one thing will simply be this: that it really is the *Lord's* Prayer that we are about, and not, as may well seem to be the case, a model prayer to God taught by Jesus "the Teacher".

What does that distinction mean? It means taking with the utmost seriousness the fact that the whole gospel is unfolded from the standpoint of Easter Day, that is to say, from the standpoint of the church's experience of the presence of the crucified Jesus confessed as Lord. And if the whole gospel is unfolded this way, then the Lord's Prayer too is to be understood *this* side of Easter, not the *other* side, as if Easter had never happened. And isn't that largely how we have grown up treating the New Testament – understanding it like any other unfolding biography, starting at the beginning with the birth of the subject, watching the maturing process and the significant things that are said and done, then culminating with a decline, retirement and death?

But with the story of Jesus it is quite different; it is to be read from the end – his exaltation as Lord – backwards into the meaning of his life and ministry. That is what was meant by drawing the contrast between confessing this to be the Lord's Prayer and repeating it merely as the model prayer to God taught by Jesus the Teacher to his followers. Every word, every phrase, will receive its meaning, not from some notion of God and life dreamt up by a contemplative "Buddha like" Jesus teaching a universal truth, but every word and phrase will receive its meaning from the *end* of this unique life, from the truth which is given in the death of this particular one, and in his vindication by God's act of raising him from the dead.

We are invited to make this distinction our own, for it is really quite vital if we are to come to a mature understanding of what it is we pray every Sunday in the words of the Lord's Prayer. Of course, the gospel writers Matthew and Luke (the prayer does not occur in Mark or John), put the Lord's prayer on the lips of the earthly Jesus, but they make it clear that it cannot be prayed, which is to say it cannot be lived, until the teaching Jesus has reached his goal. Jesus has to be seen by his followers to enter into his Lordship. We ought not to be surprised, therefore, that Jesus' prayer has likewise to *become* the Lord's Prayer.

See what this difference means then in saying “Our Father in Heaven.” If it were not for Jesus’ life and death, “Our Father in Heaven” could just as well be “God up there”. And who can make anything of that? But because it is the Lord’s Prayer, a vague God-shaped blank has become “our Father” and “in heaven”, *means that the distant one has come close to each of us*. According to Jesus, “the Kingdom of Heaven” is amongst us (plural), which means either pressing to become an actuality in the Church, or as potential realisation for the wider culture. Everything, quite literally, is different from what is conventionally thought to be the case. And, sadly, Christians are just as capable of being as conventional as those who have no interest in being Christian. If we do nothing else now but simply understand better why “Our Father in Heaven” does not mean “a God up there”, we will have started exploring a discovery where all things are possible.

So let us consider first this phrase “in heaven”. The Old Testament reading makes it quite clear that it has always been a foolish notion to believe that God is “where heaven is”. Solomon’s temple dedication prayer is only one instance where it is known that God is one “whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, much less this building made with hands”. That is to say, God is free to make himself known when and where he pleases. And that is just what Jesus recognises when he begins his ministry with the words: “*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*”. In other words, the whole ministry of Jesus will indicate what heaven means, namely the kingly presence of God upon earth. If heaven for Jesus is understood to be “where God is”, and if God is in the man Jesus as the Church believes, then “Our Father in Heaven” means God present on earth, as the One who transforms this hurting, chaotic world into a reconciled, joyful creation.

People who are serious about life – and that presumably includes us – often speak of the need to “rise above” our hurts and disappointments, to endure the slings and arrows of our misfortune with resignation and confidence of a brighter tomorrow. That would be true if our prayer was to “God up there” – where else could we go but to rise above our troubles to a “risen up God” in “heaven”. But the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father in Heaven”, recognises that in Jesus Christ God has come to us, and amongst us, and as one of us, enduring our hurts with his own gift of healing, bringing heaven – the very life and presence of God – into our very midst.

He does this, of course, through the victory of his Cross. In his resurrection, God vindicates the crucified sonship of Jesus. God reveals him in the world as the faithful son true to his calling. So in the resurrection of Jesus, God shows himself to be the Father of *this* Son, which means that if we share the Son’s risen life, we too have the privilege of knowing God as “Father”. That is to say, the resurrection is an event in the life of God; it is the Father who raises the Son, in the power of the Spirit. As such, the resurrection is not subject to microbiological tests, as many might imagine, either as support or refutation of its claim.

Nothing could be more important than holding to this gift. The conventional view looks at the world and – on the basis of beautiful sunsets, happy and peaceful human relationships, feelings of achievement, particular religious experiences – has found no difficulty in calling God “Father”, even though today many are manifestly uncomfortable with such patriarchal language. But whether then or today, when the storms come, our world collapses, we are alone, failure follows failure, and the “Father/Mother God” dissolves into a void. When will we learn that life in the world is always ambiguous – for everything that is good in it there is always something – and usually much more – that is evil? So to believe one day in the

projected God of “the world”, is likely the next day to find oneself unable so to believe, that is to be, in effect, a “practical”, even if unintended, atheist.

The point here, of course, is that God is “Father” not because this is thought to be a once culturally appropriate, but now inappropriate, human form of address. Rather God is “Father” because there is a “Son”. If we hold to the Lord’s Prayer we too may, come what may, dare to call God “Father”, “the Name” who has drawn near to us in Jesus Christ: Jesus Christ who himself, in the name of God, experienced the utter desolation of being abandoned by God and the world, but upon whom God’s ultimate benediction rested. It is this God who, in so honouring the Son, established his name as “Father” for ever.

So may we too, then, from this same Son learn what it is to pray: *Our Father in Heaven*.

# 3

John 17. 1-6, 20-21, 25-26

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## HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME

We can best understand this request by observing at the outset two things that are not said. First, there is nothing here about asking God to make *us* hallowed, sanctified, devout, believing persons. Here again we may draw a contrast between the conventional view of prayer and the uniquely Christian understanding. For what has to be hallowed, according to Jesus, is not ourselves as we often like to imagine, but “the name” of God. That is surely worth reflecting upon.

Second, there is nothing here about *us* hallowing God’s name either, as we might have expected. Rather are we calling on the Father to hallow the Father’s name. We note the passive voice: only the Father can hallow the Father’s name. We are accustomed to hearing that what counts in the religious life is what we do for God, that we owe God praise and honour. That is certainly true, but look carefully at what is happening in the Lord’s Prayer – not “we hallow your name”, but “Hallowed be your name”, that is to say, may *you* be God for us, *may* you be “Our Father”, not by our way of making you Father, but by your way of making yourself known as Father for us.

These observations tell us something of the form of this petition, but what of its content? What do we make of the word “hallow” and of the word “name”? A comment on each may be helpful. First, the word “hallow” is a verb derived from the word God and belongs inseparably to God as in the Alleluia – Hallelujah, literally “Praise, the Lord”. “Hallowed be your name” then is our urgent prayer that God himself will honour or praise his name. The verb in its Greek form implies an action that takes place once only, and therefore looks to a final fulfilment in which God will be all in all. But, and this is the significant thing, this request will soon be fulfilled in Jesus – “Father, glorify your name” says Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion. Again, we remind ourselves, it is literally the *Lord’s* Prayer. In his cross and resurrection, an event in the heart of the trinitarian God has become at the same time an event in the world. Therefore “God happens”, we can say. God himself honours his name in Jesus, and therefore honours us in him.

Second, we are reminded here of a fact of great significance for the Old Testament, namely the importance of the name of God. The “name” is not a label of identification as it is so often for us, a label detachable from who I am. In the Old Testament, “the name”, whether of God, or Israel, or a particular individual, is the reality itself. This means in our context

that not until God's name is honoured can he really be God for us, because God's "name" is the same thing as God's "presence".

What we call primitive cultures still know the power of the name, when to kill an enemy all that is required is to write the opponent's name on a tablet and bore a hole through it and he dies. In the same way, to know God's name is to know his presence and his power. And if he has hallowed his name as Father in his Son, then we honour the Father by honouring the hallowing of himself in Jesus Christ, whom people like us put to death, inconceivable though that be. Yet the Father did not allow us to have the last word, but hallowed his name by honouring the Son, "giving him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, things in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father". (Philippians 2. 9-11)

This Lord and his destiny is where God "hallows his name." For us to invoke this prayer is to ask that this name become real for our time, in the world, in our history. In effect we are asking that God's deity be experienced as humanity. The fact that this has already happened in the Son is the ground for expecting that the promise will happen again and again, bringing his already accomplished will into our present. So we have with this petition begun to tread a path from which our prayer, if it be truly Christian, must never deviate.

## 4

Isaiah 11. 1-5  
Matthew 11. 1-6  
Colossians 1. 11-17

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**YOUR KINGDOM COME**

If we were to think of one word which best sums up the feeling of what it is to be alive in the modern world, the word “time” says it all. “Time” one way or another is usually present somewhere in our conversation or our consciousness. We often complain that we either have too much time at either end of our lives, or not enough time during our middle years. So “time” is either not full enough, or too full for what we need to do. This is equally true of us both as individuals and as a society confronting massive problems on a global scale – the inexorable warming of the planet, millions of starving refugees, dwindling energy resources, large scale unemployment – these and other issues will, it is judged, overwhelm us or be solved by us if “time” is a possibility.

