

Our Father Talk 2

“Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us!”

1. Introduction and Welcome

1.1. My brothers and sisters in Christ, welcome to this, the second of three talks on the Our Father. A special welcome and greeting for the mothers amongst us. Last week I was merely competing with the Archbishop celebrating a special Mass at Our Lady of the Assumption, Maryvale. Today, I am competing with not only Mothers’ day but also with the collective drowning of sorrows following Villa’s defeat earlier and for some parish families the Servers’ Retreat at Alton Castle. So it’s a miracle we still have a full chapel. I am particularly grateful that you are here. Thank you also to Oscott College for acting as our hosts. The format of each talk will be that I shall speak for 20 minutes or so with two short breaks for questions, if there are any at either of those stages. I will also invite you to ask any further questions when I have concluded my remarks. However, if you feel that I could usefully clarify something immediately before moving on, then, please, ask a question right away. We will adjourn to the Refectory at 4.15 for tea and then those that can stay are cordially invited to join me and the Oscott community for Holy Hour and Solemn Vespers in the Chapel at 5 pm.

1.2. Last week, we looked at what might be called the first half of the prayer: “*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name! Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!*” Before considering those petitions in detail, I began by explaining the context for our study of the Lord’s Prayer referring to Pope Francis’s designation of 2024 as a Year of Prayer in preparation for a jubilee year in 2025 under the title Pilgrims of Hope. I then went on to explain where the Lord’s Prayer can be found within the Gospel. The theme running through that review of the context, I suggested, is that the Lord’s Prayer expresses the core of our understanding of who we are, what our mission is and how we are to live in accordance with God’s plan. I next spent some time looking at the two opening words of the Prayer: “Our Father” because they can be the springboard for a reflection on our baptismal vocation. I then suggested that “who art in heaven” which is Matthew’s addition to the more basic form of the prayer we have from St Luke shows an adaptation to St Matthew’s intended audience. It shows that we too must adapt our way of presenting the Gospel to the circumstances of today. The challenge of witnessing to the Gospel in the circumstances of today is the key to understanding how St Cyprian and St Augustine interpreted “Hallowed be thy name”. We must show that we hold the Lord’s name to be holy if we want others to do the same. Finally, we looked at “Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. This petition points us to the next world – very fitting for pilgrims

of hope preparing for a jubilee year in this world and life eternal with Almighty God in the next.

2. Context

- 2.1. In this talk, I will be considering the petitions: “Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us!” Whereas the first half of the Lord’s Prayer clearly directs our attention to God and heaven, these next two petitions seem much more concerned with the day to day practical business of living as God’s people here on earth. Before going into detail on these petitions, I want to establish some context by exploring the background to the Lord’s Prayer which we find in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- 2.2. The fundamental experience which defined the Jewish nation was, of course, God’s choosing them to be his very own people. This was manifested by the rescue from Egypt and then the making of the covenant on Mount Sinai which bound this band of refugees into a people united with each other in community and united with God in a special relationship. If we pay close attention to the narratives in Exodus, we see that this foundational event had three elements: an experience of the presence of God – what the theologians call a theophany-; the giving of the 10 Commandments – which can be seen as the core Constitution of the new nation; and a Book of the Covenant – which contained all the detailed laws needed to put the 10 commandments into practice.
- 2.3. Now what was the result of this event? According to Exodus 19: “Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”. I am using the translation in the **Jewish Study Bible**. Let’s just dwell a moment on “treasured possession” and on “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”.
- 2.4. “Treasured possession” calls to mind the way the covenantal relationship between God and his people was often likened to a marriage. Just like a marriage, the covenantal relationship had obligations, certainly, but ultimately was a relationship in which heart speaks to heart.
- 2.5. “Kingdom of priests and a holy nation” makes it clear that priesthood was not just to be seen in terms of those called from the community to offer the sacrifices in the temple. In case we had any doubt about that, the Book of Leviticus (19.2) which has a lot of law about sacrifices and the priests who offer them also has this to say: “Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God, am holy”. Thus opens what is known to Bible scholars as the Holiness Code. Later on, the Holiness Code says (19.18b): “Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord.”

