

“Our Father who art in heaven”

Matthew 6.5-15

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengolt

‘Our Father in heaven’, that is how our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us to address God. This prayer is deeply meaningful and important. It teaches us how to pray, and it teaches us about the God we pray to.

The early church saw this prayer as one the pillars of the faith that had to be taught to the new believers before they were baptised. ‘This is how we pray, because this is who God is’.

So the Lord’s Prayer is really the first Creed; it unites the Holy Catholic Church all over the world. Because we all pray this prayer and we learn about God through this prayer.

1. God is a Father

First, Jesus teaches us to call God ‘Father’.

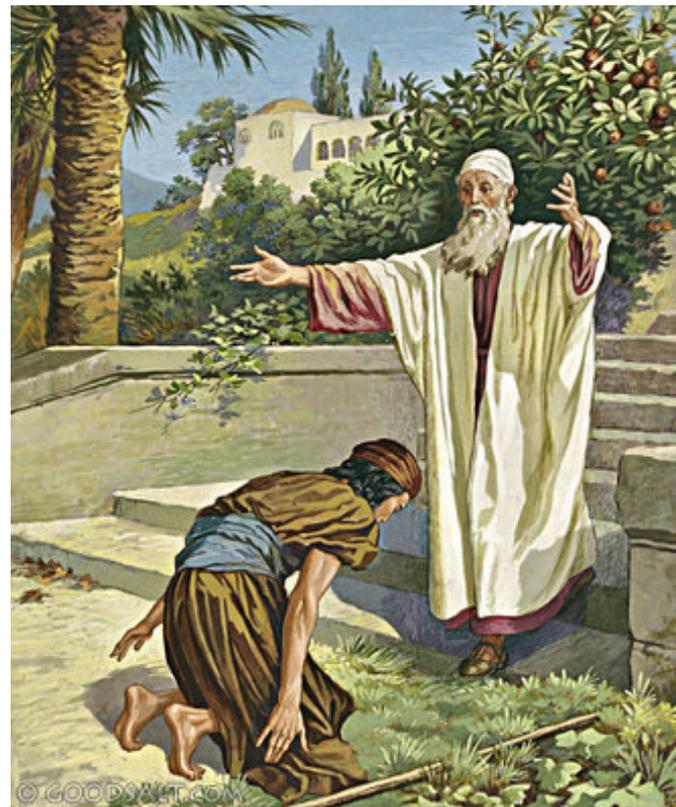
Actually, he used the Aramaic word ‘Abba’. We know that Jesus used that word, because when he prayed in Gethsemane, he prayed to ‘Abba, Father’, as St Mark relates.

So we are told by Jesus to also pray to Abba, Father, just as He did. And this was revolutionary.

Joachim Jeremias, a German Lutheran theologian of the last century, wrote a great book on The Lord’s Prayer. He describes how he and his team of scholars researched all the prayer literature of Judaism in the times of Jesus, and the word ‘Abba’ was never ever used for addressing God. Because it was not formal enough.

Many Aramaic speaking Church Fathers testify that ‘abba’ was how they, when small children, would address their father. As ‘daddy’.

Abba was an everyday word, a homely family-word. No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner.



But Jesus spoke with God as a child speaks with his father, simply, intimately, securely, childlike, and He tells us that we should address God in the same intimate manner.

‘Daddy.’ So close. So full of trust.

But be not mistaken. We do not own Him. He is our Father, yes, but He is in heaven.

Be careful not to make idols, like Israel did in the desert. With so much overwhelming power God had shown to Israel that He was truly a loving Father, but holy and almighty at the same time.

In spite of this, at the earliest occasion, the Israelites made themselves a golden calf. They imagined God to be like the gods of Egypt.

Our God is not a man-made idol. He is not how we imagine Him to be; He is the living God who dwells in heaven.

It is very easy to sentimentalise the idea of the fatherhood of God, and to make his fatherhood an excuse for an easy-going, comfortable religion. “He is a good fellow, my Father, and whatever I do, He is okay with me.”

The addition ‘who art in heaven’ is an antidote against the idea that God is an easygoing, sweet daddy and he will always bail us out and support us, whatever we do.

He is in heaven. He is the almighty, the all-holy, the totally different one. Yes, a loving Father, but we approach him with reverence and adoration, with awe, with obedience.

A father in the ancient Near East was never a pushover. Beside the idea of tenderness, the word ‘father’ also meant, the one who is ultimately responsible and the one who must be obeyed by his children.

Not all people have good feelings when they think of God as a Father because their own father was awful. That is another reason why it important to address God as the Father ‘who is in heaven’.

This means, our thought are drawn up to the Ideal Father, the perfect one. He is the example for how fathers should behave. He is not called Father because He resembles earthly fathers, He is not like a father, but He is called Father because He is the archetype of Fatherhood.

He is the example. If only all of our earthly fathers reflected him more, we would find it so much easier to know God, and to pray to our Father in heaven.

2. Father of Jesus Christ

Jesus taught us a new intimacy with God, as our dear Father, Daddy, if you like. In the Old Testament, God is sometimes called a Father, but without that connotation of intimacy. He is called Father 14 times in the Old Testament. That is not often, but when it occurs, it is significant.