It was not always so, this awareness of time as constituting human experience. For centuries it has not been “time” that has absorbed us so much as “space” – the period of so-called Western expansion when all sorts of boundaries were pushed back, geographical spaces and astral spaces, the rise of the physical sciences and the growth of technology, all have given us possibilities of new space. Not surprisingly, what happens in the secular consciousness is also true of our religious imagery. In the Christian West, the category of space has dominated the thinking both of the church and culture. For example, ask yourself what your first quick mental picture of these Biblical words is: God – heaven – hell – soul. I would wager for a good many of us, God is the God “up there”, not perhaps in the caricature of an old man in the sky, but even more sophisticated thoughts, for example the omnipresence or “ever-here-ness” of God are always spatial in nature. And we all know what has happened to heaven and hell – they are spaces with a vengeance. And the elusive “soul” of man? Well, we say man *has* a soul just like he *has* a body, and we understand both to occupy spaces.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the same thing has happened to this word “*kingdom*” in the Lord’s Prayer. It has become a space, God’s territory, as it were. Corresponding to the kingdoms of the world, which cannot be anything but spatial, we visualise God’s kingdom as a heavenly space, a celestial condition, a pure state. And in all this we can easily imagine that we are being faithful to the Bible. So it may come as something of a shock to discover that these past centuries when “space” has pre-occupied us are really an aberration from the standpoint of the Bible, which from first to last page is about “time” – from “*When God began ...*” of Genesis 1 to “*Even so Come Lord Jesus*” of Revelation 22. We may note in passing that the fact that the Bible is all about time and the fact that we moderns are infatuated by time should

make Christian communication compelling and illuminating for our contemporaries. Whether that will happen or not depends on whether Christians shake off their cultural shackles and become as contemporary as the biblical God. The so-called “mission” of the Church, its outreach as we call it, consists of nothing more than Christians being able to tell the time *now* for the world, rather than as is often the case, telling the world what time it *was*.

“Telling the time” is in fact only to resurrect in our own time what the word “Kingdom” meant for the New Testament Church. We can never ponder too often the fact that the name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is a name which is about time, not space. God’s name is “*I will be there as I will be there*” (Exodus 3. 14). The “Kingdom” of this God, then, is the time when the life and purpose of the world meshes with the intentions of its Creator. The fact that John the Baptist’s mission points to the coming Kingdom; that Jesus proclaims the advent of that Kingdom, and demonstrates signs of it in his words and deeds; that he inaugurates it in the face of human hostility on his bloody cross; and that he himself receives it in the totally unexpected relinquishing of the power of death in his resurrection – all this comes together in the triumphant and exultant confession of the New Testament that in Jesus Christ the world has reached its end, its goal; “the time” has come, the new world is here, apart from him God has nothing more to say. Before him, the world faced the future looking forwards, after *him* the world goes to meet the future walking backwards as it were. He is the fulcrum on which all history moves. He is the end of time in the middle of time. In him human judgement has already taken place. In him the life of God destined for the whole creation has begun. In him the time of God breaks upon this weary restless world. The time of God is here. The future is now.

Why, then, do Christians pray: “Your Kingdom come?” They do so simply because what has happened in him must become a reality for us: for our grasp of the Lord’s Prayer, for our world and for us. Why shouldn’t the world in which we live really be like the world which Jesus invokes for us in his parables of the kingdom? Why shouldn’t life really be like a banquet where a father and two sons eat the fatted calf together, where irresponsibility and a legal sense of duty are transcended by joy? Why shouldn’t the rewards of God be measured by his grace rather than man’s deserts, as they are for the labourers in the vineyard who are paid the same wages regardless of when they started work? Why shouldn’t the goal of life for all of us be the discerning of the precious pearl for the sake of which we are prepared to sacrifice all lesser jewels? Why shouldn’t our relationship with God be as it is for the importunate widow who keeps on asking, or the friend at midnight who keeps on knocking, even when the circumstances appear inappropriate? Far from the common fatalistic view of faith which is quietly submissive to what is taken to be “the will of God”, Jesus calls for a faith which refuses to take “no” for an answer and always expects great, even unreasonable, things from God.

So we could go on, letting Jesus’ parables of the kingdom, like shafts of light in a dark room, illuminate for us the purpose of life, what life should be and perhaps most importantly of all, what it is destined to be. So we pray, “your kingdom come” knowing that it has already come in Jesus Christ, and because it has come in him, so in the fullness of time it will come for this whole creation, ‘groaning in its birth pangs’, as Paul reminds us and as we only too well know, waiting for the reconciliation of all things.

All this is why we choose the little word “time” to replace, or better to fill out, for us the word “Kingdom. The “time” of God has come in Christ, the future is already here, and so now we and all ages yet to come proceed into that future, not reluctantly looking at the ground, nor in fantasy at the distant horizon, nor stolidly at the back of the one walking in front of us, but as it were – and here all images really break down – expectantly, looking over our shoulder at the man of Nazareth who, as the one who has reached the goal, travels with us and ahead of us, for his Church like Yahweh for his people of old, ‘a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night’.

To pray “Your Kingdom come”, then, is a turning to the future which is God’s future, yet a future which has already come. This “having come” is the only basis on which it makes sense to look to the future, otherwise such a course of action would be visionary, or romantic, or escapist. And the Christian future is none of these things, no matter how many times ignorant commentators parrot otherwise. And this “having come” of the future is why the person of Jesus Christ is indispensable to the Lord’s prayer, why, as we said on an earlier occasion, it really is *this Lord’s Prayer* we pray, not some model prayer separable from the One who gives it to us. Apart from Jesus, who brings the future who is God into our present time, there would be no warrant for praying: “*Your Kingdom – your fulfilled time – come*”.

The truth is that this prayer: “*Your kingdom come*”, makes time controversial. It tells us that true time is not clock time – the spaces on a watch, the days on a calendar, the years on a tombstone – but true time is hope, that is to say, living in the reality of that which is coming to meet us. Jesus came to make the present controversial – to bring fire on the earth, to bring a sword not peace. What makes time controversial is the question whether it is time that is empty, hopeless, void of future, or whether it is time that is fulfilled, hopeful, filled to the brim, so to speak, with future.

This is the gift of time, the kingdom Jesus came to bring; this quest for meaningful time is what our modern world is thirsting for. God and the world, here as in all things, belong together. On behalf of the whole creation Christians, then, are those privileged to pray: “*Your kingdom come*”, which is to say “Your time, in truth, be our time”, not just for you, not just for me, but for all creation.

## 5

John 6. 35-40

**YOUR WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN**

“It’s the will of God – we must learn to live with it.” How many times have we heard that? And how often has it been said in the face of the most appalling circumstances – the tragic death of a young child by motor accident, the prediction of cancer, the destruction of thousands of innocent people by earthquake or flood, a plane crash which in an instant removes 300 people from life. Is this what we are to learn from the Lord’s Prayer in the words: “Your will be done on earth as in heaven”? Is Jesus here offering us a ritual of resignation, a prayer panacea? Is this what Jesus himself had to learn in the Garden of Gethsemane – to become resigned to his fate: “Father let this cup pass from me, nevertheless not my will but yours be done.”? God forbid!

Let it be said right at the outset that with these words “Your will be done” we stand on a knife edge. We are either at the very heart of the profundity of true faith, or we are revealed to be those who are far from the truth. In our hands, the words: “Your will be done” may be the most destructive, passive, hopeless, death dealing words. Whether illuminating or crushing, in both cases, as customarily occurs where truth is at stake, the words remain the same – what is at issue is what we take them to be saying. An apparent high point of trust: “Your will be done”, may be no more than a high point of futility. This ought not to surprise us. None of the words of the Lord’s Prayer is, so to speak, of peculiarly Christian origin. Each in one form or another is already present in the tradition of Israel. This implies that not one of its petitions guarantees *by its wording* that it will be understood in terms of its true foundation. Wherever the human race seeks to pray, we find echoes of such words whether faint or clear – especially prayer to know the will of God. That need not cause us any uncertainty with regard to the uniqueness of the Lord’s Prayer. On the contrary, it shows how completely the whole human race in all its need, in all its distress and longing, is here drawn up into the simplest of words, but must now also be drawn out of the tangle of misunderstandings into the simple truth. It is no wonder that the confusion is especially great when we come to speak of world events in the context of the will of God. For here all are involved, whether on a narrower or a wider scale – Christians, Jews, the Islamic world, the Eastern contemplative and ascetic religions – and not only all these world religions, but also the godless and the would be neutrals. Everybody is involved.

The prayer: “*Your will be done*”, consequently can be uttered in a variety of ways. There is a dark side to these words which may show itself in the desire to make of religious faith a

matter of convenience, and this prayer a convenience of faith. It can mean no more than “What is the point of tiring myself out”? God, in any event, will only do what he has in mind, and in the final analysis whatever happens will always be “the will of God.” “Your will be done” then becomes a means of hiding, of avoiding the questions of God and real life. It says in effect “I know very well that you will never do anything other than your will, and that nothing is left for me to do but to give in.” It now becomes a prayer of the absence of faith because it is a prayer of indifference based on the conviction that it is impossible to communicate with God or co-operate with him. It becomes a formula thrown in on the off-chance. We should not, therefore, put our confidence in a formula, even one that comes from the Lord himself. Its content can vary greatly. It can be the very opposite of its liberating potential.

The difference between “*Your will be done*” as a fatalistic prayer and as a prayer of faith becomes apparent when we change the word “God”, with all that that word has come to mean by its association with all sorts of doubtful images, to the words “Our Father” as the Lord’s Prayer has already done for us by saying at the very beginning “Our Father in Heaven” not “God in Heaven”. Those two words do not necessarily mean the same thing; indeed the whole point of Christian faith is to change the word God into the word Father, for according to the New Testament God becomes Father in the raising of the “Son”, Jesus, from the dead. He is not called “Father” as some patriarchal projection based on human experience in the world; he is called “Father” because he has a Son who *shows* him to be Father. Without the Son there might still be God, but there would be no Father. So when we pray “*Your will be done*”, what we must have before us in the word “your” is not some impersonal blurred sense of deity but, as it were, the human face of God which comes into focus as when the lens of a camera defines the subject. We will not refer to such a faceless “God” again, but only to the Father – “our Father”. When this happens we are on the way towards true and helpful prayer. And we go further towards a right understanding that will encourage us to pray this petition when we come back once more to the exact wording: “*Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.*” This means that the world stands in contradiction to itself because it finds itself at war, as it were, with the Father. Jesus makes it very clear to us in the Lord’s Prayer that the Father’s will is not being done among us. “*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” is to pray: “may heaven come upon earth and the earth become heaven”. May the realm of hostility to the Father be broken, and the will of the Father be openly done in us and by us and around us.

