

The Lord's Prayer as a Paradigm of Christian Prayer, by N.T. Wright

THE LORD'S PRAYER IS NOT SO MUCH A COMMAND AS AN INVITATION: AN INVITATION TO SHARE IN THE PRAYER-LIFE OF JESUS HIMSELF.

by N.T. Wright



“AS OUR SAVIOR CHRIST hath commanded and taught us, we are bold to say: ‘Our Father. . . ’”

So runs the old liturgical formula, stressing the *Pater Noster* (Our Father) as a command and its use as a daring, trembling, holy boldness. At one level, this is entirely appropriate.

At another level, however, it fails to catch the most remarkable thing about the Lord's Prayer — and so fails to grasp the truly distinctive feature in Christian prayer that this prayer points us to. *For the Lord's Prayer is not so much a command as an invitation: an invitation to share in the prayer-life of Jesus himself.*

Seen with Christian hindsight — more specifically, with trinitarian perspective — the Lord's Prayer becomes an invitation to share in the divine life itself. It becomes one of the high roads into the central mystery of Christian salvation and Christian existence: that the baptized and believing Christian is (1) incorporated into the inner life of the triune God *and* (2) intended not just to believe that this is the case, but actually to experience it... The Lord's Prayer is an invitation to know this God and to share his innermost life.

All this is so, more particularly, because the Lord's Prayer is the "true Exodus" prayer of God's people. Set originally in a thoroughgoing eschatological context, its every clause resonates with Jesus' announcement that God's kingdom is breaking into the story of Israel and the world, opening up God's long-promised new world and summoning people to share it. If this context is marginalized — or regarded as of historical interest only (because, for instance, as some would suggest,

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the Parousia did not arrive on schedule) — the prayer loses its peculiar force and falls back into a generalized petition for things to improve, albeit still admittedly to God’s glory. In order for it to be prayed with anything approaching full authenticity, therefore, it is necessary to be grasped afresh by the eschatological vision and message of Jesus himself, who announced the true Exodus, the real return from exile, and all that is implied by these wide-ranging shorthand expressions. (On these topics, see my *Jesus and the Victory of God* [1996].)

I begin this article, therefore, with some reflections on the rootedness of the Lord’s Prayer within the ministry and kingdom announcement of Jesus. This will lead to a fuller exposition of the way in which the Lord’s Prayer opens up the heart of Jesus’ “New Exodus” project and invites those who so pray to become part of it. And this will then lead to some reflections on the shape and content of Christian liturgical praying and private praying, and, finally, to some concluding remarks moving on from the “Our Father” of Jesus’ ministry to the *Abba* cry of which Paul speaks in Galatians 4 and Romans 8.

1. The Lord’s Prayer and Jesus’ Own Prayer Life

References to Jesus’ own practice of private prayer are scattered throughout the Gospels and clearly reflect an awareness on the part of his first followers that this kind of private prayer — not simply formulaic petitions, but wrestling with God over real issues and questions — formed the undercurrent of his life and public work. The prayer that Jesus gave his followers embodies his



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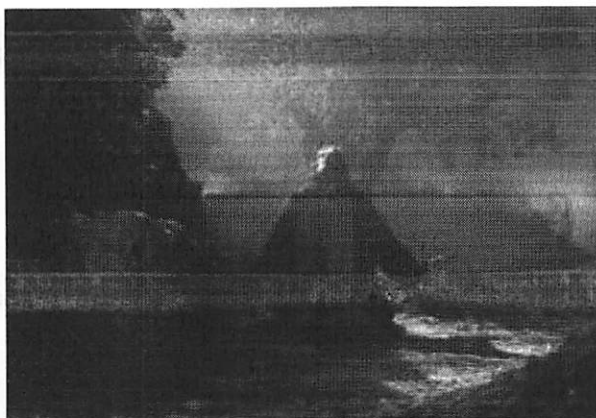


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own prayer life
and his wider
kingdom
ministry in
every clause.

*Father/Our
Father*



Jesus' own
address to God, it appears, regularly included
"Father." Though the Aramaic word *Abba* is only
found in the Gospels in the Gethsemane narrative at
Mark 14:36, there is a broad consensus (1) that Jesus
indeed used this word in prayer, and (2) that the
notion of God's fatherhood — though, of course,
known also in Judaism — took central place in his
own attitude to God in a distinctive way. So when
the prayer given to his followers begins with
"Father" (Luke 11:2) or "Our Father" (Matt. 6:9;
cf. *Didache* 8:2-3, which also begins "Our Father"),
we must understand that Jesus wants them to see
themselves as sharing his own characteristic
spirituality — that is, his own intimate, familial
approach to the Creator. The idea of God's
fatherhood, and of building this concept into the life
of prayer, was not, as must again be stressed, a
novelty within Judaism. But the centrality and
particular emphasis that Jesus gave it represents a
new departure.

