

The Lord's Prayer: A Communal Experience

Ian Randall

27 October 2024

20 years ago, my wife and I were in Ukraine, as I was speaking at a conference. At the time we were living and working in Prague; I was teaching Anabaptist Studies. The people involved in the conference were happy that Ukraine was developing its own national life outside the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and I was speaking on issues of identity. It was memorable for us, as our first and only visit to Kiev, Ukraine, and because the first day of the conference was in a splendid venue in Odessa. I wonder how it is now.

Some years later there was a massive series of events in Kiev's Independence Square. This was the Maidan Revolution, or the Revolution of Dignity. Many friends we had from our days in Prague were involved. It was a further statement about Ukraine's identity, and it is a major reason why President Putin regards Ukraine with such bitterness.

What has this to do with the Lord's Prayer?

Day after day in those days of the Revolution of Dignity the tens of thousands – even hundreds of thousands – who gathered in Independence Square said together the Lord's Prayer. They were from different traditions – Orthodox, Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal – but this united them as a community. It was a feature that was not reported in our media.

The prayer that Jesus gave us is intended to be communal, rather than personal. It begins **Our**, and there are then the words **us** and **we**. This is an aspect of the prayer which is sometimes overlooked. It actually defines what Christian life looks like – it is being part of a community, of Jesus' many disciples.

Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage in north Africa in the third century, said regarding the Lord's Prayer that Jesus, the Teacher of peace and Master of unity was unwilling for prayer to be made singly and individually. The one who prays, he continued, is not to pray in personal terms alone. For we do not say, '**My** Father in heaven', nor 'Give **me** this day **my** bread'. Prayer with us, he insisted, is public and common; and

when we pray we do not pray for one but for the whole people - because we the whole people are one.

I was in North Africa some years ago and was speaking about Christian history in that region, but I didn't know at the time this very powerful insight from Cyprian.

So how far does **our** and **us** go? What are the limits? Do we think beyond ourselves – if so, is it our immediate family? Or our close friends? Or this College? Or the city of Cambridge? Or any other city or country? I suggest it is wider. We pray that every single person has bread to eat, not just hoping our own circle will do well. We know, of course, that there are millions of people (some of them in rich countries) who do not have enough to eat or who suffer from malnutrition and poor diets.

In praying that all of 'us' have our daily bread, I do not think we are expecting God to drop manna from the skies. Are we not reminding ourselves that the feeding of brothers and sisters is our responsibility? If people are hungry or badly fed, it is to a large extent traceable to what human beings have done. We can do something to mitigate that and we are called to address this by the Lord's Prayer.

In asking for 'daily bread', which has the sense of people's basic needs, we are also challenging the idea that making a great deal of money is the aim of life. There is a myth perpetrated that extreme wealth brings contentment. As a myth it is pervasive but spurious.

Another preacher in the early church, a little later than Cyprian, John Chrysostom, favoured the idea that the bread for which we pray is only 'bread for today'. It is not for an imagined amazing future that we pray, but only for living day by day. And that rootedness in present reality takes us into a more realistic future.

I am interested, as was mentioned, in studying what has happened through history. A book I've been writing this year is about Elizabeth Hewat, from Scotland, who was an early twentieth-century historian, academic and a servant of the Church in China and India. Her story was one of subverting accepted situations since she was at New College, Edinburgh University, and was the first woman to gain a Bachelor of Divinity degree and later the first to complete a PhD in Theology. She saw praying the Lord's Prayer as a uniting factor through history and pictured different people and places as part of this huge community – and we are inheritors of that story.

Also, as we continue with the Lord's Prayer and we pray, as Jesus taught, for forgiveness, we are admitting that we are part of groups and societies that often mistreat one another. We are called in this part of the prayer to be agents of reconciliation. To pull up the ugly weeds of bitterness. To break cycles of revenge. We extend forgiveness not in a superficial way, but in making journeys to be with others. Or we ask forgiveness. That's also hard.

'Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive', asserted C.S. Lewis. Forgiveness is radical and revolutionary. Far from being a weak response it is braver than retaliation and hatred.

The Lord's Prayer, I suggest, is not just a prayer; it's a vision from Jesus for life in the kingdom that God's wants. It seeks what is his good purpose in this world. It's an acknowledgment of the injustices, hunger, hatred and all evils that call for change.

When we seek God's kingdom, we are drawn to the commandment that Jesus reiterated, to love your neighbour as yourself. Matt.22.

Thinking of that, the Baptist pastor and Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jnr, whose commitment was love that would overcome injustice, often portrayed what he called the Beloved Community: 'We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but one day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed.'

Finally, Jesus teaches us to be aware of human weakness. 'Lead us not into temptation.' There is a pressing temptation to be conformed to current societal norms, especially individualism, and we may need to be counter-cultural in response to that.

And as we pray, finally, 'deliver us from evil', like Martin Luther King Jnr we are moved to work for freedom from oppression. A picture of the Civil Rights marches seldom shown is of the huge crowds kneeling in prayer in the streets. The police didn't quite know what to do. And this commitment has been inherent in so much that has sprung from prayer, as I have seen in different parts of the world.

The Lord's Prayer makes faith a shared experience, not an isolated individual one. It highlights need, but not greed, and is about relationships that seek human

flourishing, not the destructiveness of vengeance and violence. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for us to pray and a prayer for us to embody in action.