

Father, Bring In Your Kingdom

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us Christianity's best known and most often recited prayer. The Lord's Prayer, also known as the "Our Father" (or *Pater Noster* if you're into Latin), is often the first prayer we learn as children and the last prayer we remember at the end of our lives. I've prayed with people whose dementia had progressed to the point where they struggled even to recognize loved ones, but they could still recite the Lord's Prayer. Many denominations include the Lord's Prayer in every church service, no matter the occasion. And when we try to pray but can't find our own words, "our Father, who art in heaven" is always a good place to start.

The Lord's Prayer is brief, just a few lines long, and surprisingly unadorned. Don't let its apparent simplicity fool you. Every word in this prayer is packed with enough sacred meaning to support centuries of sermons. Before we get too far into scriptural analysis, though, let's spend a moment considering how Jesus came to give us this incomparable prayer.

Luke tells us that "Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'" That one short sentence is freighted with implications. Luke doesn't tell us which disciple addressed Jesus, making it more difficult to interpret a request that might mean something very different coming from Peter, for instance, than it would from Thomas, Matthew, John, or Judas. Some Bible scholars read it as the plea of a naïve soul who wanted Jesus to give him a little extra help. Others see it as a case of prophet envy. "John gave *his* disciples a prayer, Jesus, so why haven't you given one to us?" (And no, we don't have the text of whatever prayer John the Baptist taught his followers.) Both interpretations are possible, but Bible scholar, activist and minister Obery M. Hendricks, Jr. suggests an intriguing third possibility. In his book *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teachings and How They Have Been*

Corrupted, Dr. Hendricks reminds us that the disciples already knew how to pray. As observant Jews, they would have prayed constantly. However, their regular prayer practices wouldn't necessarily have taught them how to pray for Adonai to liberate their nation from secular tyranny and corruption. So, when the disciple asks Jesus to teach them how to pray, he's really asking how to persuade the Father to grant his Messiah and chosen people the power to drive the Roman Empire from their land, purify the Temple, and establish a theocracy with Adonai himself restored as their rightful king. It's a revolutionary request that inspires Jesus to give his disciples a radically political prayer.

One quirk of the Christian tradition is that, even when we lean into the use of modern language in our worship, a few texts only sound right to many of us if we use the 17th century King James translation. The 23rd Psalm is one of those texts; the Lord's Prayer is another. Our *Book of Common Prayer* offers traditional and contemporary translations of this prayer, and some congregations use both. But the contemporary version doesn't necessarily trip easily off of Episcopalian tongues, and neither version is an entirely accurate translation from Luke's original Greek. "Hallowed be thy name" can sound like rote flattery, and "thy Kingdom come" like a vague wish for a happy ending that might come to pass in some far away future. Neither is what Jesus meant. Without getting lost in the complexities of Greek verb conjugation, the Common English Bible more accurately translates the first lines of the Lord's Prayer as "Father, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom." This prayer asks the Lord to be active in the world, awakening hearts and minds to his holiness and transforming humankind's broken mess into heavenly perfection. In the Kingdom, our Father alone is king, and his will is always done. Not the will of the Roman Emperor, a puppet monarch, the Sanhedrin, or the rich and powerful people who always seem to find a way to dominate and exploit the poor. Only the will of the

Lord. When the Kingdom comes, his will alone will be done across the world, just as it's done in heaven. For that to happen, all earthly kingdoms must fall and earthly leaders bend the knee. Suddenly, it's a lot easier to understand why the Temple authorities, Herod and Pilate might feel threatened by the teachings of a country rabbi from Nazareth. Jesus didn't teach his disciples to pray for some idyllic fantasy. He taught them to pray for a holy revolution, and that's something the powers and principalities of this world never fail to oppose.

There's a lot to preach in the Lord's Prayer, and experienced clergy warn against trying to cover it all in just one sermon. The rest of our Gospel holds still more potential pitfalls. In his 2010 sermon "Shameless," the Reverend Doctor David Lose told working preachers, "If you're going to preach on the gospel reading from Luke this Sunday, I have some advice for you: clear some time on your schedule for additional pastoral counseling in the coming weeks." His advice focuses not on the Lord's Prayer, but on the bewildered pain Christians experience when their prayers seem to go unanswered despite Jesus's promise that, if we ask, it will be given to us. No preacher can explain exactly why our Father grants some requests and refuses others, although his delays and denials shouldn't be automatically interpreted as punishment. We can't anticipate all the possible consequences of everything we pray for, so it can be a blessing when we ask and the Lord replies with "not yet," "not that way," or simply "no." I wonder, though, whether he sometimes withholds what we pray for not because he deems us unworthy to receive it, but because we pray for the wrong things. Perhaps if our prayers ask for our Father's will to be done rather than our own, the outcomes might be different.

Jesus's assurance that doors will open if we knock and what we seek will be found is often explained as a call for persistence. Like the widow in the parable who incessantly petitions the reluctant judge, we are to bang on the Pearly Gates until the Father gets up off his throne and

opens them. I suspect, however, that Jesus actually means that we should be relentless in seeking to know and understand the Father's will. If so, our prayer shouldn't be "Lord, please give me what I want," but instead "Lord, please tell me what you want." That prayer is almost certain to be granted, because we can usually discern what our Father wants if we're willing to listen to Jesus's teachings and wrestle our own desires into submission. That's not to say that we can't petition him. If Abraham could argue with the Lord to spare Sodom because his nephew Lot lived there, we can ask for what seems good to us. We need to recognize, though, that our Creator is not a vending machine who will drop our desires into our hands if we only say the magic words. He granted Abraham's prayer to protect Lot and his family, but everyone else in Sodom and Gomorrah perished despite Abraham's arguments. Outcomes like that can be hard to accept, whether they strike us directly or we simply have to watch them unfold. I can't explain the Father's logic, and we make a mistake if we take every misfortune as proof of guilt. Still, I'm confident that our Lord is more than able to absorb and heal whatever disappointment and anger we hurl his way when things go according to his will but don't work out as we'd prefer.

Inviting the Father to bring his Kingdom can be scary for those of us who like to pretend we're in control of our lives. Before we knock his will being done, though, maybe we ought to give it a try. Just imagine a world where everyone did justice, loved mercy, and walked humbly with the God who made us all. It would probably be very different from the world we've built for ourselves and, apart from a handful of tyrants and oligarchs, people would probably prefer it. We'll never know as long as we continue to insist that we know better than the Lord of all Creation how every little thing on earth should go. We'll recite the King James Version of the Lord's Prayer in a few minutes. For right now, though, let's simply, sincerely pray: Father, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom and let *your* will be done. Amen.