Hallowed Be Your Name

The sanctifying of God's name, as in the clause
"hallowed be your name" (Luke 11:2//Matt. 6:9), is
not a major theme in the Gospels. Where it does

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occur — as, for example, in Mary’s exclamation, “Holy is his name!” (Luke 1:49); or Jesus’ prayer, “Father, glorify your name,” and the Father’s response, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again” (John 12:28) — it appears as a natural, and typically Jewish, affirmation of God’s holiness and majesty. But the hallowing or sanctifying of God’s name is thoroughly consistent with the sort of work that Jesus conceived himself to be undertaking.

Your Kingdom Come



Jesus Teaches his Disciples to Pray (Stained Glass)

The coming of God’s kingdom, however, as expressed by the petition “your kingdom come” (Matt. 6:10//Luke 11:2), is a major theme throughout the

entire Gospel tradition. And though its interpretation has sometimes been controversial, there is no doubt (1) that Jesus made this the central theme of his proclamation and (2) that he meant by it that the long-awaited kingdom or rule of God, which involved the salvation of Israel, the defeat of evil, and the return of YHWH himself to Zion, was now at last happening (see my *Jesus and the Victory of God*, chs. 6-10).

Inaugurated eschatology, or the presence and the future of God’s kingdom, was a hallmark of Jesus’

public career — as it was, probably, of the Teacher of Righteousness a century or more earlier (see M. O. Wise, *The First Messiah*, which is a stimulating and suggestive book, even if the argument is possibly pressed too far) and of Simeon ben-Kosiba a hundred years later. Where the leader, God's chosen one, was present, the kingdom was already present. But there was, of course, still work to be done, redemption to be won. The present and the future did not cancel one another out, as in some unthinking scholarly constructions. Nor did "present" mean "a private religious experience" and "future" mean "a Star Wars-type apocalyptic scenario."

The presence of the kingdom meant that God's anointed Messiah was here and was at work — that he was, in fact, accomplishing, as events soon to take place would show, the sovereign and saving rule of God. The future of the kingdom was the time when justice and peace would embrace one another and the whole world — the time from which perspective one could look back and see that the work had, indeed, begun with the presence and work of the anointed leader (see *Jesus and the Victory of God*, ch. 10).

To pray "your kingdom come" at Jesus' bidding, therefore, meant to align oneself with his kingdom movement and to seek God's power in furthering its ultimate fulfillment. It meant adding one's own prayer to the total performance of Jesus' agenda. It meant celebrating in the presence of God the fact that the kingdom was already breaking in, and looking eagerly for its consummation. From the

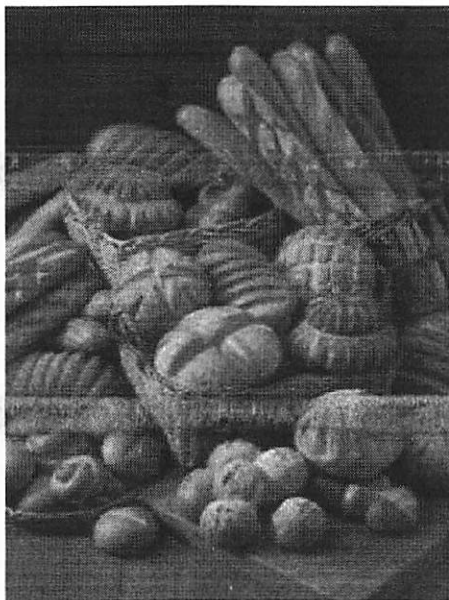
centrality of the kingdom in his public proclamation and the centrality of prayer in his private practice, we must conclude that this kingdom prayer grew directly out of and echoed Jesus' own regular praying.

Your Will Be Done

The performance of God's will, as voiced in the entreaty "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10) — whether one sees that clause as subordinate to the clause "your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10//Luke 11:2) or as distinct — chimes in with the emphasis of Jesus at several points in his recorded work. This is particularly noticeable in John's Gospel. But it finds many echoes in the Synoptic Gospels, not least in Luke's repetition of how God's will must be fulfilled.

Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

The prayer for bread, as in "give us today [or, 'day by day'] our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11//Luke 11:3), awakens echoes that resound throughout Jesus' public ministry. The two evangelists who give us the Lord's Prayer also give us the temptation stories, where Jesus' hunger and his refusal to create bread for himself feature prominently (cf. Matt. 4:2-4; Luke 4:2-3). The wilderness feeding



stories suggest both a literal feeding and a symbolic act that demonstrated God's power, operative through Jesus, to provide for the needs of the people (cf. Mark 6:32-44 par.; 8:1-10 par.). Jesus' own prayers of thanks on these occasions (cf. Mark 6:41 par.; 8:6 par.; see also Luke 24:30) are translated by the Lord's Prayer into a trustful prayer for God's regular provision.

One of the most securely established features of Jesus' public ministry... is his frequent participation in the festive meals of his day, where he celebrated the kingdom with all comers. One does not have to go all the way with the members of the Jesus Seminar, who have described Jesus as "the proverbial party animal," in order to appreciate that the sharing of food, both actually and symbolically, was a central feature of his life.

The sequence of meals in the story of Jesus reaches its climax, of course, in the Last Supper. The bread there was — again in the context of prayer — given a special meaning, which echoes back throughout Jesus' lifetime and on to the cross and his resurrection. To pray for bread (whether for "today," as in Matthew, or for "day by day," as in Luke), therefore, is once again to align oneself with one of the most central and practical symbols of Jesus' kingdom work. Bread follows from and symbolizes the kingdom, both in the Lord's Prayer and in Jesus' own career.

Forgive Us Our Debts/Sins

The prayer for forgiveness — "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12);

“forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us” (Luke 11:4) — is the one instance of a prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray that they did not suppose he needed to pray himself. The well-known scene of John the Baptist’s initial objection to baptizing Jesus (Matt. 3:14-15) and the very early tradition of Jesus’ personal sinlessness (cf. John 7:18; 8:46; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22) bear witness to the great divide at this point between Jesus and his followers. They needed to repent and seek God’s forgiveness, but he did not.

This exception, however, clearly proves the rule that the Lord’s Prayer was intended by Jesus to bind his followers closely to the agenda of his whole ministry. Forgiveness, which is offered freely and without recourse to the temple system, was another hallmark of Jesus’ work — indeed, so much so that it was the cause of scandal (as, e.g., in Mark 2:5-12). Furthermore, there is good reason to think that Jesus regarded this free offer of forgiveness as a central part of his inauguration of the new covenant, and that he saw the corresponding obligation to mutual forgiveness as a necessary badge of membership (see my *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 268-74). This prayer for forgiveness, therefore, though not aligning itself with anything in Jesus’ own spirituality, belongs very closely with the total picture of Jesus’ public ministry, as his ministry is set out in the Gospel narratives.

Lead Us Not into Temptation, but Deliver Us from the Evil One



With the prayer about deliverance from temptation (*peirasmos*) and the evil one (*ho poneros*) of Matt. 6:13, we are back again with Jesus. Again, the temptation narratives of Matt. 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13 are close at hand as part of the context; and again, the Gethsemane scene and the complex of “trials”

before Caiaphas and Pilate offer themselves as the wider setting.

Jesus’ whole public career was marked by “trials” of one sort or another — by what he, and the evangelists, saw as a running battle with the powers of evil, whether in the form of possessed souls shrieking in the synagogues or angry souls challenging in the marketplace. The fact that Jesus was not spared these trials, but had to face them at their fiercest, suggests a clue as to the meaning of this controversial clause, which we will pursue later.

Here in the prayer of deliverance is, once again, one of the clearest overtones in the Lord’s Prayer: “Let me be as my Master.” “You are those,” says Jesus in Luke 22:28, “who have continued with me in my trials (*en tois peirasmois mou*).” So in giving this prayer, Jesus is inviting his followers to share his own struggles and to experience the same spirituality that sustained him.

Its shape and content remind us of the public career of Jesus at every point. And since Jesus' public career was solidly rooted and reflected in his own life of prayer, we must conclude that the Lord's Prayer is an invitation to share Jesus' own prayer life — and with it his agenda, his work, his pattern of life, and his spirituality. The Lord's Prayer marks out Jesus' followers as a distinct group not simply because Jesus gave it to them, but because it encapsulates his own mission and vocation. And it does this in a form appropriate for his followers, which turns them into his co-workers and fellow-laborers in prayer for the kingdom.

If we accept the early Christian assessment of Jesus — with its dramatically high, though still Jewish, Christology — what has been said so far strongly implies that here within the Lord's Prayer we are meeting the beginnings of trinitarian soteriology: ***the Son is inviting his followers to share the intimacy of his own life with the Father.***

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