Is this the spirit of submissiveness and capitulation to fate? On the contrary, it is the spirit of revolution, compared with which what we know as revolutionary spirit is the most harmless romanticism. Jesus teaches no submission to world events. He does not ask us to do such a foolish thing as accept our fate. He never said to any blind or sick or lame man: you should accept your sickness, your leprosy, your blindness: then you will stop groaning. Nor did he say to the mother of the young man of Nain who had died before he had begun to live: accept with resignation this terrible breach that death has brought into your life – then your nerves will calm down and your tears will be dried. No, he rather laid his hands upon the sick and tormented to show them how the Father feels toward them, to give them a sign that their pain grieves the Father and that he is present with his help.

How could one declare war on what we call events in this world in sharper terms than by saying: “Here, now, on earth, the Father’s will is to be done as openly and without opposition as it will be when his life truly rules”. If this were really to happen, then not merely this or

that but literally everything would be different. So what we have here is not submission to the will of God in the form of the inexorable, unalterable course of world events, but – which is a very different thing – submission to the will of the Father in the form of dedication to the initial coming about, and the final, coming, open disclosure of the Father's will. For the will of the Father is not the same thing as the events of this world that are before our eyes, but is actually a counter event opposed to these events.

How do we know this? How can we say this? Because in Jesus Christ we have the coming about and the promise of this future, open, manifest coming of the Father's will "on earth as it is in heaven". He is the meaning of this petition "*Your will be done*", just as we claimed earlier that he is the basis of saying "*Our Father*", and just as he is the content of praying "*your kingdom come*". If it were not for Jesus Christ, there would be no alternative but to bow before a "will of God" in one or many of its various "peaceful" or "resentful" disguises. But because of him, we dare to know an infinitely better, life bestowing, strength-giving, battle-calling will – an imitation in other words of his own cross as the way of dealing with this world's opposition to the truth of its own being and purpose. For it was the Father's hands which, by the raising of his only Son, transformed and hallowed the apparent victory of this world's opposition to the truth as it showed itself in the cross. This manifest will of the Father is on the way, having already been done, and intends to be further done as the still outstanding end and goal of this earth.

"*Your will be done, on earth as in heaven*" means only this: may Jesus Christ be "done" in this world. That is, may he be proclaimed and believed and, therefore, may we and the whole creation know where we belong.

# 6

Psalm 104. 1-6, 10-15, 24-30

Matthew 7. 7-11

1 Timothy 6. 6-11

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## GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

With the words “*Give us this day our daily bread*”, we come to the half way mark of the Lord’s Prayer. At this point it may prove useful to consider the structure of this prayer. It consists of seven petitions. That in itself is not accidental in view of the significance of the number seven for Biblical thought – the number for fullness, richness, joy, the number for the completion of creation, the number for active rest, (Genesis 2.2,3) the number for newness of life, the number for God and humankind together. It consists of seven petitions, three preceding and three following this central request – “give us this day our daily bread”. Martin Luther, for one, understood this petition quite concretely. He suggested that this clause in the middle of the Lord’s Prayer does not seem to bear comparison with the heights to which we have travelled in the first three petitions, God’s name as Father, the Father’s kingdom, the Father’s will. Nor does it seem to bear comparison with the depths that open in the following three petitions – our sins, our discipleship, our supreme test. The surely incongruous prayer for our daily bread stands unpretentiously in between with its face towards natural, every day, matter of fact things. What we have to do with here seems scarcely worth speaking of compared with the ultimate significance of all these other things. On the one hand we have the things of God, on the other hand we have the human “things that belong to us”. How do we fit into this spiritual happening between God and us, the solid material bread for our mouths and stomachs? Between the eternal God and our ultimate destiny, what place is there for this almost niggardly attention to the fleeting insignificant things of today, and even more surprisingly, to the paltry daily ration that is needed in order to eke out our life from today to tomorrow. For that is the meaning of the word “daily” – “*Give us this day tomorrow’s bread for today.*” Daily means “for each day”, “the coming day”. Give us today, give us each day, the bread we shall need tomorrow. We are living now, but shall we be alive next minute, next day. This is the practical question which our precarious situation presents to us, despite the fact that our bread at any rate seems to be in plentiful supply.

In earlier generations some people have felt embarrassed at the presence of such an apparently trivial matter in the middle of the Lord’s Prayer, and have wanted to relegate it to the margin or translate the daily bread into spiritual terms. In the face of this, it is useful to hear how Luther understood the meaning of the word bread in his shorter Catechism – “food, drink, clothing, shoes, houses, farms, fields, land, money, property, a good marriage, good children, good and trustworthy authorities, a just government, favourable weather

(neither too hot nor too cold!), health, honours, good friends, trusty neighbours.” This is no small order! It shows us the needs and living conditions of a middle class German countryman of the sixteenth century. But nothing need prevent our interpreting and completing the list to suit the needs of our own time and individual situations. It is certainly permissible to think of daily bread in this wider sense of the word, especially if we are tempted to spiritualise it. But we ought not to lose sight of the original simple meaning of the word bread as that which is strictly necessary for life, the minimum nourishment which even the poor cannot do without. Bread is the other side of the coin of hunger. Asking the Father to give us bread means appealing to his free grace which sustains us on the edge of the abyss of hunger and death. Psalm 104.29 expresses it well – if Yahweh withholds breath, life returns to the dust. We have no security without this necessary bread, and with it, life.

So at the very heart of the Lord's Prayer, the prayer for our daily bread, like all the others, strikes the basic note: bringing God and human life together. Here at the very point where the thought of God is usually furthest from our minds in the natural, every day, “matter of fact” world, where it is a case of satisfying our bodily needs and the demands of the moment – before anything else – we are brought face to face with God. The declining practice of saying grace before a meal bears rich testimony to this tradition. Where God and the human are brought together in this way, bread is transformed from being some outward thing that says nothing to us into bread that is given; transformed from being godless bread into bread for which we have to thank the Father. The aim, therefore, of this prayer for our daily bread, is not that we should receive bread as such, but that we receive it for what it really is, God's bread.

*Bread – life – God.* The Lord's Prayer reminds us that these three realities cannot be separated. Bread brings life and God into sharp focus. It suggests three things: that bread is central, that bread is communal, that bread carries a commission. This latter observation moves us into a new dimension. The giving of bread by the Father has a purpose over and above the satisfaction of hunger. It has a larger significance. In the old Covenant, for example, bread is given not merely that Israel might exist, but more significantly, that Israel might reach the promised land of freedom. In the new covenant, it is given not simply that mankind might have a full belly, but that mankind might eat of the true bread which, once having eaten, we will not need to eat again.

In this respect, recent scholarship has wanted to put the emphasis of this petition not primarily in relation to our always pressing physical wants. Rather, it has come to recognise what we observed in the Introduction, namely that all the petitions of the Lord's Prayer are what theologians call “eschatological”. That is to say, they always are about an end time wanting to burst into our present time. The “hallowing of the Father's name”, the realisation of his “expected Kingdom”, “the accomplished reality of his will”, are all end-time promises waiting their present implementation in our daily life. So here, with the demand, “*Give us tomorrow's bread for today*”, we are being invited to the Eucharistic feast to participate in the first fruits of an anticipated consummation already accomplished in Christ when all things will be handed over to the Father.

Perhaps this is the supreme significance of the place of this petition in the Lord's Prayer. In the first three petitions, Jesus Christ asks us to join him in his fight for the Father's cause, and in the last three he invites us to join his victory over the world and over everything which would prevent the realisation of what is longed for in those first three petitions. That is to

say: the Lord's Prayer as the prayer of the Church comes to us recognising that Jesus Christ has conquered, and now he invites us to share his victory. So that we may be free to utter these longings "May your name...", "your kingdom...", "your will...", we will accept the invitation to take part in this already accomplished victory. This is the reason for us daring to approach the Father in this arrogant manner. "Give us", "forgive us", "lead us not", "deliver us" – note the boldness – no "please", no "if you will", no "if we might dare to suggest such a thing" – but the giving of an order: "Give, Forgive", "Lead", "Deliver". This appeal is surely astonishing. It cannot be made on any other grounds except in the freedom that is given in the commitment to the way of Jesus in the world.

This is why, as the condition of this commitment, not only we ourselves, but even so the whole creation, need this "Eucharistic" – "thanksgiving" – bread for the sake of his mission; not because we have a right to live for three score and ten years, but because whether we live for another fifty years or die tonight, his way in the world, if it has become our way in the world, is ultimately the only thing that matters.

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# 7

Leviticus 25.1-2, 8-10,35-42  
Matthew 18.21-35

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## **FORGIVE US OUR SINS AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US**

Both the following Old Testament reading from Leviticus and the Gospel require some introduction if we are to understand what they are about and something, too, of the background to this phrase of the Lord's Prayer. It is valuable to be aware of the fact that Jesus' concept of the coming kingdom and what life is to be like in it was borrowed extensively from the prophetic understanding of the Jubilee Year. This occurred every fiftieth year, that is, the year after seven periods of seven years, and we have had reason to refer already to the significance of the number seven in the Bible.

It is significant in this connection to learn that one time for the celebration of the jubilee was the year 26 A.D., which occurred at the same time as Jesus' ministry. The Jubilee year included four things: leaving the soil fallow, the remission of debts, the liberation of slaves and the return to each individual of his family's property. We can profit from a reading of some verses from Leviticus 25, which tells us about the nature of this Jubilee (Leviticus 25. 1-2, 8-10, 35-42.)

In summary, the Jubilee is the background also for the well-known parable of Jesus, 'The Merciless Servant'. At the time of Jesus, the Galilean peasant who had previously been a free property owner had been reduced to the practical equivalent of slavery: yearly mounting indebtedness. Herod the Great was the one responsible for this situation. He had crushed the people with heavy taxes and expropriated the crippled property owners. To escape this situation, the peasant would borrow from a money lender, who was often in liaison with the king's tax collector. His property, which he mortgaged, soon fell into the hands of the money lender, and the peasant became his servant. But the peasant's problems were not then over – his unpaid debts continued to pile up to astronomic levels. Then in order to regain his funds, the money lender ordered that the peasant be sold with his wife and children and all his possessions in order to cover the debt. This is exactly the situation into which the unmerciful servant of the parable had come. Jesus describes the relationship between the rising indebtedness of the poor peasant, the loss of his properties, and the loss of his liberty. The Jubilee Year having been proclaimed, the servant now appears before the king who forgives his debt. The king, the text says, releases him and remits the debt, but then, when he meets a fellow slave who owes him only a modest sum, refuses him the benefit of the same Jubilee.

