

**All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton, Online Evening Prayer on Zoom
6pm Sunday 10 May 2020: 'Our Father in heaven...'**

During May and June this year, Cheryl, Sarah and I will be exploring lines of the Lord's Prayer. Last week Sarah spoke about our own experience of prayer then introduced the advice Jesus gave us via Matthew's Gospel. This week, I am looking at the first four words: **Our Father in heaven**. Those beautiful words are incredibly simple and at the same time rich in meaning about **who God is and what God does**.

Graham has just read some 1st century Bible passages about praying to the 'Father'. You may think I've put them in the wrong order, but it's generally accepted that Paul's Letter to the Romans was written first, Mark and Matthew's Gospels next and Luke's Gospel later. They help us see how the Christian use of 'Father' developed. Of course, God as 'Father' was already in the Old Testament. But Jesus being the Christ and the Son of God was new. Paul refers to the Roman custom of 'adoption' to include all of us too. Some scholars say the roots of the Lord's Prayer can be found in Mark's Gospel. Jesus is praying to God, **his** Father, in anguish before the Crucifixion.

After the Resurrection and Ascension, new Christians started using the Lord's Prayer in worship. It was still being passed on verbally so people never used quite the same words in every place. Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels to bring the words together. They gave us the first written versions of the Lord's Prayer, in Greek, but left in the word 'Abba' to show its origins in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. The '**My** Father' of Jesus had now become the '**Our** Father' for everyone.

Let me tell you about some other perspectives. There's a lovely passage in the recent book *Shameless* by Nadia Bolz-Weber, the Lutheran preacher. She says that some Jewish rabbis teach that the Hebrew word for God in the Old Testament, 'Yahweh', is not even a **word** at all. It is literally the sound of **breath** itself: Inhale *yah*. Exhale *weh*. Inhale *yah*. Exhale *weh*. In Genesis 2, God **breathes** human beings into life. Apparently in some Muslim traditions, the very first thing a new-born baby hears is the name of God, whispered into the child's right ear by their father. Isn't that an amazing thing for a human parent to do?

However, when I hear the word 'Father' it brings up very mixed memories. I was 16 when my father left my mother and us 4 children. For a long time I had a very poor view of fatherhood and that often made me wince at the Lord's Prayer. But now I know there are many alternative words for God. There are all those Old Testament non-human metaphors for God: a bear, a rock, an eagle, fire, wind and many more. God is sometimes Creator, Guide, Breath, Water, Wisdom. In the stories of Jesus, God can be a mother-hen, a generous vineyard owner, a shepherd or a woman

looking for a lost coin. You could say it's all in the Jewish tradition of not **'naming'** God directly but going right to the heart of **who God is and what God does**.

Today, one of my favourite new authorised versions of the Lord's Prayer is in the New Zealand Anglican Prayer Book. It's by Jim Cotter and starts like this: 'Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in whom is heaven'. That brings us neatly to the word 'heaven'.

What does the word 'heaven' mean to you today? In so-called normal times maybe it means being on holiday in your dream place? Having your favourite meal at home or in a restaurant? In today's not-normal times, maybe 'heaven' will be being able to hug friends or family again? For some people 'heaven' might mean something much more serious: being free of pain, abuse, fear and poverty.

In the Bible 'heaven' means something **like** all that but also **beyond** all that. 'Heaven' means God's wonderful Creation, God's world, God's eternal universe. The Pilgrim Course booklet on the Lord's Prayer says about the word 'heaven': *'The universe is not about randomness but relationship. We are created in God's image and likeness. We are made to know God and enjoy God for ever'*.

The words 'Father' and 'heaven' in the Lord's Prayer may be comforting and familiar but they are not cosy and sentimental. What we **do** next as Christians is important. We have responsibilities through knowing God. People in Cottenham and Rampton are losing their jobs, losing loved ones. We can support charities like Foodbank, the Mobile Wardens, the Samaritans and Cruse. We can look after God's creation. We cannot forget people in other countries, living in terrible conditions. We can support refugees. We can reduce carbon emissions. Since we are created in God's image and likeness, we do have to act accordingly.

To summarise, when you start the Lord's Prayer, if that reminds you of a loving and nurturing human father, that's wonderful. If you want to go beyond the image of God as a male human parent, that's wonderful too. There are plenty of other words to describe **who God is and what God does**. And whatever 'heaven' means in human terms, that's a very small glimpse of God's wonderful Creation.

So, let us be silent for a short while and pray for our own relationship with God. Then Margaret will lead us in prayer.