

Our Father Talk 1

“Our Father who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name! Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!”

1. Introduction and Welcome

1.1. My brothers and sisters in Christ, welcome to this, the first of three talks on the Our Father. It is also our inaugural meeting as a Cluster of parishes. Thank you for coming out to support it. Thank you also to Oscott College for acting as our hosts. **[Welcome Sutton Cluster if present and refer to the St Nicholas Blog]**. The format of each talk will be that I shall speak for 20 minutes or so with a break half way through for questions, if there are any at that stage. I will also invite you to ask any further questions when I have concluded my remarks. However, if you feel that I could usefully clarify something immediately before moving on, then ask a question right away. We will adjourn to the Refectory at 4.15 for tea and then those that can stay are cordially invited to join me and the Oscott community for Holy Hour and Solemn Vespers in the Chapel at 5 pm.

1.2. Now as many of you know, I have spent the last six years writing academic essays of one sort or another. This will be a talk not an academic essay but that would not exempt me from a charge of plagiarism if I did not name my sources. I will mention them as I go along and when I post the texts of these talks on the parish websites, I will include a full reading list if anybody feels moved to investigate further. What I am about to offer are my own reflections in response to some of the many works which have been written on this core prayer of our faith and worship.

2. Context

2.1. That leads me into saying something about the context for these talks. First we have the fact that since the First Sunday of Advent which ushered in this current liturgical year B, we have been observing what Pope Francis has designated as a Year of Prayer. It is worth our while to take a moment to remind ourselves why he has done that. In announcing that there would be a Year of Prayer, the Holy Father explained that the Year of Prayer is dedicated “to rediscovering the great value and absolute need for prayer, prayer in personal life, in the life of the Church, prayer in the world.” That in itself would be a worthy aim but there is more. The Year of Prayer is a year of preparation to a Jubilee Year in 2025 which has been given the umbrella title: “Pilgrims of Hope”. We might well be wondering what the connection between the two is supposed to be. The answer, I think, lies in the date on which this announcement was made. It was the 21st January 2024. Now that date has a special significance. It was the 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time; the

Sunday of the Word when as Catholics we are asked to show a very special reverence for the Word of God as an outward sign of our inner commitment to continually reforming our lives by the Word of God in Scripture. If we do that then we cannot avoid seeing the centrality of prayer to the Christian life because it was central to Christ's ministry on earth. Furthermore we cannot fail to have our hope in the ultimate triumph of Good over Evil rekindled because the Scriptures are full of promises about that. The period leading up to that ultimate triumph is known by some Christians as the End Times. Now if we are getting all posh and theological then we refer to the study of the End Times as eschatology. In what I say about the Our Father, I will be drawing upon the commentary of Tom Wright the Anglican Bishop of Durham which focusses particularly on the eschatological dimension of the prayer.

2.2. Now as befits Pilgrims of Hope, refreshing their prayer life in response to the promptings in Scripture, we can now see how very appropriate it is that we take as our guide the Our Father the text of which is given to us in the Gospels. So let me say a few words about where we find that text specifically and what we can learn from how the Evangelists passed it on to us. The Our Father is found in two versions: one in St Luke's Gospel and one in St Matthew's. Both evangelists record that Our Lord gave the disciples the prayer in response to their request that he teach them to pray. According to the New Jerome Biblical Commentary, no self-respecting religious group would be happy unless its founder had passed on a prayer which expresses their particular insights and charisms. That is why John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray too. In the Catholic Church of today we retain something of that attitude in the way that the Our Father appears in the Divine Office for Morning and Evening Prayer. By praying it twice that way and then once at daily Mass, the ancient practice of praying three times a day was restored. We also see it in the way we make a point of handing over the Our Father to catechumens if we are doing the Scrutinies as part of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

2.3. A moment ago, I mentioned two versions of the prayer. In the Divine Office and at Mass, we use exclusively the version from St Matthew. St Matthew's is slightly longer. The scripture scholars suggest that it's a slightly later version than St Luke's. The additional wording represents the fruit of some reflection on the prayer in the early Church to whom St Matthew was writing. From this we can learn a lesson. The prayer does not stop with the Amen. The prayer is only complete when we have built it into our spiritual lives and it has inspired us to further conversion to Christ.

2.4. Where, then, in St Matthew's Gospel is his version of the Our Father to be found? It is found in the Sermon on the Mount: Chapter 6 vv. 7-15 to be precise. To be even more precise: if you cast your mind back to the Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday, our Lord gives us his instruction about good works, fasting and prayer.