So we hear the story unfold with its conclusion – no divine jubilee for those who refuse to apply it on earth.

We find this theme central to Matthew 18. 21-35 in the petition: “*Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*” Enough has probably already been said to indicate that this way of putting it, “forgive us our sins”, is a departure from the literal sense of the petition in the Lord’s Prayer. But that applies as well to “Forgive us our *trespasses*” with which previous generations were more familiar. The older version still – “Forgive us our *debts*” – is literally more accurate. For the word of the Greek text signifies precisely a monetary debt in the most material sense of the term. In the Lord’s Prayer, then, Jesus is not simply recommending vaguely that we might pardon those who have bothered us, but tells his disciples purely and simply to erase the debts of those who owe them money, which is to say, to practise the Jubilee.

So the ‘Our Father’ is genuinely a prayer of the Jubilee in the first instance. It means: “the time has come for the faithful people to abolish all the debts which tie the poor ones of Israel, since your debts towards God are also wiped away.” For that is the gospel, the good news. This is how Jesus’ first hearers would have understood his prayer. Jesus was establishing a strict equation between the practice of the Jubilee and the grace of God. Jesus, who was not a legalist at any other point and who was ready without hesitation to pardon disreputable and immoral people, was nevertheless extremely strict upon one point: only the one who practises grace can receive grace. The liberation of God toward you, he is saying, becomes vain if you do not practise liberation toward your brethren.

If this is what this phrase means in its own time and place, we may well ask – what on earth has this to do with us who know nothing of such a Year of Jubilee and for whom the whole economic and political structures are so different? Do we simply have to push this phrase to the margin, or is there some way in which it can be rescued in order to speak with some relevance to us? The answer clearly is – of course. Indeed the context of the Lord’s Prayer in the gospel of Matthew makes it quite clear that the words concerning debts applied here also to offences in general. So it goes on – “if you pardon others for their offences (literally, *transgressions*) your heavenly Father will forgive you as well, but if you do not forgive others your Father will not pardon your offences either” (Matthew 6.14). This is the sense in which we are now to understand this petition of the Lord’s Prayer which more helpfully has “debts” or “trespasses” expressed as: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

It would be interesting to discover which, for example, of the two petitions, the previous one, “*Give us this day our daily bread*” and now “*the forgiveness of sins*” impresses itself on us as being the more necessary. Being forced to make such a choice is obviously contrived, yet it does have the value of revealing to us what we regard as being decisive for our life. Clearly without bread we cannot live, but equally clearly without being able to offer, and what is usually more difficult, to receive forgiveness, we scarcely know anything worth being called life. In this sense forgiveness is more urgent than bread, and therefore more important. Yet we must surely all admit that we are poor witnesses to the fact that the forgiveness of sins is a necessity of human existence, otherwise there would be much more vitality and freedom and joy in our human communities – our families, our friendships, our church, where we work and with whom we work, not to speak of wider political and economic spheres of life.

If it is so hard for us to live out the reality of forgiveness in this horizontal dimension of human relationships, how much harder is it to communicate the reality of a need for such a sense of forgiveness by God. Today it is said people are less haunted by sin and guilt, even if any religious (as distinct from a moral) understanding of the word “sin” is grasped. Rather, in a more general sense, anxiety about life, loneliness, the threat of meaninglessness, are ever present experiences. To concentrate on the forgiveness of sins and how, for example, one can stand in the presence of a righteous God – the burning question of the sixteenth century – is to be tied to a sense of a law which must be valid for all times and in all places. But that is said to be precisely what modern people have lost. One can't read a newspaper or watch television or attend a film without having stark evidence of that truth. The law of God is widely regarded as being meaningless, and even the law of the state has to be upheld by coercion. The end of all this is the conviction of being without law or, which amounts to the same thing in the end, of being abandoned to the tyranny of an unintelligible law. Whatever form it takes, “forgiveness of sin” impinges less and less on most of us, all summed up in the widespread rebuke: “Why should I be required by the church to confess in the well-known words that I am ‘a miserable sinner’? I haven't done anything wrong!” We shouldn't play down the gravity of this conclusion if it be the situation in which more and more people in our community are finding themselves. But neither as a Christian community should we be deflected from the fact that we know, if not well enough, how critical the experience of the forgiveness of the Father is for us tied to our experience of Jesus Christ. Because of him, there is a liberation in knowing and rejoicing with someone like Søren Kierkegaard, that anguished nineteenth century Danish Christian, when he confessed to a startling experience, namely that of the “*the blessedness of knowing that before God I am always in the wrong.*” In that typically extreme way of putting it lies the heart of this whole matter of the forgiveness of sins, for whoever understands and confesses this blessedness is already rejoicing in the fruit of forgiveness, the experience of who God is, and of who we are.

What happens in this miracle of forgiveness, for that is what forgiveness is, a miracle? Indeed, the Gospel makes it quite clear that it is the only miracle to which all the so-called “miracles” of Jesus bear witness. Every one of us who can say I am a “pardoned sinner” or a “free rebel” knows very well that this can never mean: I do not sin any more; I am holy; I have been cleansed by some word chemistry. No – we know only too well the things that still lurk in our hearts; we know that the wolves still howl in our darkness. Forgiveness means, rather, that there can no longer be a chasm that cuts me off from the Father. How is this possible? How can one seriously say such a thing? Once again, by teaching us this petition, Jesus points to himself. He is really saying: because of me, because I am here, this is possible. In this one Man, the Father will see all that was committed to our hands but which we frittered away. In this one Man, he will recognize us as his children. In this one Man, the Father comes to meet me as from a far country, and restores to me my lost and squandered inheritance. Jesus' cross falls like a bridge across this chasm between what we are destined to be and what we are. To walk across that bridge – that is what it means to be in a state of forgiveness.

But there is one final point in this petition that we have to learn, and that is that it immediately becomes practical. In Christian faith, nothing remains shut up in the ghetto of our inner life. Everything in it seeks to become an action. So we are led to pray – “*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.*” When God is generous and forgives us 10,000 talents, we cannot be petty unforgiving servants and raise a fuss about a few dollars our neighbour

owes us. When the Father forgives us for hitting him with a club we should be able to manage to put up with the pin pricks we get from one another.

But really it is not a question here of isolated and benevolent acts towards one another, but a whole new situation in which everything is different from before. The one who really forgives from the heart has been set free from the vicious circle of action and reaction in which we normally find ourselves; room has been made for a totally different kind of action which has come in the form of a gift, a miracle. This is why this petition is misunderstood if it is thought that first we have to forgive each other, and then God will forgive us, or even that first God forgives us and then we are able to take a second step of forgiving one another, as if our forgiving were merely something additional that is demanded of us as a result of our receiving forgiveness. The two in fact belong absolutely together. There is no such thing as a sin against one another in any serious sense of the word which is not also a sin against the Father. And there is no sin against the Father which does not ultimately express itself, however apparently far removed, as affecting another or others.

If God is not treated as some sort of religious appendage to the world, but is its Creator and Lord, then the fact that we live with fellow human beings, and the fact that we are related to the Father, are inseparably bound together. We are to relate to one another as the Father relates to us. Jesus has shown us the meaning of this double relationship. He is the image of the Father as the New Man, and he intends that we must become that image. That means, according to the gospel, not in being in the right and judging, but in suffering wrong and forgiving. That's what it means to be in God's image – not to imitate God in his majesty, but to follow him in his humility, in his suffering, to whom we can appeal when we pray: *“forgive us our sins as we also forgive those who sin against us.”*

The life of the world and each of us is always as it were an echo. The real question is – “an echo of what?” Either we are echoes of that dreadful chaotic law by which nations and individuals are constantly inflaming and provoking one another because of the “other's fault” and swelling the avalanche of guilt and retribution to even more gigantic proportions, or we may become more obviously the echo of Jesus Christ and therefore echoes of that creative, forgiving, renewing love that comes to us from the Father. Then it is that we are enabled to make a new beginning to life out of possibilities the world could never offer of itself. For from him a new age springs up from the dungeons of the ancient gods of vengeance, wherever, sharing his forgiveness, human beings become renewing, creative, forgiving people.

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# 8

Job 1. 1-12  
James 1. 12 – 15  
Matthew 26. 36 – 41

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## SAVE US IN THE TIME OF TRIAL

There is considerable advantage in having this petition before us in the form of contemporary translations of the Lord's Prayer: "*Save us in the time of trial*". It is an advantage not only in the fact that it is a more accurate translation, but also because of what has happened to the word "temptation" in common understanding of the phrase: "*Lead us not into temptation*".

As we know, temptation has an earthy ring to it – it summons up images of things which are seductive or forbidden – of gluttony, dissipation, self-aggrandisement, lust. In ordinary life surrender to temptation carries with it weakness or depravity, while resistance to temptation seems to prove virtue or at least superior will power. In other words, when we hear the word 'temptation' it is almost inevitable that we will succumb to a mishmash of morality and religion in which both are out of focus. Religion becomes a special kind of "Ten Commandments" morality, and morals become the main interest of "practical" religion. Both together are then reduced to a particular way of living that makes no binding claim for all. Why is this? Because now a way of life becomes controversial and not, as it is for the Gospel, we ourselves who are controversial. That is to say, something external and controllable takes precedence over something inherently personal and demanding.

