

# Our Father in Heaven

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*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2019 by the vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.*

*Romans 8: 14 – 17; John 14: 8 – 17, 25 – 27*

Something that lies at the heart of our faith, but which we probably don't talk about enough, is prayer: prayer lies at the heart of the Christian experience; prayer is where we encounter the reality of God. Many Christians have all sorts of questions and doubts and things in our heads that we struggle to sort out, but we persist in continuing to trust God, because of our experience of prayer - prayer is the oxygen of the Christian life, without it there's only an empty shell. So as we go through this June we're departing from the lectionary readings that we're meant to be following in order to focus on prayer. And it's actually quite appropriate, because in the season between Ascension and Pentecost, the disciples were left in prayer waiting for the Holy Spirit. It's the reason why that season of Ascensiontide was chosen for the 'Thy Kingdom Come' initiative, where Churches Together have been meeting together to pray for this town over the last ten days. And on the day of Pentecost, which we mark today, we celebrate the coming of the Spirit who amongst other things, helps us to pray. And our first reading speaks of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Adoption: "You have received the Spirit of Adoption", says St. Paul. When we cry "Abba, Father", it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. And calling God "Father", brings to mind Jesus's teaching on prayer in the Lord's Prayer. When the disciples ask him for teaching on prayer he says, "When you pray, say Our Father in heaven."

So the first thing to say about Christian prayer is that we address God as "Father". So what's special about that? Well, Jewish people at the time of Jesus would have been familiar with the idea of God as the Father of Israel, the Father of the nation. Sometimes you hear preachers say that Jesus' teaching about praying to God as "Father" was radically new and completely different from anything that had gone before. There is some truth in that, because Jesus does address God as "Father" in a way that is far

more intimate and personal than anything that has gone before. But it's not true to say that the Jewish people didn't think of God as their Father, but they did in a corporate sense. And the very first mention of God as "Father" in the Bible is in the Exodus story when Moses goes before Pharaoh the king of Egypt and says to him, "Thus says Yahweh. Israel is my son, my firstborn. Let my people go that they may serve me." So the significance for the Israelites in thinking about God as "Father", is that he is the Father who wants his children to be free. When Jesus told the disciples to call God "Father", he was teaching them, or he was suggesting implying, that they should be expecting a new exodus, a new act of liberation, because this is what the Father does: He set his people free. This time the liberation wouldn't be from slavery in Egypt, but slavery to the powers of sin and death. I think it's helpful for us to be reminded of that, that when we're saying "Our Father," we're calling upon the God who longs to set his people free, whose will is to overcome everything that enslaves or oppresses. Who wants his children to find the freedom which is His Will for them. And when we call upon God as "Father", we are calling upon our liberator, our protector, our guide. It's perhaps worth bearing that in mind, if our experience of our human father has been rather negative. Human fathers are a pretty mixed bunch, and many people struggle with calling God "Father" because of their experience of their earthly father. Can I suggest that we should do it the other way round, that our expectations of human fatherhood should rather be shaped by our experience of God's Fatherhood, as the one who comes to set his children free. And we say, "Our Father" not "My Father," because he is not my personal possession. I'm not praying to Him just as an individual seeking to have my own private needs met. God isn't there to serve my agenda. Rather, I find purpose and fulfillment in allowing myself to be caught up in His agenda of liberation and healing. Praying to God as "Father" is a revolutionary act: looking for the overturning of the status quo; looking for radical change in the world; for justice and peace; calling upon God as the one who can put things right in a profound and lasting way, in a broken world. The Father is ranged against Pharaoh, and all the other pharaohs in this world: those who stand for the earthly empires; all the vested interests; all the power structures that want to keep things as they are that oppress people and stop them from flourishing.

Calling upon God as "Father" is to challenge all of that. It's an act of revolution and of profound hope that things can be different.