When it comes to prayer this is what he tells us: *“And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites; they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you pray go to your private room and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.”*

2.5. The Gospel reading then goes on to give the Lord’s teaching on fasting. Now as the Lectionary presents the text it seems to flow perfectly well. We first have our Lord’s teaching on almsgiving, then his teaching on prayer and finally his teaching on fasting. The Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday on almsgiving, prayer and fasting seem to form a single unit divided into three components. In fact, in the Bible, there is an interruption. Our Lord expands upon his teaching on prayer by criticising the way the Pharisees babble and then gives us the text of the Lord’s Prayer as a model of all that we need say. In the Lectionary, everything to do with the Lord’s Prayer is omitted from the Ash Wednesday Gospel.

2.6. But from knowing where to find the Lord’s Prayer in the Bible, we can draw a number of important lessons which will usefully frame our reflections on the text of the prayer itself. The first is that Matthew took an editorial decision to place the text of the prayer within the Sermon on the Mount because he saw it as essential to a proper understanding of God’s plan for human living. That, after all, is what the Sermon on the Mount is. So apart from the eschatological dimension to which I referred earlier, we should be expecting to find in the Lord’s Prayer, vital guidance about ourselves, our calling, our relationship with God and our mission.

Interim pause for questions [5 minutes]

3. Our Father

3.1. With that context in mind, let’s look at the opening words of the prayer: “Our Father”. That word order opens the prayer with a focus on us: “*Our* Father”. In the actual Greek in which the New Testament was written, the word order is reversed: Πατερ ἡμῶν brought out more accurately in the Latin version of the prayer: Pater noster: Father of us. Does this subtle difference in the word order between the languages matter? Well, yes! I think it does because unless we are aware of it, we can miss some very important points.

3.2. Opening the prayer with the word “Father” takes us back to the very first book of the Bible: Genesis – “In the beginning God created...” The very first vocation God the Father the Creator of Heaven and Earth gives us is the calling to live as people created in his image and likeness. This is a crucial foundation for understanding who we truly are.

- 3.3. Then, who is included within the “our”? Obviously, all of us here and all other Christians because it unites the whole Christian family, the Church, the Body of Christ. But the Body never prays without its head, Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between humanity and the Godhead who by his passion death and resurrection opened the way for us to full Communion with the Holy Trinity. For us to lay hold of that salvation we must be baptised so becoming temples of the Holy Spirit. Baptism conforms us to Christ.
- 3.4. So, in just those two words, we have a powerful reminder of our dignity as redeemed sinners and of our baptismal calling for this world and the promise of life eternal in the next. For death occurs in the body but the Spirit brings us life, to paraphrase St Paul. Here I would like to mention a prayer I say when I am charging the chalice with wine and water at the Offertory. Normally only the Altar Servers hear it: By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity. Think of that for a moment: because through baptism we are conformed to Christ and can call God our Father our destiny in the next world, through the work of God’s grace, is to become ourselves divine. I have not just made that up. That is the clear teaching of the great fathers of the Church.
- 3.5. When it comes to our baptismal calling, St Cyprian reminds us that when we offer the Lord’s prayer, we pray for all – even in our private room. We do not say “my father” but “our father”. This is an example of all the Christian faithful exercising their priestly vocation that is to say to be in dialogue with God through prayer and to be intercessors and friends of sinners. When we pray this prayer, we bring before Almighty God all those situations which need to be cleansed and redeemed by the precious blood of the Lamb.

4. Who art in heaven

- 4.1. The addition of these words to the text found in Luke is an indicator of St Matthew’s editorial work. He was shaping his sources to give the message he wanted to proclaim. Scripture scholars tell us that St Matthew was writing for Jewish converts to Christianity. These words were added to make the prayer sound more like the prayers that would be offered in the Synagogue. In other words. St Matthew was seeking to accommodate the sensitivities of the congregations for whom he was writing. From this we can draw a reminder that the mission of the Church must adapt to time and place whilst not compromising on the core message.
- 4.2. “Synagogue” comes from the Greek for a place for meeting together. It is related to the word “Synodal”. Yes: our Father is in heaven but the prayer we offer is for all those on earth who need treatment in the Church’s field hospital or who need our respectful accompaniment.

5. Hallowed be thy name

- 5.1. “Hallowed” is an old English word for sanctified or made holy. We have retained the sense of this word in naming the evening before All Hallows, that is All Saints, Day, Hallowe’en.
- 5.2. St Cyprian reminds us that when we pray “Hallowed be thy name” we are not asking that God be made holy by our prayers. That would be obvious nonsense. No: what are asking in this prayer is that the sanctity of God should shine in us who bear the name of Christian. We are told in the Sermon on the Mount to be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect. This can only be possible of we who are by baptism temples of the Holy Spirit allow Christ to live in and through us. St Augustine adds a further interpretation: that by this prayer we are asking that all people on earth hold the Lord’s name as being holy. The two perspectives are not opposed to each other but rather are complementary. We can hardly expect the Lord’s name to be held holy if we take it in vain. If we are consciously not taking the Lord’s name in vain then we create the space for God’s sanctity to shine in us. Our 1st Reading at Mass this Sunday reminds us of the 10 commandments. “Hallowed be thy name” reminds us of the continuing relevance of the 10 commandments as a moral code for Christians and in particular in this specific regard, the commandment: “You shall not utter the name of the Lord your God to misuse it”.

6. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

- 6.1. I have mentioned the word “eschatology” a couple of time already. Let me explain that in more detail. The Greek word “eschaton” means the End. In Christian theology it refers specifically to the return of Christ in glory and the end of the world. In other words, it refers to those things which occupy our thoughts in the month of November in the run up to and including the Solemnity of Christ the King and in Advent up to 16th December. Why is this relevant to the Lord’s prayer?
- 6.2. According to Bishop Tom Wright, the answer to that question is that the prayer is nothing less than a plea for Christ to come immediately. In other words, it is a prayer for the eschaton to arrive right now, this minute, with no further delay. When I first read Bishop Wright’s book, I did think, perhaps a little mischievously, how providential it is that we reserve this prayer for the Communion Rite otherwise there may be a danger that if it were prayed earlier in the Mass, the Second Coming would interrupt the Homily! But seriously, we do need to pay very careful attention to precisely what it is we are praying for here. Now there is obviously great value in St Cyprian’s interpretation that this petition is all about the kingdom of God being made perfect within our souls. St Augustine follows the

same line of thinking when he suggests it is in reality a prayer for obedience. Nevertheless, it is worth taking another look at why Bishop Wright brings a different perspective to these petitions.

- 6.3. Bishop Wright makes the point that when Jesus gave us this prayer, he was speaking not just from his divine experience of being the only-begotten Son of God but also from his human experience of being born a Son of Man within a specific religious tradition. This tradition for all the waywardness recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures had faithfully guarded the promise of the coming of the Messiah and lived in expectation of it. The book of the Hebrew Scriptures which proclaimed this teaching first and foremost was the book containing the prophecies of Isaiah.
- 6.4. Scripture scholars tell us that the book is not a single unit containing the prophecies of just one man but a compendium containing not only the work of the original and actual Isaiah but also the work of a school of spiritual disciples loyal to his teaching. Hence modern scripture scholars refer to First, Second and Third Isaiah. Third Isaiah begins at Chapter 56 and goes through to the end of the book – Chapter 66. I mention the chapter numbers because it is significant that when Jesus inaugurates his teaching in Gallilee when he reads from the scroll in the synagogue, he reads from Chapter 61. So, our Lord is reading from Third Isaiah. Throughout the whole of Third Isaiah, the prophet is talking about the dawning glory of the Lord's reign which will see the world renewed and sanctified in readiness for the enjoyment of the eternal marriage feast of the Lord. In Chapter 61, we read of the vindicated Suffering Servant of Almighty God who will be the agent through whom this profound change will occur. What does Jesus say? Today this prophecy is being fulfilled. In other words he is the long-awaited Messiah whose saving work is accomplished on the Cross at Calvary but will only be fully realised at the Last Judgement when his resurrection and our sacramental resurrection in baptism will shine out in a way no-one can contradict; and because no-one can contradict it, that will be the moment for dividing the sheep from the goats. Personally, I find Bishop Wright's reading persuasive because it gives an independent content to these two petitions whereas St Cyprian and St Augustine rather wrap them both up with "Hallowed be thy name".

7. Conclusion

It is time to bring these remarks to a close. I began by explaining the context for our study of the Lord's Prayer referring to this Year of Prayer and also to where the Lord's Prayer can be found within the Gospel. The theme running through that review of the context is that the Lord's Prayer expresses the core of our understanding of who we are, what our mission is and how we are to live in accordance with God's plan. I next spent some time looking at the two opening words of the Prayer: "Our Father" because they can be the springboard for a reflection on our baptismal vocation. I then suggested that "who art in heaven" which is Matthew's addition to the more basic form of the prayer we have from St Luke shows an adaptation to St Matthew's intended audience. It shows that we too must adapt our way of presenting the Gospel to the circumstances of today. The challenge of witnessing to the Gospel in the circumstances of today is the key to understanding how St Cyprian and St Augustine interpreted "Hallowed be thy name". We must show that we hold the Lord's name to be holy if we want others to do the same. Finally, we looked at "Thy kingdom come; they will be done on earth as it is in heaven". This petition points us to the next world – very fitting for pilgrims of hope preparing for a jubilee year.