This is why everything depends on confronting the profundity of the Gospel experience of temptation if we are to enter more fully into this phrase of the Lord's Prayer. In the Bible, temptation is a profoundly different reality from that which the everyday world understands and, it must be said, even from that which even many Christians understand. In the Bible, temptation is the experience of the original and ingenious assault of the power of death against human life and, in particular, against those who profess faithfulness to the event of the word of God in daily life. That is to say, temptation in this sense is experienced only by Christians. It needs to be said as bluntly as this. Two types of people whom we recognise around us, even within us – what we might call the natural human and the moral human – neither can understand this prayer. Why is this?

*Natural* human beings want to prove their strength in adventure – want, as the phrase goes, to "live dangerously". As the antithesis of a life of bloodless timidity this is no bad thing. That phrase is a protest against every smug, snug security which is content to go on sliding over safe tracks with as little risk as possible. The *natural* human says – "if you do not stake your life you will never win it". We can all identify experiences in life where we took

something of a risk, perhaps unwillingly, which hindsight subsequently revealed changed irrevocably the trajectory of our life. But “live dangerously” also has another meaning; it may be the attitude of those who have thrown overboard every authority, and taken the helm into their own hands. When this happens, where *everything* is possible, when every desire is in principle able to be entertained, temptation becomes meaningless.

*Moral* human beings say much the same thing. They know that life is true and convincing only when it is tried out and proved. So the moral human may conceivably offer as a daily prayer something like: “Lead me *into* temptation” so that I may test out the power of the good in me. We can all understand this. That life is won only from struggle, and the good only from evil, is a piece of thoroughly worldly knowledge which is not strange to the Christian. But this has nothing to do with the temptation of which Jesus speaks. Indeed, the temptation of which the whole Bible speaks does not have to do with the testing of my strength, for it is of the very essence of temptation in the Bible that all my strength is turned against me. That is the enduring witness of the book of Job. To my horror, and without my being able to do anything about it, all my powers including my robust and convinced faith fall into the hands of an enemy power, and are now led into the field against me. Before there can be any testing of my powers, I have been robbed of them. This is the decisive thing about the temptation of the Christian: that each feels abandoned, abandoned by every human power, indeed attacked by them – and even more, abandoned by all others, abandoned even by God himself. There is complete darkness. I am nothing. The enemy is everything. The hour of the fall has come.

For the *natural* and the *moral* human, of course – Job’s so-called comforters – such a defeat means simply a spur to greater effort. One’s powers have to increase in order to withstand the trial. So a defeat is never final. Christians, on the other hand, know that in every hour of temptation human strength is problematic. They know that temptation means a dark hour which is ultimate. So they will not seek for strength to be proved, but instead pray: “*Save us in the hour of trial, lead us not into temptation*”.

All this is only another way of saying that we can only understand the meaning of temptation for us by taking with the utmost seriousness the fact that the one who teaches us to pray: “*Lead us not into temptation*” himself endured its full onslaught. But not only that, the Gospel even tells us that Jesus was “led by the *Spirit* into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil”. Far from the Father equipping the Son with every power and every weapon in order that he might be victorious in the struggle, the Spirit *leads* Jesus into the wilderness, into solitude, into abandonment. The hour of temptation must find Jesus weak, lonely and hungry. The three temptations of Jesus show us quite clearly that Jesus himself is robbed of all his own strength. He is left alone by both God and man. His is no heroic struggle against wicked powers as we might suppose, no native strength, no joy in the grand fight against wickedness. All he has is God’s word as a saving, supporting power which holds him firmly and which fights and conquers for him. Read the temptation stories again, and see how each word of the tempter is rebuffed not by a demonstration of human, much less superhuman, power but by the three times repeated: “*Scripture says*”! In response to the tempter’s invitation to turn stones into bread, we hear the reply: *Scripture says* – “Man cannot live by bread alone”. In the face of the demand to leap from the pinnacle of the temple, we hear: “*Scripture says* – You are not to put the Lord your God to the test”. And when finally Jesus is offered everything in return for worship of the tempter, we hear: “*Scripture says* – You shall worship only the Lord your God”. So for Jesus, too, there remained nothing except God’s word and

promise. Only in this is the temptation overcome. Only now does the devil depart, robbed of his power. Because Jesus himself was tempted by the power of death, masquerading as always by the offer of a more exciting life, and because he overcame every temptation, we can pray, indeed we must pray: *“Lead us not into temptation”*.

The personification of evil in evoking “a tempter” is not an invoking of a literal mythical figure. It is simply the recognition that temptation is not an abstract concept, but rather is a deeply personal experience. The “tempted” fundamentally experiences a “tempter”. It makes perfect human sense to remain with this traditional personified image. For so radical is this experience that just here we must learn that Jesus is teaching us something about temptation by telling us to pray against its instigator. Amongst other things, this means that we cannot “act” against “him”. How should we be able to stand off from temptation in our own strength and will when “he” has already built a bridgehead in us? If it be genuine temptation we face – and it always is! – and not the “New Year” sort of resolutions for which it is always appropriate to make a moral appeal to our strength of will; if it be genuine temptation we have been wanting to confront, prayer alone is appropriate, that is to say, temptation of such a kind that God alone is a match for it. If it be true, as the New Testament suggests, that the Christian life is not a “contending against flesh and blood” – that would be simple! – but rather “against principalities and powers and the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places” (Ephes. 6. 12), if it be this, then every human dream cannot but fail. Therefore Jesus directs us to resort to prayer when we meet the “tempter”, for only in such a relationship with the Father may this usurper be challenged. What can be better done by us except in obedience to the command of the Lord who asks us to watch with him in the hour of his supreme encounter with the power of death but to “stay awake and pray that we may be spared the test”? All we can usually do, it seems, is “to go to sleep” like those first disciples, even while we are perhaps wide awake, preparing to march out to do brave battle with our blunt swords and ineffective staves, our well-meant resolutions and our honest idealism.

Jesus doesn't say: “Go and do this or that”, but “Watch and pray”. Watch and pray – this way lies real action and true victory. Like the knight in Albrecht Durer's famous woodcut “Knight, Death and the Devil” who, in the distance seeing his Lord beckoning in encouragement preparing to receive him, rides straight on. As long as the knight keeps his eyes on the Lord, the vermin on his path cannot deter him. Rather than squabbling with the demonic powers, we look to their victor. He does the rest. Then mysteriously, everything that would overpower us is banished. To pray “Save us in the time of trial” is to remember that Jesus himself is teaching us to pray this petition and, what is of even more significance, assuming the responsibility that this prayer will be heard. To be sure for each of us the time of temptation is not yet ended. Indeed, we may have some confidence that the hardest temptation is still ahead. But we pray as Jesus Christ has taught us to the Father: *“Save us in the time of trial”*; *“Lead us not into temptation”*, and we know that our prayer is heard, for all temptation is conquered in him, for all time, unto the end.

## 9

Ephesians 6. 10-18

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**DELIVER US FROM EVIL**

It is surely a fact to be thoughtfully observed that the seventh and final petition of the Lord's Prayer ends not on a note of harmony and satisfaction but with the cry of distress – "*Deliver us from evil*". Even that is too smooth a way of putting it, for "deliver" has more the sense of snatching – snatch us from the very jaws of death itself. This is a cry that is more than urgent, it is desperate. What do we make of this? We might perhaps be somewhat irritated – to put it at its mildest – that Jesus has nothing else to offer his church in the end but the prospect of such a serious situation. There are many who, either secretly if not openly, cherish the view that if one "believes", then all things must go well for one, or at least, better than for others. No wonder that, when the Lord's Prayer ends with this sharp call for help, we can imagine experiencing irritation, puzzlement, barely concealed anger.

One conclusion may well be that this petition was spoken to Christians whose danger was vastly different from ours today, They were Christians who were differently placed in relation to authorities and powers, who were deprived of civic rights and whose property, and even lives, were in danger; people who had so many professed and vicious enemies that they could do no more than to cry out: "Save us," snatch us from evil. That might well be one response to this final petition of the Lord's Prayer. Or again, there are surely many amongst us who today just do not know what to make of a cry like this, many who do not understand it at all and who would be acting falsely if they were to join in this cry. This sort of thing seems like a false alarm because they are under the impression that things are not so bad as to make them think to themselves, much less cry out: "*Deliver us from evil*". True, each one of us has his or her particular burdens to bear – we all in one way or another frequently feel that we cannot "cope". We are all in need of many things, some more than others. But, we might say, the situation is surely not so bad with all the human helping agencies which exist today that we are in the position of those who are at the end of their tether, who have no choice left, and who can only rely on God for deliverance.

All this is a very natural, but nevertheless a very worldly, response. It reveals all too clearly how confident our trust is in this world, and all that it offers. And it reveals, too, how vague and shadowy a thing for us this Gospel is, yet of which we are assured is the Truth. And such a response reveals too how, in this particular case, the Lord's Prayer is made to fit in with our estimation of reality, rather than it being the source of our judgement as to what is really the case. And that is what must happen if we really are in earnest about calling ourselves

Christian. We must take our cue about the real situation of human beings not from our own analysis, no matter how profound or apparently accurate or sophisticated it might be. Rather, we must take it from the truth which Jesus embodies, which he proclaimed and lived and died for. It is what the cross and resurrection stand for, it is what we mean by conversion, by “giving up the world” as the source of what we take to be the content of words like “life” and “death”, “good” and “evil”, “freedom” and “bondage”. In other and more traditional language, which for millions has become empty talk, it is what it means to be “saved”. The one who has been saved knows and understands that in fact everyone who lives not in Christ, but out of the pursuits and varieties and delusions of the world, is lost. One who has been so grasped by the truth who is Jesus Christ can, in fact, no longer put up with the wretchedness of this world, with war and famine and disease and suffering. One can no longer say that all this is fate and therefore is unavoidable. One knows that in all circumstances of wretchedness in this world there is something that we can do. We need not be silent but can cry out “Save us”, “free us” from it. Once one has tasted the salvation of Christ, hunger and thirst for a better world will not easily be subdued; one longs eagerly for a world in which crying will be silenced and pain be no more, where “the Devil” is bound, and the last enemy will be trodden under the feet of the Lord. When the Church prays, “*Deliver us from evil*”, it is this coming world in which the truth is not only done but also is seen to be done which is being invoked. It is the prayer for the great, complete, and ultimate end of all that is opposed to the will of God. It is the prayer for perfection, paralleling that of the beginning of the Lord’s Prayer: that God’s Kingdom come, that his will be done, that his name be hallowed.

