

Lord, teach us to pray

In Jerusalem, about halfway down the Mount of Olives, a famous pilgrim's route which has churches at various stages along the way, there is the Paternoster Church. Around the walls of the large courtyard in front of the church are numerous marble plaques, each of them containing the words of the Lord's prayer in one of the many languages into which it has been translated. 'Paternoster' is Latin for Our Father, the first words of the Lord's prayer as we know it. It is here that the pilgrim is made aware of the universality of the most famous prayer ever known, the prayer which Jesus himself taught his disciples when they made that simple, yet most profound request:

'Lord, teach us to pray.'

That request may seem strange in a culture where prayer was such an important part of daily life, with set prayers for each and every occasion. It would seem that the disciples recognize that the way Jesus prays is different from the formal prayers they have heard delivered by the religious leaders. And so it proves.

What we notice first is that it begins with a simple address, 'Father'. The Aramaic word used for Father was 'Abba', the address of a child to his or her parent. That itself was remarkable since the Jewish religious leaders would be scandalized by such an informal address to God, whose name was too sacred even to mention.

'Hallowed be your name' – may your name be made holy, revered. The name in those days stood for far more than it does with us. It summed up a person's whole character, all that was known or revealed about him. The prayer concerns more than the way people take the name of God upon their lips – it refers to all that God is and has revealed of himself and asks for a proper attitude in the face of this.

'Your kingdom come' looks for the bringing in of the kingdom that was a constant subject of Jesus' teaching. There is a sense in which it is realized here and now, in the hearts and lives of people who subject themselves to

God and accept his way for them. But in another sense it will not come until God's will is perfectly done throughout the world – something all Christians pray for.

The next petition is for bread, that is, the provision of our daily needs. 'Each day' makes it clear that we should look to God constantly, not sideline him until we have an urgent need. Also it stresses the importance of the present – no need to look to the future; living for the day is sufficient.

'Forgive us our sins' is followed by the assertion that we forgive those who sin against us. This does not mean that we are only forgiven if we forgive in turn. The New Testament makes it clear that forgiveness springs from the grace of God and not from any human merit. Rather the thought moves from the lesser to the greater: since even sinful people like us forgive, we can confidently appeal to a merciful God.

'Lead us not into temptation' in our reading was translated as 'Do not bring us to the time of trial'. Either way, Jesus is encouraging an attitude, the recognition of our weakness and the easy way we give in. So we pray for the strength to overcome, something which can come from God alone.

The answer to the question 'Why pray?' is quite simply that when we draw close to God, with our needs and the needs of the world, regularly, day by day, it will happen that he can give the blessing which he desires to give to those who call upon his name. The way to recognize that he is the source of the blessings, and that we need them, is quite simply, just to ask.

Amen