

APPENDIX 1. THE LORD'S PRAYER (MATTHEW 6: 5-15)

From Fr John McKinnon's Gospel Commentaries <http://johnmckinnon.org/index.php/matthew6v1-24>

Matthew's concern was to teach his own community a better approach to prayer.

This was the first time that Jesus used the term *your Father* in relation to the disciples. A childlike approach to God in prayer was common in Judaism, and the image of God as loving parent - father and mother - figured prominently in the scriptural tradition.

Matthew's community was familiar with the approach to prayer of some of their *Gentile* contemporaries. In verses 7&8, he uses their practice to emphasise another important approach to prayer. The prayer *in the private room* would be, as well, the prayer of a quiet heart. In such prayer, words were not important. What mattered was confident trust in God and the silent surrender of the need to feel in control.

In verse 9, Jesus' language moved from singular to plural; he was addressing the disciples as community. In many ways the prayer summed up the basic attitude to daily living typical of disciples of Jesus. The context of the prayer was trust in a Father who knows what you need before you ask.

Those who prayed were to try to hold in tension both the immanence of God and God's transcendence. God was the *Father* to whom those who prayed could relate in the secret intimacy of their own hearts. Yet this intimate God was, at the same time, the God in heaven, the transcendent one. Intimacy was to be balanced with a profound sense of awe and deep respect.

It was easy for Jesus to refer to God as Father, because he lived in a highly patriarchal society, and was no doubt influenced by it himself. In using the term, Father, Jesus captured the basic intimacy between God and himself. Together with that intimacy, he included the sense of his total dependence on God. The intimate God was the source of his being, of his life.

Some Christians find it just as easy to relate to God as mother. In doing so, they stand firmly in the tradition adopted by Jesus, and, before him, by some of the prophets. Tender, gentle, intuitive, intimately sharing, trusting and unconditional love and mercy are eminently feminine energies. Jesus' own sense of his God focussed as much on these aspects of God as on God's life-giving, ordering and active care for the world.

In the Hebrew tradition God's name was Yahweh. The word itself was regarded as so sacred that Jews would never pronounce it. When they encountered the name in their Scriptures, they substituted the word "The Lord". The *name* of God (Yahweh) was inseparably linked to the sense of God as the liberating God who brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Disciples were to pray "*may your name be held holy*". To *hold holy* means to respect profoundly. Disciples were to take this God seriously.

Moses' contemporaries had experienced the oppression of the Egyptian Empire, Ezekiel's of the Babylonian Empire. The disciples of Jesus and, later, Matthew's community, knew the oppression of the Roman Empire. Like their predecessors, they longed for God to intervene to display his holiness once more.

The petition in verse 10 in some ways served to specify the previous one. In place of oppression by the rich and powerful, disciples were to long for the experience of *God's kingdom*, the nature of which had been shown as Jesus worked his healings and exorcisms. Its coming would be God's work. Just as God's name would be *held holy* through the advent of God's kingdom, so, too, God's kingdom would come as God's saving *will* began to operate. All three would call for the close co-operation of disciples.

In Jesus' day, hunger was not uncommon. People lacked their daily necessities because others had accumulated too much. Rome loaded heavy taxes on the population. Many of the wealthy Jews took little notice of the oppression imposed on most of the population of Galilee. The situation was little different

for Matthew's community. Poverty was rife in the cities of the Empire. *God's kingdom* was yet to come. *God's will* was yet to be realised. And so they prayed for their daily bread.

The language of the *forgiveness of debts* echoed that used in the description of the Year of Jubilee in Deuteronomy. The purpose, at that time, was that no one be in need. And the manner of the release of the debt was that every creditor should cancel the claim held against a neighbor if that neighbor was a member of the community.

The image of *debt* was used to come to terms with the reality of sin. The prayer simply assumed that everyone was in *debt* to God for offending God's *honour* in some way. Most sin takes practical shape in actions that in one way or another do not respect the human dignity of another (or of the community), or of the persons themselves who are sinning. They are failures to love, to forgive, or to have mercy.

The prayer does not suppose that disciples' readiness to forgive would measure the degree to which God would forgive. That would go against the unconditional nature of God's love. God is always the first to move. It is God who energises the capacity of disciples to forgive others. Sinners truly accept God's forgiveness only as they come to accept, at the same time, their own radical dignity in the eyes of God. To seek God's forgiveness, without offering forgiveness to others, is incomplete.

Regarding verse 13, it is not that God leads people into temptation. God's involvement may be to allow *temptation* for the purpose of some greater good but, at the same time, to empower a life-giving response to it. God does allow people to act in ways that God does not directly want, rather than prevent them, and, thereby, compromise their freedom and personal responsibility.

For the early disciples, Matthew seemed to see *temptation* coming from the persistent oppression of the Empire, coupled with the delay in the arrival of God's kingdom. He was concerned that the members of his community would be tempted to lose hope, and to revert to their former ways. Jesus insisted that disciples pray that God might not bring them to trial/*temptation*, and might rescue them from *evil(one)*, not because God needed reminding, but so they might clearly recognise their own vulnerability.

Matthew's conclusion in verses 14&15 was not a theological expression of causality. He was seeking rather to emphasise the imperative, but constantly difficult, need always to forgive.