We ought not to be embarrassed that this prayer for the passing away of the present form of this world is a source of irritation – even amusement – for many, for the fact is that most of us find this world not too bad a place; we would be perfectly happy here almost indefinitely, doing our bit, achieving our own and our family’s happiness, lending a hand where we can, anticipating an ever more hopeful future. We consider it an absurd thought that this world can or will ever be changed. The possibility that this world might pass away must only be a source of sadness, for example, for most Australians, Christians or not, because we are living on the sunny side of the planet. Our only troubles are that we are growing older every day, youth and the ability to enjoy life is either going or has gone. Nothing could be more abhorrent in the midst of all this than a community which prays for the passing away of this world. But to look at the horizon of this world and to say that that is where everything of significance ends, to try to suck dry the fruit of this world, is only one of the more exquisite aspects of what is encompassed by this prayer of deliverance from evil. Such a myopic certainty, such a short-sighted vision, is merely to fall under the spell of one of the many forms of human wretchedness and misery encompassed in: “*Deliver us from evil.*”

On the other hand, the experience of those who are fed up with this earth is not unfamiliar. If we can fall in love with this world, we can equally fall out of love with it, and so feel like saying goodbye to it. Youth suicide appears to be an increasing phenomenon in the Western world, and the seductive siren call of self-inflicted euthanasia in old age is ever more widely entertained. To be tired of the world is simply the reverse image of a misplaced love of this world. “*Deliver us from evil*” becomes a parody of the Lord’s Prayer.

For if Christians also pray for the world to pass away they do this not because they are sick of it all, but because they are filled with hope. They pray “Snatch us from evil”, not because they are tired of life, not because they long for death and nothingness, but because they know of the Resurrection and the Life. It is the shining of the morning star that inspires the

Christian, not the setting sun of the evening yielding to darkness. It is the truth of the realisation that the night is indeed far gone, and the day is at hand. The Lord's Prayer itself suggests the reason for praying that the world might pass away, for asking to be delivered from evil, and that reason is that the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory of God might truly come and be seen to come by the whole creation.

This is the reason why this final petition of the Lord's Prayer leaves us neither discouraged nor helpless, neither morose nor bitter, neither resentful nor resigned. It permits us neither to embrace the world, nor to neglect the world. But if there is anything at all that spurs us on and gives us the strength to fulfil our Christian calling here and now, if there is anything that calls us to a sober assessment of reality and our present obligation, then it is the knowledge that the last word has not yet been uttered; that the Kingdom which Jesus inaugurated and brought to its fulfilment in the drama of the cross, whereby evil was given free rein and shown to be ultimately powerless on Easter Day, that this Kingdom is waiting to be ours too. So we may live confident that because he was delivered from evil we too, joined with him on his way in the world, may pray, "*Deliver us from evil*", knowing that our prayer has already been answered in him. And insofar as we die a death like his to the evil powers of this world, and by virtue of putting on his new humanity, we may with confidence pray: "*Deliver us from evil*" knowing that our prayer will be answered when, in the fullness of time, "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2.10-11).

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# 10

Luke 17. 20-24

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## FOR THE ... KINGDOM IS YOURS

With these words we begin the concluding phrases of the Lord's Prayer. We have now left the petitions directed towards our human needs that make up the heart of the prayer to focus again on the reality of the One to whom our whole prayer is addressed.

There are at least two interesting things to note about this first concluding affirmation of the Lord's Prayer. The first is that this, and the remainder of the concluding petitions, does not occur in either the Gospel of Matthew or of Luke, which are the two places where we have the Lord's Prayer in the form we know. This is because these concluding words of praise became established only in the course of the first centuries, at first in individual Christian communities, and later everywhere. Although this ending is made up of biblical phrases, it was not at first usually the custom to follow up the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer with these words of praise. Later on, however, the person who was conducting the service would make the seven petitions to God, and then the congregation would join in with the words: "*For the Kingdom is yours ...*"

It is significant that it took persecution to establish this practice in the Christian Church. The more martyrs there were, the more widespread these words of praise became. How contrary this is to the way most people see things. How easy it is to find the praise of God coming readily to our lips when the sky is blue, when the world is a place of happiness and contentment and all is well. How much more difficult it is, for those who would be Christian, to praise God when all seems to be against us, when we are misunderstood, when the world deals us a bad hand. But in the beginning it was not so and there are countless illustrations right up to our own day of Christians who have known that the praise of God is the most lasting and effective protest of faith against the powers of unbelief. This is the meaning of the remarkable account in the book of Acts (16.17-26) in which Paul and Silas are thrown into prison after a severe beating, and at midnight sing praises to God. Is Paul feeling wonderful? Is he having one of those great moments when he simply has to express in words the exultation of his heart? Surely not! His back is raw and sore from the whiplash, his feet are fastened in the stocks, the air is dank and oppressive, and to add to all this, the fate of the fragile Christian community is largely wrapped up in his own fate. In body and spirit he is hemmed in on every side by suffering. Nevertheless, he praises God instead of moaning or gritting his teeth. Why? Because to praise God means to see things from the perspective of their end, to view them in the light of the great goals and fulfilment in God. That is why Paul

could sing at midnight despite his aching body and heavy spirit. That is why he could not help but sing, for he knew that if, in all his physical distress and mental pain, he simply dared to praise God – despite the obvious circumstances – this end of the ways of God would surround him in his human misery. And, ever since, the Christian community has always looked to this end of the ways of God. The Church of Jesus is a company of people who lift up their heads because they know that “the old world” has passed away, because they have caught a glimpse of something coming from the other side.

This, then, is the first significant thing to observe about the Lord's Prayer: that the ending was not original but became significant because the early Christians were confident, in the midst of everything that seemed to say otherwise, that the Kingdom really is God's, and not Caesar's. And this leads us to the second important observation: that there are two references to this Kingdom in the Lord's Prayer – at the beginning: “*Your Kingdom come*” and now at the end “*For the Kingdom ... is yours*” Far from being a contradiction, these two phrases – when held together – express the tension of lived faith. Precisely because the Kingdom is God's, and not ours, it is necessary to ask again and again that it be seen to be so in this world in which we live. We saw when we had the phrase: “*Your Kingdom come*” before us how everything centred on the future – the expectation that because the proper name for God is “the Coming One”, everything is to find its fulfilment in the time that is coming. Only after that recognition that the Kingdom is about this new future for the earth did the Church come to an appreciation that this earth, this Kingdom of humanity, which as we have seen is so problematical, in which we are dependent on God for daily bread, for forgiveness, for deliverance from evil; that this human reality, already in a hidden way, bears witness to the fact that it is here and now marked by God's Kingdom, God's reign, God's time. In other words, in the Kingdom of God everything is a matter of perspective; everything depends on where one stands. If you stand at the wrong place, you see absolutely nothing. If you stand at the right place, anybody at all begins to see in the darkness, the shining of the great mystery of the Kingdom of God.

We might well reply that these are fine words, but where is that right place? When one looks reality in the face it is small consolation to be told that the Kingdom of God is largely invisible. What we see is indeed far from splendid or even encouraging. Where is this right place? Where is this phantom kingdom? These are not new questions; they have been around from the beginning; they are the questions directed at Jesus: “When will the Kingdom of God come and where is it?” And the answer of Jesus to this question of the Pharisees is the same answer given to our questions: “The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say ‘Lo, here it is’ or ‘There!’ For behold, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you”, noting that the Greek word is a plural “you”.

But what does that mean? Do we have to struggle even harder, and by ever more intense scrutiny, to discern in the midst of a chaotic world a glimmer of truth, a ray of light, a hint of human love? Is that what Jesus means? Once again, as with every other phrase in the Lord's Prayer, all difficulties of understanding dissolve when we let the One who invites us to pray this way become *himself* the content of each prayer. So here what the Kingdom – the reign, the time – of God being in the midst of you means is quite clearly, quite specifically, Jesus Christ himself. “The Kingdom of God is where I am.” We can imagine how this would have been received by the earliest hearers. They didn't understand him any more than we do today. Some of them would have said in their hearts something like: “Well, I don't see anything in our midst. All I see is a man who has a mysterious knack of getting people to

follow him, who has a good influence on at least some of them who, by way of explanation they might go on to say, is able to release power in these people so that they think he is their Redeemer, whereas in reality they are only sustained by their own energies.” We all know people like this who see, for example, in the church certain religious forces, a certain sociologically formed community. They see certain historical effects, but really and truly they see nothing of the reality of the kingdom of God. They are like those who would shine a light on stained glass windows, and then stay outside and see nothing. For as we know, stained glass is only what it is from the inside. Stained glass is to be looked through, not looked at. So it is with the Christian community and the hidden Kingdom of God. Looked at from the outside one sees very little that qualifies it for such extravagant claims; looked at from the inside, one begins to see light and colour and form shining in the darkness. So we begin to understand why time and again Jesus spoke of the “mystery” of the Kingdom of God. From the wise and understanding of this world it is hidden – and that description is often applicable to us too – but to those who stand at the right place with him this freedom becomes more real than the much vaunted realities of this world. So Jesus speaks of the hidden pearl; the treasure buried in the field; the secret unnoticed growth of the Kingdom. Everything depends upon where one stands.

When we come, then, to the last sentence of the Lord's Prayer: “*For the Kingdom is yours*”, and we are able to pray it with confidence as those who really know it to be true, we are like flowers which bloom in the early spring, whose lot is perhaps suffering, frost, and wind. But it is better to arrive a little too early than a little, or much, too late. Perhaps the world will not understand who you are and what you mean until two years after, or ten or twenty or a hundred, long after your life in this visible world has ended. But take courage, you who come too early. Because the Kingdom is the Father's and if we belong to him, the future already belongs to us because now, here today, we already belong to the future.

