

## **Living Space Thursday of Week II of Ordinary Time – Gospel | Sacred Space Commentary on Matthew 6:7-15**

Jesus tells his disciples not to pray like many of the Gentiles. They go in for long prayers, hoping that eventually God will hear them. That is quite unnecessary, Jesus says, because our Father already knows our needs before we ask. If that is the case, why then should we bother praying at all? We do not pray to tell God what he already knows - we pray so that we will realise more deeply our own needs & our total dependence on him.

Jesus then goes on & tells his disciples how they should pray. He teaches them, in effect, what we now call the *Lord's Prayer*, or the '*Our Father*'. We have become accustomed to reciting this prayer very often - at every Mass, as well as whenever we say the Rosary & at many other times.

The prayer in this form (Lk has a shorter version) contains seven petitions. Seven is a favourite number for Mt. In listing the genealogy of Jesus he divides it into three lists of seven (ch.1 of his Gospel); there were probably seven Beatitudes in the original text (ch.5); & there are seven parables of the Kingdom (ch.13); forgiveness is to be offered not seven times but 77 times (ch.18); there are seven 'Woes' when denouncing the Pharisees (ch.23). Finally, the Gospel itself is divided into seven main sections (Infancy, five discourses, Passion).

The text of the *Lord's Prayer* should not be seen as just a formula for vocal recitation. It is, rather, a series of statements & petitions in which we affirm our relationship with God, with the people around us & with the world in general. It is a statement of faith & it is, as we shall see, a highly challenging &, therefore, even rather dangerous prayer.

Let us take a brief look at the petitions one by one.

### ***Our Father***

The challenge & the danger begin right in the first two words. We address God as Father, the source of life & of everything that we have; we have nothing purely of our own. But God is not just '*Father*'; he is '*our*' Father. & that '*our*' includes every single person who lives or has ever lived on this earth; not a single person can be excluded.

In addressing God as '*our Father*' we are acknowledging that every human person (every one of us) is a child of God, & therefore, that we all belong to one huge family where we are all, in a very real way, brothers & sisters to each other. There is no room here for rejection, or hatred, or prejudice or contempt of any kind based on race, nationality, colour of skin, gender, sexual orientation, social class, religion or anything else. If I am not prepared to accept every single person as a brother or sister, I will have problems even beginning to say this prayer.

### ***May your name be revered as holy***

Other forms are '*Hallowed be thy name*' or '*Holy be your name*'. Of course, God's name is holy no matter what we say or think. We make this prayer more for our sake rather than for his. Here we are praying that God's name be held in the deepest respect by people everywhere. That is sadly not the case. Some people despise his name & others do not even know it. We pray that the whole world will know God's name, which is to say, to know & recognise God as their God & Lord, their Creator & Conserver & the final end of their lives on this earth. It is, in fact, another form of the next petition.

### ***Your Kingdom come***

It might be more accurate to say, '*Your kingship come*'. In other words, we pray that every person in our world may put themselves consciously & willingly under the kingship & lordship & the love of God. We do this, above all, by our working together to make this world the kind of place that God wants it to be - a place of truth & love, of justice & peace, of sharing & caring. In one sense, of course, God is Lord irrespective of our relationship to him. But it is clearly his will that people, on their part, should accept that loving lordship as the centre of their lives. & that is the work of the Church & of every single Christian, indeed of every person anywhere - to help people recognise the kingship & lordship of God & to accept it as the key to their present & future happiness.

### ***Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven***

This, in a way, is simply another way of saying what we have already asked for in the previous two petitions - it is the will of God that people everywhere recognise the holiness of his name & submit themselves gladly to his kingship & lordship in our world. We do that most effectively by identifying totally with the mission & work of Jesus to bring life, healing & wholeness to our world. To do the will of God is not simply to throw aside what we want & accept God's will even when it is totally contrary to our own. We are only fully doing God's will when we can see clearly that what he wants is always what is the very best for us. & we are only fully doing his will when we fully want what he wants, when our will & his will are in perfect harmony. Then we do what he wants & we do what we want. We are praying here to reach that level of oneness.

### ***Give us today our daily bread***

It does not look like it, but this also is a highly dangerous prayer for us to make. First of all, we are only asking for what we need now. Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will tell us not to be anxious about the future. We are asking for what we need today; tomorrow is another day. We take care of one day at a time.

But there is one little word here that is highly dangerous. It is the word '*us*'. Who is that '*us*'? Just me & my immediate family? Or my parish? Or my

neighbourhood or my town or my country? Surely it is the same as that 'our' in the first petition - it includes every single person. I am praying, therefore, that every single person have bread to eat today. We know, of course, that there are millions of people (some of them in wealthy countries) who do not have enough to eat, or who suffer from malnutrition & poorly balanced diets. In praying that all of 'us' have our daily bread, are we expecting God to drop manna from the skies or are we not reminding ourselves that the feeding of brothers & sisters is our responsibility? If people are hungry or badly fed, it is not God's doing. Human beings are directly responsible for this in most cases (outside of natural disasters).

This petition prayer can also include the Bread of the Eucharist. But in sharing that Bread together we are saying sacramentally that we are a sharing people & we will share our goods & blessings with others, especially those in need. Otherwise our Eucharist becomes a kind of sacrilege.

***And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors***

Again, is this not another dangerous prayer to make? We are asking that God's forgiveness to us be conditional on our readiness to forgive those we perceive to have hurt us in some way. That is a daring thing to do. & forgiveness does not simply mean uttering a few words. Forgiveness in the Scripture always includes an attempt at reconciliation between offender & offended. But even if reconciliation is not achieved, we can still forgive.

We can go even further & say that the fully Christian person is never offended - or even more, cannot be offended. The true Christian has a rock solid sense of their own security & their own inner worth which no other person can take away. When such a person is the recipient of some attack, be it verbal or physical, their first response is to reach out to the attacker with concern & sympathy. It is the attacker who has the problem, not the one attacked. Most of us have a long way to go to reach that level of inner peace. If what you say about me is true, I accept it; if it is false, then it is false. Why should I take offence?

***And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one (or from evil)***

In the end, we acknowledge our weaknesses & our total dependence on God's help. We pray that we will not find ourselves in a situation where we fall seriously. We ask to be protected from the powers of evil with which we are surrounded.

Some texts conclude with:

***For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen***

This prayer is used by many Christian denominations & has now been included in the Catholic Eucharist after the Lord's Prayer, but separated by a prayer for

peace. It is believed that this conclusion, not found in most Bible manuscripts, was introduced for liturgical reasons.

Finally, in addition to simply reciting this prayer in the rapid way we normally do, we could sometimes take it very slowly, one petition at a time & let its meaning sink in. Or we could just take one petition which is particularly meaningful to us at any time & just stay with it until it really becomes part of us.

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