

17th Sunday of the Year (C)
(Genesis 18:20-32 / Luke 11:1-13)
27.07.2025
Prayer & Our Father

“Lord, teach us to pray.”

The simplicity of the wording of this sentence is quite misleading because in order to answer the request, we have first to agree on what we mean by *to pray*? What are we really asking? Is it just about learning new prayers or about adopting a new method of prayer?

The first thing which can be said about prayer is that it is not first about saying something to God but about being in a loving relationship with him. To pray is to be moved by the desire to live the whole of our lives in the presence of God. It is only from this perspective that St Paul's statements on prayer make sense, for example when he said to the Thessalonians: “Never stop praying” (1 Th 5:17) and to the Ephesians: “Pray in the Spirit at all times” (6:18).

Everything in our lives, our words and our silence, our decisions and our deeds, should be lived in God and become places of meeting with him, meetings which cannot leave us unchanged, meetings which should always be opportunities for us to grow in love and knowledge of God. It is probably this approach to prayer which allowed St Paul to say of himself: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20)

The call to prayer is a call for us to live so much in the presence of God that ultimately we come to resemble him and to radiate him (cf. Ps 34:5). As St Paul describes it, the goal is that God the Father may rule over all, work through all, and is present in all (cf. Eph 4:6).

If we consider prayer from this angle, then we realise how challenging the disciples' request was. Moreover we are helped to grasp the meaning of the *Our Father* which is not a prayer to be rhymed or mechanically and as is so often the case recited quickly, but a programme for our lives, a roadmap whose goal is to lead us on the way to Christ. For Tertullian, a 3rd century Church father, in the *Our Father* “is comprised a summary of the whole Gospel.” (*On Prayer* 1:9)

The word *Father* should prevent us from making God a small deity possessed by a select group. Pope Francis reminded us that the first word of the prayer “reveals our identity, our life's meaning: we are God's beloved sons and daughters.” (*Hom.* 21.06.2018). In a radical way, we are not alone and without identity.

We have to note that St Luke omitted the pronoun *our*. Yet the Churches over time chose the Matthean version for public prayer and so we must stop and pause on the importance of the pronoun *our* which we say before *Father*. This pronoun implies that the whole world, all men and women who recognise themselves to be children of the heavenly Father and brothers and sisters in Christ are invited into a fellowship which is the Body of Christ. So we cannot but be surprised when some people, and particularly politicians, who claim to be Christian make decisions which are discriminatory, or show an unjust or prejudicial distinction between different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, sex, age, religion or disability.

Every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we should feel challenged in all the ways we are tempted to worship a petty idol which is as small as we are.

Then St Luke makes us ask: “May your kingdom come.” There is another pronoun here which is quite important: *your* kingdom, it is God's kingdom not ours. So it has nothing

to do with power, violence, aggressive competitiveness and self-reliance. As St Matthew reminds us in the beatitudes, the kingdom belongs to those who are poor in spirit (cf. 5:3), those who have the first place in the kingdom are those who are like children (cf. 18:1-4); for his part St Paul writes of the kingdom as being a kingdom of peace and joy (Rm 14:17).

Moreover to pray for the kingdom to come is not an invitation for us to be passive. On the contrary, the coming of the kingdom depends on our obedience to the will of God, on our willingness to be his workers in the field of the world.

Ruth Burrows reminds us that “there is no mysterious art to be mastered, it is all there before us at each moment. What God asks us we can always accomplish.” (*Our...*, p. 38) In the book of the prophet Micah we learn “what is good; and what does the Lord require of us: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (6:8)

Christian tradition has never thought that there was a huge gap between prayer and action. Both are born out of love and both are supposed to make us grow in love, to conform us to Christ. Prayer should be transformative or it is not a real encounter with the Lord. Prayer is not only about our inner peace and personal enlightenment but it is also about the advent of the kingdom of justice and peace here and now.

Abraham Heschel was more radical when he wrote: “Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods.” (*On Prayer*, 5, 7)

Do we allow the Spirit to make the Our Father really subversive? What does it mean for us to say “Give us each day our daily bread” while children, women and men have no bread to eat and are literally dying of hunger in Gaza? In his list of attitudes which have to be overthrown Abraham Heschel did not mention the pyramids of complacency and hypocrisy, and yet... As Christians, we have to be careful because the Lord is not fooled by our empty words. In the prophet Amos, the Lord declares: “Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (5:22-24)

May the Lord teach us to pray “in the Spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:24), “with one mind and one voice.” (Rm 15:6)