# 11

2 Chronicles 20.12  
2 Corinthians 12.9  
Acts 1.8

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## FOR THE ... POWER IS YOURS

Power – that’s what we want! When there is talk of power, modern people prick up their ears. We can never have too much of it. That is understandable for, after all, our involvement in power and power relationships is simply part of our being in the world. From the moment we are born, we enter a vast and interlocking structure of power relationships. For a start, even the most personal relationships between parents and children, or between husband and wife, involve the adjustment and sublimation of power, as any domestic argument clearly announces. And with boring repetitiveness, the glossy monthly publications of our day offer their depressing, and sometimes vicious, “solutions” to the aptly named power “battle of the sexes”. Or returning to our school days, we remember our physics classes driving home how inseparably we are involved with power by announcing that all matter is itself power, energy. Or at home we turn on the television or radio, and what do we hear and see but current affairs programmes featuring “power politics”, as if politics can ever be of any other sort! So we could go on finding more and more examples. This preoccupation with power has, not surprisingly, entered into our religious yearnings too. Even such a matter as “personal faith” frequently is of interest to us only insofar as it provides us with the power or strength that we desire and worship. In recent decades when television legislation demanded a religious daily or weekly component, there was a program called the “Hour of Power” watched by a good number of those who formerly attended church, but who found such an hour to be more congenial because they “got so much more out of it”. Of course they did and do if this is what worship is supposed to be. Power, strength for the coming week, strength to perform the pressing claims on us each day. That is not far from any of us. Certainly strength is not unimportant, and our duties are often debilitating, and the drain on our energies is enormous, but do we not notice that we so easily identify ourselves with today’s pursuit of power to the extent that we value faith only as a source of strength? And in doing this we, too, have bent the knee to the Baal god of our day – the idol of performance, of strength, of power.

We could, I suppose, easily get the impression from all this that a preacher is announcing to his congregation: “Power is your problem. Forsake power, renounce strength – then all will be well.” Preachers in former days excelled at being “against things”, as the small boy remarked after a stirring sermon on sin, noting that the minister was “against it”. But the Christian faith is not “against anything” for its own sake, and Christians are no more committed to the abolition or renunciation of power for its own sake than we are to the abolition or renunciation of matter for its own sake. That would be Manichaeism, not

Christianity, an ancient heresy which still lives in those who would drive a wedge between body and spirit, between earth and heaven, between a realm of light and a realm of darkness.

In no way, then, is power as such suspect. On the contrary, wherever we turn in the Bible, we find power being celebrated, and these texts before us are simply random illustrations. So with the Psalmist we confess, "*power belongs to God*". Power is part of the very structure of creation that God sees: "*and behold it was good*" (Genesis 1, *passim*). And part at least of what it means for humans to be made "*in the image of God*" is that we are not merely like the rest of creation, subject to this power structure but, under God, responsible for it. In the well-rehearsed, and lately contested text, human beings are to "*subdue the earth*" sharing God's "*dominion over it*" (Genesis 1.28). Dominion, we note, not domination! The two are quite different. Moreover, the exercise of power over other human beings is also part of the divinely ordained structure of life within this world, as we hear in Chapter 13 of Paul in the Letter to the Romans in which he speaks of the role and status of the State.

All this is important simply to correct a widespread notion that power in itself is something evil, and not Christian. There are many Christians still who, if they do not actually think that power belongs to the devil, at least do not act very conspicuously as though it belonged to God. No life is possible without power and nothing is more urgent than that, as Christians, we learn afresh to understand power in the light of the Gospel and not to identify it as does the world, nor, which ultimately amounts to the same thing, simply repudiate it.

In a sentence, the ultimate Christian definition of power is Christ crucified. "The power is yours" says the Lord's Prayer, and points here as everywhere else in this prayer to the one who gives us this prayer. This defeated and crucified Christ redefines the meaning of power, he alone. God's self-definition of power is terrifyingly simple – as simple and as terrifying as the cross. He has exposed "*the strong right arm*" – celebrated by Israel – that strong right arm by which he wills to curb the nations, and it is pierced with nails, stained with blood, and riveted in impotence. "*Folly to the Greeks*" Paul admitted, and we are all Greeks. Who would think to look for the power of God here of all places! At the very point where he is seemingly most impotent, God rejoices in demonstrating his power which breaks out in the victory of Easter as the only compelling source of power. "*We are powerless, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you*"; so says King Jehoshaphat in the name of the people, and the King on the cross eight centuries later, does he not say too, "we are powerless, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you"? "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" Forsaken? Easter tells us otherwise: a miracle withheld even from the One in whose obedient misery the power of God is being revealed.

In the celebration we call Pentecost we rejoice in the fact that the Father and the Son do not wish to keep this celebration of power bottled up as some private transaction for their mutual edification. But this power is being poured out on us, even us, just as the Holy Spirit has always caused the message of the cross and the message of the resurrection to become power for anxiously waiting disciples. And now we can pray for the Holy Spirit to transform the message into power for us but, once again, not our power but his – power, let it be said, not for us to "overcome" our difficulties, nor to "cope" with daily life, nor to "perform" the pressing claims on us each day, but power to be his witnesses. That is why this power is being given us – to be witnesses of the power which makes of no consequence each and every worldly claim whether to power or to powerlessness. This is the power that wants to give itself completely to the life of faith, no better, to bring to *birth* the life of faith so that,

like the apostle Paul, we hear the Lord himself promise: “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” That is to say: if you would be Christian, do not seek to be made strong as the world values strength. Give no attention to seductive offers of indeterminate “hours of power”. Glory rather in the weakness of the apostle Paul – Paul who died with Christ, was crucified with Christ, was buried with Christ, and finally was raised from the dead with Christ, so that now he can actually *boast* of his own weakness. So totally and completely was he swept up into the doxology of the Lord’s Prayer: “*The power ... is yours*”. And the promise is that even if now we cannot go the whole way with Paul, but in fear and trembling venture just a beginning, we also will be swept up into that same exultation so that, without asking how or where or when, we find to our astonishment, when maybe it is hidden even from us, that we are being his witnesses. Power to be witnesses – this is the best part of the whole promise of this power of God – such that it drives us as church into the world at large; such power shows its relevance not merely in the realm of personal relationships, but “out there”, too, in the complex world of systems. This Pentecostal power takes the power of the cross into the heart of the world in which that Cross first stood, and for which it was given, claiming each and every manifestation of human power and each and every pitiable demonstration of total powerlessness – claiming all of this world as its goal in the power of God in Christ crucified.

That is the mission to which each and every Christian is called. We may well say what the people of God have said in every age: “*We are powerless ... we do not know what to do.*” How privileged we are to be able to say now with a better understanding of the Lord’s Prayer behind us that “*our eyes are upon you*”, knowing that it is Christ crowned on the cross who is both our vision and our charter.

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# 12

Exodus 33. 13-23  
 2 Corinthians 3. 17 – 4.6  
 Revelation 21. 22-27; 22. 3-5

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## FOR THE GLORY ... IS YOURS

Exodus 33.13-23 is surely one of the more quaint texts in the Bible. But it seeks to guard a double truth which we lose at our peril. It wants us to reckon with the ineffable being of God, while at the same time rejoicing in the experience of God. In our day, neither of these claims can be taken for granted. For a good many, to speak of the ineffable being of God confirms their suspicion that God, if he exists at all, is too far away in heaven to be of much use. For others, in the face of so many diverse forms of religious experience, it is not exactly clear who or what the face of God might be which might prompt such rejoicing. If, further, one was to claim that such difficulties are instantly removed by holding fast to the reality of the word “glory”, one could scarcely reckon on being believed. For this word “glory” is likely to be as problematical as everything else.

Despite the fact that the Oxford English Dictionary has one and a half columns related to “glory”, and despite the fact that this word occurs more than 400 times in the Bible, there are probably few words before which most of us feel quite so helpless. We sing it, we say it, very often we are overwhelmingly conscious of it, yet what “it” is, we cannot say. If you see yourself in this description, then rejoice! Do not let anyone – least of all a preacher – imagine that one is any more knowledgeable than anyone else when it comes to this word, “glory”. For it is something beyond each and every one of us. Indeed, there is always something faintly comical when a preacher attempts to approach the unapproachable – a fact which is more often felt by the hapless preacher than the hearers might suspect. Such is certainly the case here. Now, having indicated how impossible is our task, let us disregard our own advice and proceed to do the impossible. Let us, in the words of T.S. Eliot, carry out on the word glory yet another “raid on the inarticulate”. For that is what must happen when, in Church, we are not merely relating an episode or reporting or exhorting but, as with this word “glory”, trying to point to promises and meanings in life.

First, let us return to the Oxford English Dictionary. Amidst all the more or less exalted possibilities attaching to the word “glory” there is an entry there which, despite first impressions, surely turns out to be the most useful of all. It is – of all things – the entry belonging to the “glory box”. Yes, the antique glory box most of us have heard about with some amusement, and with which around half of the population in earlier generations could well have had dealings. And what is the definition of this “glory box”; it is: “a box, drawer, receptacle in which things are heaped together without any order or tidiness.” Some of us go

on to fashion our homes on the same principle! Yet this apparently irrelevant entry is a good start in helping us to approach “the glory”. For the “glory of God” is similar to the “glory box”. The glory is “without order”, “unable to be classified”, “defying conventional categories”. Or, to put it positively, glory is what God is and does out of himself. Far from being a piece of Semitic rhetoric or some preacher’s purple prose, “glory” is the deeply religious affirmation that God in his naked reality is not available to human beings. Yet “glory” conveys the profound acknowledgement that the ultimate, who dwells in light unapproachable, is nevertheless the light that shines on everyone who comes into the world, and that this light unapproachable is, in practice, inescapable. The “glory”, we might say, is the signature of the form and presence of God; it is the light that “the holy” gives off. It has, for this reason, the character of a secret. One’s name, too, is a symbol of the unique secret of the self – to tell one’s name is to reveal the self. But there is a difference between “the name” and the “glory”. Moses, we were reminded again in the Old Testament reading, was at one and the same time told the name of the Lord and all the goodness belonging to that name, but his request to be shown the glory of the Lord was denied him. “You cannot see my face, for you shall not see me and live.” Who can, after all, look upon nuclear brightness! Thank God the cleft of the rock continues to hide us still while the glory passes by. It is not by any means a second rate vision to see only the back side of God, and not his face. Such is the incandescence of glory.

