

FATHER

Πάτερ

(father, nourisher, protector, upholder)

"The Lord's Prayer brings the whole of life into the presence of God, and brings the whole of God into the whole of life." Read Matthew 6:5-15... One thing you can definitely say about this prayer is that it is short – short on flowery language and short on waffle, but it packs such a lot into just over 50 words. Is Jesus trying to tell his disciples something here? According to Luke (Luke 11:1-4) this conversation was in response to a request to teach them a prayer as John the Baptist had done for his disciples. Why did they want him to teach them a prayer? That might seem like an odd question, but the fact is Jews had plenty of good quality prayers and a strict pattern of prayer, at the third, sixth and ninth hour of every day. Prayer was and is at the centre of their day.

Matthew shows that there were some aspects of Jewish prayer which Jesus was concerned about. A tendency to want to let everyone know what they were doing (an outward show of piety) rather than prayer being an intimate conversation, and the length and wordiness of some prayers. "It's not the words and being seen that are important." says Jesus. "Cut out the babbling! It's the heart and soul that's behind the words that matters!" And there was a fair bit of babbling when it came to prayers.

What do you have to do to get your god to sit up and listen to you? Do you start quiet and then start shouting? Do you think up as many fancy titles as possible to try and appease him? And if that fails do you just shout louder and louder and start getting physical? The Jews themselves were, as I mentioned, also prone to going a little over the top in their prayers, although to be honest I've heard similar from Christians around today.

You see, one of the problems with prayer is that it can be sometimes confusing. How do we know that we're using the right form of words? How do we know that God is listening? Why would he even bother to listen to us, and how do we know that he will answer our prayer? One of the reasons that the Jews (and pagans) tried to cover all the bases in the way they addressed their gods was that there was a real fear – firstly that they might not be listening, and secondly that they might be angry with the one praying. Is that fear still with us today?

Do we still have those worries about prayer – that we're not doing it right, that God might not hear us, he's angry with us, or worse that he simply won't answer? How do we address those fears? Well, it rather depends on our understanding of the God we're praying to.

Jesus had an answer to that one: *"Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."*

Jesus tells us not to worry, that God knows what we need even before we ask, and there's no need for all that babbling and shouting! And there's more, because how does Jesus tell the disciples to begin? ***"Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name..."***

No babbling, no need! Just *"Our father in heaven..."*

"Our Father...!" What is Fatherhood all about? It's about a relationship, in this case a relationship between God and humankind, based upon the love of a father for his child. Let's backtrack a little...

The disciples asked Jesus for a prayer, and Jesus may have done something rather interesting – taken the familiar and transformed it. It's something he did a lot. The parables he told took illustrations from life in order to make a spiritual point. There are echoes of the Lord's prayer here in **"Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven"**

The Lord's Prayer is the Jesus Creed morphed into a prayer. It's a yearning for God's will to be done, His name to be hallowed. And it's a yearning for all of us to benefit from the generous love of God, for our comfort, healing and spiritual well-being. But it's more even than that! Those 52 words are packed full of significance, covering the spiritual realm, our physical needs and the relational aspects of our lives.

1) The Spiritual Realm: We live in a scientific age which demands proof before belief can happen, and that can cause problems for many, because although as Christians we know there's more to life than the mere physical, it's not something that we can prove empirically. It's a faith thing, and that's why one commentator calls this the disciples prayer, it can only be meaningfully spoken by someone who is a disciple of Jesus. **"Hallowed be your name"** means acknowledging that there is a spiritual realm. And the spiritual connects with the physical realm in **"your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."**

The best way of understanding **"your kingdom come"** is in the context of the Hebrew style of writing, called parallelism. You find it throughout the psalms. A verse divides into two where the second half repeats and amplifies the first half. The second half of the verse brings out the meaning of the first. If we apply the same idea to the Lord's Prayer we have **"your kingdom come - your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."** If the second half explains and amplifies the first then we have a definition of the kingdom of God – *it is wherever on earth God's will is as perfectly done as it is in heaven*. To be in the kingdom is to submit to and obey God's will. It's not about nations, it's about people, it's about you and I, it's about submission of my will, my life, my heart to God.

2) The Physical: God is how big? He's the creator of the universe, the sustainer of everything. God is that big and yet he is interested in the minute detail of your next meal. **"Give us this day our daily bread.."** At the heart of our material needs is the food we eat, and the thought behind this phrase is that God is concerned with our daily physical needs, we can bring to him what might seem mundane concerns in the light of all that's going on in the world.

3) The Relational: **"Forgive us as we forgive"** - This is where the prayer touches not only our relationship with God but also our relationships with others, and at a personal level that can hurt, because there are times when we fall out with each other. And Jesus knew this because he adds a rider to the prayer he's teaching his disciples. **"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."** It's in the relational that we so often fall down, isn't it?