God was the Father of Israel. When Moses spoke to Pharaoh in Egypt, God told him to say: “Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, I say to you, let my son go that he may serve me” (Ex 4.22-23).”

Israel was God’s son, and God was Israel’s Father.

God was Israel’s father as the one who elected, delivered, and saved his people Israel by his mighty deeds.

God is Israel’s Father, but the prophets of Israel constantly accuse God’s people that they did not give God the honor that a son should give to his father.

A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father. where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts.

Israel was a disobedient son, and when, finally, Jesus came, He was the perfect Son. The one who obeyed God as Israel should have done. That is why in the Gospel of Matthew, we read of Jesus: “Out of Egypt I have called my Son.” These words about Israel are applied to, and fulfilled in Jesus.

Jesus fulfilled all that Israel should have been. An obedient Son of the Father.

And Jesus was to a much deeper extent a Son of the Father than Israel could ever have been. He was, He is God from God. That is why He could talk to God as daddy. They are truly, by nature, related. Father and Son.

And the great miracle for us is that Jesus takes us under his wings. Of those who believe in Him, He says to God his Father: “I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters...”

Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters, we read in the letter to the Hebrews. He made us his brothers and sisters, and by doing that, He made us children of God. He teaches us to relate to God in the same intimate manner that he does. ‘Call Him: Our Father’.

Jesus is the Son of God by nature; we are sons and daughters of God because we are by faith linked to Jesus and adopted by God; so now we also call him Father.

At the heart of our universe is a good God who wants the best for us. This idea should give us joy and security in our life. The God who created our world and who upholds it, and who will eventually also renew it, is good and wants the best for us.



What a Father we have!

And if you look in the mirror, you can tell yourself: “I am a beloved child of God. My Father loves me and cares for me.”

We all know our own heart, full of bitter thoughts, often even about ourselves. No-one knows our own unworthiness better than we do ourselves. But our heavenly Father, who knows you better than you know yourself, still loves you and cares for you. And wants to give you the best.

That is why many liturgies introduce the Lord’s Prayer with the words: ‘We are bold to say’. Without fear we talk to God. Thanks to Jesus Christ.

3. He is *our* Father

One little word I did not speak about yet, that little word ‘our’.

It is very significant that in the Lord’s Prayer, the words I, me, and mine never occur. How is that in your prayers?

Jesus took those words out of our prayers, out of our life, and he replaced them by we, us, and our.



The word ‘our’ is significant. It turns every individual prayer into a prayer for the community, a prayer for others. If we address God as ‘our’ Father, we address Him on behalf of and together with our brothers and sisters at the same time.

We have no right to ask anything for ourselves that hurts other members of the worldwide Christian family. And whenever we ask something of our Father, the ‘our’ should hit you in the face if you only ask things for yourself.

If we pray in line with the will of God, His answer to our prayers will always be a blessing for all God’s people. In one way or another.

The Christian faith has molded us into being one family. Like Israel, we are on a journey together. As Israel was led from Egypt to the promised land, we are one people of God on the move.

With Jesus at the helm. He is our leader, and He teaches us how to pray. He is our Oldest Brother who knows the Father of the family best. He stands, as it were, in front of us as our prayer leader, and begins the prayer... ‘Our Father, who art in heaven..’

When Jesus taught his disciples, and us, to address God together, Jesus included himself in that ‘our’. We really pray this prayer with him.

He leads us in this prayer. He invites us to participate in His own prayer life. The early Christians were very conscious of Jesus' exalted presence before the throne of God, where he is always interceding on behalf of His people. On behalf of His brothers and sisters.

So when we pray with Jesus, to our Father, we pray the best possible prayer. We unite with him in heaven before the throne. We unite with all believers. And we boldly speak to God Almighty about our common needs.

Is this not a very comforting thought. We pray with the Lord Jesus to God. We also express this in our prayers when we end them by saying: 'we pray in the name of Jesus.' That means, united with him. As if Jesus prays. That is how your prayer reaches God on the throne. As the prayer of Jesus and his family.

Another comforting thought. Sometimes, when I cannot pray, you pray for me, by saying 'our Father'. I am part of your prayers when you do this. And when you are in a bad period and you cannot pray, worry not too much. Other people pray to 'our Father', and that includes you. You are never alone. Your brothers and sisters pray for you, all the time.

Conclusion

So concluding...

We are together on a fantastic journey through life; as redeemed children of God we are a family and we travel together.

And in this journey, we are blessed and helped and supported by God - our Father. So we pray to Him, we ask Him, we involve Him in our life. And we can boldly pray, because He is our Father.

When you lay the needs of yourself and the whole family of God before God, be assured that He is listening, and that He is willing to give you what you need. Because He is a Father, a loving Father, your Father. The Father of us all.

When we pray, we stand as it were behind Jesus Christ before the throne of God. He leads us in our prayers. He tells us how to pray, and what to pray for. And our prayers are presented by Jesus to the Father on the throne. What a powerful idea. It is Jesus Christ in heaven who presents all our needs to our Father.

With all the saints, with all believers here, with all believers worldwide, and with our oldest brother Jesus Christ, we pray to our Father. And oh, our Father, our papa, He listens and acts for the sake of his children.

+ Amen