- 2.6. In the same vein, the Book of Deuteronomy – the word Deuteronomy literally means “the Second Statement of the Law” – in the Book of Deuteronomy (6.4-5) we read: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”
- 2.7. Now the texts we find in Leviticus and Deuteronomy represent mature meditations on the Law. If we go back to the 10 commandments in the light of them we can see a division similar to the one we find in the Lord’s Prayer. The commandments down to “Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy” are all about true worship and devotion to God. All the commandments from “Honour thy father and thy mother” onwards are all about just and holy living in community. However, we need to avoid the mistake which the Pharisees made and which Jesus roundly criticises in the Sermon on the Mount, as we hear on Ash Wednesday. There is a danger that we can see loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and might as being only about ritual and liturgical practice and devotion. Similarly, we can fall into the trap of thinking that all the social obligations of Gospel living depend solely upon our own efforts. Then we are exposed to two occasions of sin: first we want to chalk up brownie points for being “Good Catholics”; secondly we might try to minimise what we do to comply with our obligations so that Gospel living does not interfere too much with the way we want to run our lives.
- 2.8. Hence, later in St Matthew’s Gospel, our Lord reunites the teaching in Leviticus and Deuteronomy when he says (Matt 22.37-40): “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments”. Love of God and love of neighbour: that is how we live as a kingdom of priests and holy nation. But the love of neighbour does not depend on our own strength. Love of neighbour comes from the love of God which has been poured into our hearts at baptism. In other words, the whole of our Gospel living whether it concerns God or neighbour has to be empowered, energised and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. That is the starting point for our discussion of the next two petitions in the Lord’s Prayer.

Interim pause for questions [5 minutes]

3. Give us this day our daily bread

- 3.1. The first way we can read this petition is to treat “bread” as meaning everything we need for our human existence here on earth. So, on that reading, we are recognising that the resources we acquire to meet our needs are gifts from God in answer to prayer not entitlements which have satisfied from our own efforts.

- 3.2. We can add a little salt to the bread by remembering what the **Catechism of the Catholic Church** has to say about the Gospel imperative to meet the material needs of humanity: “As leaven in the dough, the newness of the Kingdom should make the earth “rise” by the Spirit of Christ. This must be shown by the establishment of justice in personal and social, economic and international relations, without ever forgetting that there are no just structures without people who want to be just” (CCC 2382). In other words, we could read this petition not only as a request for resources to enable us to meet our own earthly needs but also for the grace needed to restrain ourselves to that we share appropriately with other people. Remember that triad of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Almsgiving in Lent requires us to review our relationship with other people. Fasting in Lent requires us to review our relationship with material possessions. Neither review will be authentic unless done in a renewed spirit of prayer on the basis that we are loving God with all our heart, soul and mind and loving our neighbour as ourself. When we pray for the grace to bring about social justice in that way, we are exercising the royal priesthood of all the faithful as a holy nation should.
- 3.3. A second reading is to take “bread” as meaning the “Bread of Life” – in other words Jesus himself. We can receive the Bread of Life daily if we go daily to Mass, obviously. But that is not the only way we can come into the presence of our Lord and Saviour. We can also make a spiritual communion. Now if we remember that the making of the Covenant on Mount Sinai involved an experience of the presence of God – a theophany- we can see this petition as a prayer for a daily renewal of the experience of Christ coming into our soul. We can see it as a prayer for our spiritual lives to be fed so that mind and heart be attuned ever more perfectly to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.
- 3.4. A third reading requires us to free ourselves from centuries of living and praying with a potential mistranslation. “This day” means today as opposed to yesterday or tomorrow. The word we have translated as “daily” – meaning each and every day as opposed to weekly or annually – can, it seems, also mean “of the future”. This a potential translation contemplated both by **Bishop Tom Wright and the Catholic Bible Personal Study Edition and The New Jerome Biblical Commentary** so this reading clearly has some scholarly backing. What might this future bread be? Scholars think that it refers to the bread we shall eat at the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb in heaven. So this reading neatly dovetails with the eschatological dimension of “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” and the theme for the jubilee year: pilgrims of hope.
- 3.5. I don’t think we have to choose one reading to the exclusion of the others. In fact we can bring them into harmony with each other if we reflect on the fact that we say the Lord’s Prayer in Mass as part of the Communion Rite. The Mass is a foretaste here on earth of the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb. When we receive the Bread of life in Holy Communion we experience the presence of Christ in our

lives and thus empowered we leave Church to be the bread of life for those who need our care in the name of social justice bearing in mind that when it comes to the separation of the sheep from the goats on the day of Final Judgement we surely want to be clearly identified as being within the Good Shepherd's flock and not outside it.

