

Reading: Luke 11:1-13

St Peter's

Translated into over 500 languages, used by millions of people every day, said when we have just died, at our baptism, at weddings and funerals, sung and chanted, I refer of course to the Lord's Prayer or the Our Father. The Our Father is often deep in our minds and, even when everything else is lost, it is still there. I was once asked to visit an old priest in a dementia ward. Sadly, he had no idea who I was, or indeed who he was, where he was or what he was doing. But as soon as I prayed the Lord's prayer, he knelt on the floor and said it from heart. Knowing it by heart is a very good way of saying it. It no longer sits in our heads but in our hearts. It has been prayed aloud across 2,000 years, but it still has the power to surprise us.

It all begins in today's Gospel. Jesus gives the Lord's Prayer following a request from the disciples. "Teach us how to pray," they ask him. It's an odd request. It is not odd because they are asking Jesus. He is the spiritual master and so has much to teach them. Rather, it is an odd request because, as faithful Jews, the disciples would have been praying all their lives. But they actually interrupt Jesus in his praying to ask him their question. It's a bit like the nurse who wakes you in the night to give you your sleeping tablets.

It seems that the disciples can see there is a quality about the way that Jesus prays that is different, deeper, and more transforming than how they have been praying.

So, Jesus gives them the Lord's prayer. He gives it to them in their own language of course, in Aramaic. When people ask me for the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer, I'm often tempted to give them the Aramaic version.

Jesus, with one simple Aramaic word begins a religious revolution. Up until Jesus, Jews especially and people in general, were too frightened to even say the name of God. Up to this day Jews still will call God Lord or Adonai but they will not say the actual name God. When prayers were said they always put God out there somewhere, calling Him something like 'O great Sovereign of the Universe'. But Jesus is about to change all that, with one word that every child would have learnt from the time they could first speak.

That word was Abba. It meant daddy. It is the most intimate word for a male parent. For Jesus, God was closer to him than his own breath. Indeed, the Psalms say, "Even before there is a word on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely." Abba was not so much about the maleness of God as it was about the close intimate relationship Jesus had with his God. The disciples could see this close loving relationship and that is why they asked, "Teach us how to pray."

There is a huge difference between knowing about someone and knowing someone. In history we might study someone, an historical figure we can read in all the books, but to actually know them means we can talk with them. When you can talk with someone, they

change from being a theoretical dead historical figure to being alive and present. This is what Jesus is for us, not a dead historical figure, but a live and very present person.

After a large dinner at one of Hollywood's stately mansions a famous actor entertained the guests with stunning readings from Shakespeare. Then as an encore he offered to accept a request. A shy old vicar, much like myself, asked if he knew the 23rd Psalm. The actor said, "Yes I do but I will give it on one condition, that when I am finished you recite the very same psalm."

The priest was a bit embarrassed but consented. The actor did a beautiful rendition, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want etc...". The guests applauded loudly when the actor had finished and then it was the vicar's turn. He got up and said the same words but this time there was no applause, just a hushed silence and the beginnings of a tear in several eyes.

The actor savoured the silence for a few moments and then stood up, "Ladies and gentlemen," he said "I hope you see what has happened here tonight. I know the words of the psalm, but this priest knows the Shepherd."

We too know the Shepherd.

As it was with Jesus, the Lord's Prayer is an invitation to form a deep, living, and present relationship with God. We do not need to fear coming before God for God, our loving Father, wants to hear us, our concerns, our hopes, and our desires.

The religious revolution is that God is not far off but close, God is not distant but near, God is to be found at the very heart of our lives.

Thomas Keating, a modern prayer master wrote, "The chief thing that separates us from God is the *thought* that we are separated from God."

To pray the Lord's prayer is to begin to realize that God is not distant, removed, uncaring, but that He is deeply, unconditionally in love with each one of us.

This is how the Lord's Prayer begins, "Our Father," but it doesn't stop there.

Jesus urges us to pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven. Our world is not as God would want it to be. Suffering, pain, and oppression are not what God wants but we need to play our part in bringing about God's reign.

Then Jesus offers us a section on what our needs are. He is totally realistic. We need bread, food and shelter and God wants us to have these things, but we also need forgiveness. In order for a community to survive and to thrive, we need forgiveness.

Desmond Tutu the great Anglican archbishop of South Africa, who helped end apartheid, wrote a book titled *There is No Future without Forgiveness*. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission went around hearing the dreadful stories of cruelty, in order that they might start over. The model of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been used in

22 other countries including Rwanda, East Timor, Northern Ireland, and Germany. Maybe when the dust finally settles, they will use it in Ukraine too.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer in a few moments, think of it not so much as words to be said as a formality but as an invitation to a loving, life-giving relationship with God who wants the very best for you: daily bread, a kingdom of peace and justice and unconditional forgiveness.