The second thing that's special about calling God "Father", is that it reminds us that God is personal. God isn't an object or a thing neither is He an idea or a philosophy, there's nothing abstract about God. As one theologian put it, "He is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be encountered." Calling God "Father" tells us that prayer is chiefly about relationship: it's about placing ourselves in God's presence; it's about responding to him with adoration and trust. Now in our technocratic culture, we tend to lose sight of that. We have a tendency to see life as a series of problems needing to be solved, and we devise all sorts of clever technologies to solve problems and make life a little bit easier. And the tendency is to treat prayer in the same way, as a kind of ancient technology for getting jobs done. So people sometimes think of prayer as a way of co-opting God to solve tricky personal problems: "Please Lord, save my daughter's marriage", or else to deal with our overwhelming cosmic problems, "Please Lord, may there be peace between nations."

When we feel helpless, it's natural that we should turn to God with trust and hope, and there's nothing wrong with that. But that isn't the fundamental reason why we pray, or why we're encouraged to pray. Jesus invites us to pray because God is our Father in heaven and He longs for us to know Him. Deep in our hearts there is a desire for God, and in calling Him "Father", our hearts can meet His heart. The former Orthodox Patriarch, Anthony Bloom, wrote a series of wonderful books on prayer, and in one of them he speaks of an old woman who was asked by her priest which line of the Lord's Prayer spoke to her most powerfully. And she said well I never get past the first line, "Our Father in Heaven. It seemed so wonderful that I should be able to call him "Father" and to be His child. I just sit there in the presence of the Father." So it's really important in our prayer, that we don't rush, that we don't see it as business to be transacted.

When you come to pray, remember that the Father is there before you, waiting for you - before you say anything, try to become aware of His presence in the room with you, closer than you can possibly imagine, that the Father is there with you in your breathing,

in your very existence. Allow his peace and stillness to enfold you, and give time just to dwell with that first phrase of the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father in heaven."

So we pray to God "Our Father" as our liberator and saviour. We pray to God "Our Father" because we're seeking a deeper relationship and trust in Him. And finally we pray to God as the Father of Jesus the son. Jesus calls God "Father", and as we focus on the Lord Jesus, as we respond to the love of Jesus revealed on the cross, so we join with him in praying to the Father. And as we pray to the Father, so we draw closer to Jesus the Son and vice versa. And as Jesus in Gethsemane prayed, "Father not my will, but Yours be done", so as we pray to the Father, so our wills may be conformed to His as we pray through the son. And as Jesus's will is conformed to that of the Father, so is ours. And by identifying with Jesus in prayer, we are reminded that without Jesus we can know nothing about God: Jesus reveals the Father to us. So in calling God "Father", we are also reminded of the mystery of God, that this is an encounter we don't control.

In coming to God as Father we are coming to our Creator, to the source of all life and of everything that exists. The one clothed in unsearchable light, and in His presence we are drawn out of ourselves in worship: we're in the presence of a presence much bigger than we are, before whom we lose our self-consciousness. We forget ourselves as we focus only on Him, and have our gaze turned outwards from ourselves to the world, in love. So the Father is the Father of Israel who acts to save his people, He is the Father who invites us to draw near into a deeper encounter and to respond with trust and obedience, and He is the Father of Jesus, towards whom Jesus points us, that we may be transformed and live more as His children.

It is a very daunting privilege to call God "Father" - it implies that we are His children and we may feel that we hardly qualify for that. The former bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, suggests calling God "Father", is a bit like trying on an older brother's suit of clothes. The suit may fit Jesus the older brother perfectly, but for us it's still several sizes too big, and it may not feel all that comfortable. But if we practise and are patient, we shall grow into it. And by the same token we shouldn't saunter into God's presence just saying, "Hi dad." Rather, we should come with a sense of God's great courtesy in

inviting us to draw near and call Him Father. And that's reflected in some of the biddings that occasionally get used before saying the Lord's Prayer - things like: "As our saviour has taught us, so we are bold to pray." That sense that it requires some boldness to call God "Father", but we do so because He's given us permission and He invites us,

So on this day of Pentecost, let us pray for that Spirit of Adoption, the Spirit by whom we call "Abba, Father", the Spirit who bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God, that we might humbly and joyfully 'sign-on' as it were, as apprentice children of God, alongside Jesus our big brother, and allow him to teach us what it means truly to call God "Our Father".