Interim pause for questions [5 minutes]

4. And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who trespass against us

- 4.1. Earlier today, I proclaimed a Gospel reading about God so loving the world that he gave up his only-begotten Son to save it. Surely that speaks of God's unconditional love for the world, does it not? Not only that: if we say the longer form of Creed at Mass, we say: I believe in one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, we have a whole sacrament dedicated to reconciling us to God and his Church if we should stray from the right path. I took advantage of it myself in the Chapel of this very college only on Friday just gone. Why, then, do we have a prayer which seems to make forgiveness conditional? How does that fit with the message of unconditional love?
- 4.2. Now we can't just say it is some kind of oversight on St Matthew's part: he must have misheard our Lord or something. You will recall that the Lord's prayer is given to us within the Sermon on the Mount in the middle of the text which we read on Ash Wednesday albeit the prayer itself is omitted at the point in the Lectionary. Also omitted is the emphasis Our Lord gives immediately after the prayer when he says (Matt6.14-15): "If you forgive others their transgressions your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions." So we clearly have to pay very careful attention to this petition and find a way of harmonising it with the rest of the Gospel.
- 4.3. I suggest that the key to understanding this petition is in that word "as": just two letters but that one little word is the key to unlocking the deeper truth of this petition. Remember that we pray this prayer as baptised members of the Body of Christ in union with our Head. That is why we dare to say "Our Father". I suggested last week that when we say those words, we are in fact receiving a powerful reminder of our baptismal dignity which is to live as temples of the Holy Spirit as befits those created by the Father through the Word of God in his image and likeness. For only if we live in that way can we fulfil our baptismal vocation to be priests, prophets and kings. By baptism we are conformed to Christ. Our whole journey of faith is a pilgrimage towards making the theological truth of that conformity; that living as a temple of the Holy Spirit; that living as an image and likeness of God a spiritual reality in our daily lives.
- 4.4. So this petition is not so much placing a condition on our forgiveness on some sort of contractual legal model. It is a prayer that we be daily forgiven because we

are growing more and more deeply in Christ. And what could be more Christ-like than to forgive? I would give further: I see this petition as a prayer that just as the Holy Spirit makes Christ sacramentally present in the Mass, so too we ask Him to make Christ spiritually present in us so that it is not we who live but Christ who lives in us. For only when Christ lives in us can we truly be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and truly fulfil our vocation to be priests, prophets and kings; only then can we truly be Bread for a stricken and sick world desperately in need of forgiveness and healing.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1. It is time for me to draw my remarks to a close. In my introduction I reviewed last Sunday's talk drawing attention to the connection between the Lord's Prayer and the Year of Prayer in preparation for the jubilee entitled "Pilgrims of Hope". I also made a connection between the Lord's Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount. The prayer plays an integral part in helping us understand God's plan for human living.
- 5.2. In setting out the context for today's talk, I suggested that we could see in the Lord's Prayer a division similar to the one we see in the 10 Commandments: the petitions we saw last week are focussed upon God and our relationship with him, our vocation and our destiny; the petitions we have considered today are more directed towards our relationships between ourselves and those around us. However, when recall that the Lord's Prayer comes to us as an integral part of the Sermon on the Mount, we realise that the petitions in the Lord's Prayer direct our thoughts to God's plan for human living.
- 5.3. We need to remember this when considering the petitions we have examined today. When it comes to obligations, we can so easily fall into the error of thinking that fulfilling them depends upon our strength and that we have the autonomy to decide what limits to put upon the way we fulfil them. The petitions we have examined today begin from a different starting point: God is in control and everything we do to honour his name in the way we serve his people must be empowered, encouraged and energised by grace and the Holy Spirit. For only when we are empowered, encouraged and energised by the Holy Spirit can we live as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation should.
- 5.4. From that perspective we looked at "Give us this day our daily bread". We saw that there were potentially three variant readings of this petition but we could reconcile them by reflecting on the fact that we say the Lord's Prayer in Mass as part of the Communion Rite. The Mass is a foretaste here on earth of the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb. When we receive the Bread of life in Holy Communion we experience the presence of Christ in our lives and thus empowered we leave Church to be the bread of life for those who need our care in the name of social justice bearing in mind that when it comes to the separation of the sheep from

the goats on the day of Final Judgement we surely want to be clearly identified as being within the Good Shepherd's flock and not outside it.

- 5.5. With a similar change of perspective, we examined "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". It would be easy to read this petition as imposing a condition on forgiveness which is at odds with out texts in the Gospel. In fact, this petition is not so much placing a condition on our forgiveness on some sort of contractual legal model. It is a prayer that we be daily forgiven because we are growing more and more deeply in Christ. And what could be more Christ-like than to forgive? I would give further: I see this petition as a prayer that just as the Holy Spirit makes Christ sacramentally present in the Mass, so too we ask Him to make Christ spiritually present in us so that it is not we who live but Christ who lives in us. For only when Christ lives in us can we truly be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and truly fulfil our vocation to be priests prophets and kings; only then can we truly be Bread for a stricken and sick world desperately in need of forgiveness and healing.
- 5.6. A kingdom of priests and a holy nation fed by the Bread of Life so that we can bring the Gospel of forgiveness to a broken and distracted world; a kingdom of priests and a holy nation offering prayers here on earth through Christ our Head to our Father in Heaven who promises us life eternal: how can we fail to be pilgrims of hope?