It is this glory which the heavens declare, but do not deliver; it is this glory which, aflame between the cherubim and seraphim, crumples the young Isaiah with the antiphonal song: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.” For us mortals, this glory must always be at one and the same time a lure, a burden, and a passion. It establishes life on the one hand, and on the other, plagues our existence with inextinguishable dreams. That is why, whenever and wherever in Israel’s battle with her God she is forced to define her place in that relationship, “the glory” appears; why, when she is rebellious, she is smitten by it; why, in her obedience, glory is for her the health and glow of rightness with God; why, in her exile and despair, it is “the glory” that shapes her heart-breaking songs by the river of Babylon and why, when she is home again, it is at Mt. Zion “the place where the glory dwells.” For Israel, then, it is the force of glory which inwardly controls every episode, and shines like a light, beckoning to ever-fresh interpretation of everything that occurs.

Only with something like this rich background can the full symbolic measure of the meaning of the Christian identification of Jesus Christ and the glory be encountered. When in the birth stories “the glory of the Lord shone roundabout – and when the child was greeted as the “glory of your people, Israel”, the background is given for the claim that in Jesus Christ the glory has concretely come near in the flesh, “and we beheld his glory full of grace and truth”. Such glory is God’s way of getting heavenly song onto earthly streets, the ecstasy of the cherubim into plain deeds of justice among us creatures. Not surprisingly, therefore, when the darkness of death failed to smother a life luminous with the glory, and the Christian community confessed him to be alive and creative of nothing less than a new being for all flesh, they put it this way: “Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father.” And it is this God, Paul reminds us, “who commanded the light to shine out of darkness,” who “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Observe here Paul’s reserve. If we are not now still with Moses and “the back side” of God, neither are we simply confronted by the light of God in some direct way, as we might sometimes presume. Nor is it the case that we simply have “the light of the

knowledge of God". No, rather we have to reckon with this when it is a case of speaking of Jesus Christ and the Father: that we have to do with the *light* of the *knowledge of the glory* of God in the *face* of Jesus Christ. Even in the face of Jesus Christ we have still to reckon with the glory of God. And what is this face of Christ? It does not mean merely the look of Jesus, his luminosity, or his bearing. It means rather the entire action of God in a man of earth who became obedient absolutely so that in him alone we behold the glory – can we say? – the absolute relation to the absolute, the face of what it means to be human.

It is this Jesus Christ whose “face” comes into focus when we confess as we do in the Lord’s Prayer: “For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.” “Now and forever.” If only it were true that this tired old world really did stand in the brightness of this glory of God. If only it were the case that everything that here we are struggling to grasp again could be celebrated and rejoiced in and lived out by every creature, including ourselves. That this is painfully not the case is a matter for sadness, but a sadness which is tempered by the very power of that glory, a glory which, though now we see it “darkly as in a mirror”, yet carries with it a promise that even now is pressing upon us: that there will come a time when we can bear the full brightness of the face of God which was denied Moses, a brightness which has shone in the face of Jesus Christ and has been reflected on the face of his people in every subsequent time and place. How better to stand before the promise of that brightness than to join John in his vision as he unfolds for us a new heaven and a new earth:

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the *glory* of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their *glory* into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day – and there shall be no night there; they shall bring into it the *glory* and the honour of the nations (Rev. 21. 22-26).

Here the new day has dawned. It is, of all places, a city, whose light is the “glory” of God, a city whose inhabitants may rightly cry out: “For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever.” We are not yet that city, but by grace we may join in its song. And that, for now, is sufficient.

# 13

1 Chronicles 16.36.  
John 6.32  
2 Corinthians 1.20

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## AMEN

The concluding word of any act of worship is “Amen” It is the last word of the Lord’s Prayer; it is the last word in the Bible. Since we come across it so often – even if in some churches it is not said as often as it should be – “Amen” deserves some comment.

It is one of a very small group of Hebrew words which usually have not been translated into Greek or Latin or English or any other language, but have been preserved untranslated in the Christian worship of all nations. “Alleluia” and “Hosanna” are two other words of which the same can be said. Our worship is always conducted in a language understood by the people – at least that is the intention! – but we make an exception in the case of these words: “Amen”, “Alleluia”, “Hosanna” and go on saying them in Hebrew. Why?

Perhaps the fact that we go on using the very same words, pronouncing the identical syllables that were spoken by the people of God in the Old Testament, and by Jesus himself and the early apostles, is a sign to us that, despite all our differences, we really are one family. “Amen” is the only characteristic mark of Jesus’ speech that has come down to us. Like every family we have our own special words, our own private vocabulary. At the very least, it is significant that although the members of the Christian Church speak all sorts of different languages, there are still some words which are peculiar and universal – “Amen” is just such a word. But what does it mean? The Hebrew dictionary says that the adverb “Amen” comes from a verb which means to “support” or “to make firm”, so that Amen means firmly, truly, surely, but it can be used in various ways; there are three in particular which are significant.

First, “Amen” can be used for the purpose of making your own something that has just been said by someone else, or even that you yourself have said. That is the sense in which it is used in our Old Testament text. When King David brought the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem, he ordered the choir to sing a psalm of thanksgiving and at the end of the Psalm we hear that “all the people said Amen”. In the early Church, too, special importance was assigned to the Amen that the whole congregation said, loudly and enthusiastically, at the consecration in the Communion service. Also when the minister gave the sacrament to the people saying: “The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ given for you” each communicant in turn used to say: “Amen”. Thanks to this frequent use of the Amen, the services were rather different from what we are used to. Anyone who was not able to preach or teach could at any time join in with the “Amen” of faith. That may not be quite our style, but there is

certainly no reason why there should not be a much more audible “Amen” sounding from the congregation at the conclusion of the prayers. Without the Amen of the people, the minister, or the one leading worship, becomes more powerful even than the Pope. Not only does the minister offer the liturgy of the people, but then if left alone with the Amen actually confirms it himself. But that is your job. You are to confirm – if you can – what is being offered on behalf of the whole congregation. Without your “Amen”, you become simply spectators, not participants. That must not happen; you must make the Amen your own. Sometimes, of course, it is not easy to know when a prayer, for example, is ended; but there are liturgical forms which we can recognise. If our prayer is addressed to God the Father, we know that after the words: “through Jesus Christ our Lord” we will say Amen. If the prayer is addressed to Jesus Christ, then some such concluding words as “for your name’s sake” allows us to join in the Amen. It may not sound much, but if we could overcome our timidity and say in a loud voice “Amen” – “surely”, “truly” – that would be the one single thing which could transform our worship, and establish a link between the leader and the people which is not always felt. So much for the first sense of the word Amen.

The second sense of the Amen is found in our second text from the gospel of John, where Amen is used, not at the end but at the beginning of a statement, and always only on the lips of Jesus. More than two dozen times in the gospels his words are introduced with this striking “Amen, Amen”, “Truly, truly”. This Amen is an assurance that he is speaking not for himself, but by order and with the authority of the Father. It is the equivalent of the Old Testament phrase used by the prophets: “Thus says the Lord”. When Jesus says “Amen, Amen” it is his way of saying that his words come as from God. We are familiar with ways of adding authority to what we say; we give our word of honour or may even go to the extent of taking an oath. Jesus expressly renounces all these human means of assurance. He uses neither words of honour nor an oath; his own peculiar assurance is “Amen”, “truly it is valid”; it is, as it were, the royal seal that is valid in his kingdom. But why would he need to emphasise himself and his cause with such formal recommendations? As if his simple word were not sufficient and believable without his having to say: “Truly, truly, I say to you”. But then he is saying it for our sake, and for the sake of our unbelief and weakness, simply because he is reckoning with our doubt and lack of faith. Fundamentally, therefore, it is not his word but we wavering people that he is supporting and re-assuring. His Amen does not disown us, but gives a helping hand to our weak trust in God. His “verily” at the beginning is therefore even more important than our “Amen” at the end.

Thirdly, in the Bible, “Amen” is sometimes used almost as a title of God, or of Jesus Christ, which shows what tremendous associations the word had and still has. In the Revelation of John, for example, the letter to the Church in Laodicea begins “These things, says the Amen, the faithful and true witness...” (Revelation 3.14), that is, Jesus Christ whose entirely dependable faithfulness contrasts sharply with the lukewarmness of the Laodiceans, who were neither hot nor cold. But perhaps the best illustration of this third sense is found in our reading from the letter to the Corinthians: “All the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him to the glory of God.” This means that it is Christ who stands behind every Yes and behind every Amen, and only in so far as he does stand behind them are they not mere empty shells. Until the coming of this Jesus Christ, people could not be sure that God would really do what, according to the Old Testament, he had promised to do. But now, in his coming and his continued presence, we have a firm basis for complete confidence that the Father can and will perform all that he has promised. Martin Luther once said: “I have no doubt I shall be heard, for I feel the *Amen* in my heart.” If we

were to trust in the God of the *Amen* as he did, we would be able to say that too. And, if we should so feel it in our hearts, why should it not be a word also that we find upon our lips?

So we return to where we started. When we say "*Amen*" at the end of a prayer it is not equivalent to saying: "Well, I hope something may come of this." It is equivalent to saying, "I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him until that day" (2 Timothy 1.12). So when we say *Amen* at the end of the Lord's Prayer, we are speaking nothing less than the name of Jesus Christ. Because of his incarnation, his cross and resurrection, all God's promises are Yes and Amen. He has, once and for all, underwritten the word "*Amen*". That is why there are so many more *Amens* in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. And this is surely why we are privileged to bring the Lord's Prayer to its final conclusion with the strongest of all possible exhortations: "*Amen*".

