

Practicing Prayer on Our Resurrection Walk

Session 5 – The Lord’s Prayer as Outline of All Prayer

The Lord’s Prayer, or Our Father, is certainly the most widely used of all Christian prayers. In daily prayer at home, on Sundays at church, at weddings, funerals, coronations (!) and more, by Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants of all stripes, in every language around the globe and in a number of variations, the Lord’s Prayer is at the center of all Christian prayer. (And it is completely compatible with Jewish prayer, which of course is what Jesus taught it as.)

The Lord’s Prayer was not intended simply as a set of words to be recited in themselves, though it is certainly that. In its setting in the gospels of Matthew (Mt. 6:9-13) and Luke (11:2-4), it was given by Jesus to his disciples as the pattern or framework for all prayer. Tucked into your bulletin this morning is a little sheet that suggests ways to use the Lord’s Prayer like this in your private prayer. We invite you to explore such use, giving time to listen and wait upon the Lord – the essence of prayer.

Two biblical versions. The version of the Lord’s Prayer that we use is a conflation of two slightly different versions found in Matthew and Luke. Scholars tell us that those two gospel writers used material from a now lost compilation of the sayings of Jesus, including the Prayer. Jesus spoke Aramaic, a colloquial form of Hebrew, so in translating these sayings into Greek – the language of the New Testament – it is not surprising that Matthew and Luke took slightly different routes. Both versions address God as Father, in Hebrew *Abba*, a familiarity or intimacy distinctly different from the formalities of Jewish temple prayer. Both focus prayer on God, away from us as supplicants: “your kingdom come” not our wishes be granted. Both ask for only three things: daily bread, forgiveness, and to be saved or delivered from evil. Translation into English has given us trespasses, debts, and sins as alternatives, all of which are used in current versions of the prayer. It has also offered us evil, the evil one, time of trial, testing and temptation as alternatives.

Two tough subjects in the Prayer. Forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer is a reciprocal process: we are forgiven in measure as we forgive. Forgiveness is a lifestyle in other words, not an isolated transaction. In the Prayer, a life of forgiveness lies at the heart of what we are to seek from God. Linked to this request is the request not to be “led into temptation” or to be “saved from the time of trial.” Theologians and Church authorities have deep struggles over what Jesus is saying here. The latter translation, used in the Contemporary form of the Prayer in the Prayer Book, seems better suited to our ideas about God, but is actually not as close to the Greek as “lead us not.” We may remember that in the gospels the Spirit himself led or even drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. We are going to be tested in this life; what we seek is Christ’s help in saving us from evil.