

Scriptures and Doctrine :: 'OUR FATHER'

'OUR FATHER' - posted by pastorfrin, on: 2008/6/10 4:50

'OUR FATHER'

Alexander Maclaren

'Our Father which art in heaven.'—MATT. vi. 9.

The words of Christ, like the works of God, are inexhaustible. Their depth is concealed beneath an apparent simplicity which the child and the savage can understand. But as we gaze upon them and try to fathom all their meaning, they open as the skies above us do when we look steadily into their blue chambers, or as the sea at our feet does when we bend over to pierce its clear obscure. The poorest and weakest learns from them the lesson of divine love and a mighty helper; the reverent, loving contemplation of the profoundest souls, and the experience of all the ages discern ever new depths in them and feel that much remains unlearned. 'They did all eat and were filled, men, women, and children—and they took up of fragments that were left five baskets full.'

This is especially true about the Lord's Prayer. We teach it to our children, and its divine simplicity becomes their lisping tongues and little folded hands. But the more we ponder it, and try to make it the model of our prayers, the more wonderful does its fulness of meaning appear, the more hard does it become to pray 'after this manner.' There is everything in it: the loftiest revelation of God in His relations to us and in His purposes with the world; the setting forth of all our relations to Him, to His purposes, and to one another; the grandest vision of the future for mankind; the care for the smallest wants of each day.

As a theology, it smites into fragments all false, unworthy human thoughts of God. As an exposition of religion, the man who has drunk in its spirit has ceased from self-will and sin. As a foundation of social morals it lays deep the only basis for true human brotherhood, and he who lives in its atmosphere will live in charity and helpfulness with all mankind. As a guide for personal life, it gives us authoritatively the order and relative worth of all human desires, and with these the order and subordination of our pursuits and life's aims. As a prayer it is all comprehensive and intended to be so, holding within the perfect seven of its petitions, all for which we should come to God, and resting them all on His divine name, and closing them all with a chorus of thanksgiving. As a prophecy it opens the loftiest vision, beyond which none is possible, of the final transformation of this world into the kingdom in which God's will shall be perfectly done, and of the final deliverance from, all evil of the struggling, sinning, sorrowing souls of His children.

I desire to try in a series of sermons to set forth what little I can see of the depth and comprehensiveness of this model of all prayer, and of its ever fresh applicability to the wants and difficulties of our days as of all days. But before dealing with that great invocation of the divine name on which all rests, a word or two must be said touching the introductory clause

'After this manner pray ye.' The question which is usually made prominent in thinking of these words is really a very subordinate one. Did Christ intend to establish a form, or only to give an example? Churchmen say, a form; Dissenters generally say, an example. But it would be better for both Churchmen and Dissenters to try to realise for themselves what 'this manner' is.

Unquestionably, whether our Lord is giving us a form or not, His chief object was not to prescribe words. To pray is not to repeat petitions, and His commandment has for its chief meaning a much deeper one than that He was giving us either a form which we are to incorporate verbally with our prayers, or an outline according to which our spoken supplications are to be shaped. Whether in addition to this we are to regard the very words as to be used by us, will be determined by each man and church according as he regards the use of set forms in prayer as being the true and noblest manner of prayer.

Such use is certainly not inconsistent with the utmost spirituality, but the habitual use of forms, especially their exclusive use, seems to many of us to be dangerous, regard being had to the tendency of human nature to rest in them. And it is not without significance that this very prayer of our Lord's, which was given as the corrective of vain repetitions and idle, heathenish chattering of forms of prayer, has itself come to be the saddest instance in all Christendom of these very faults.

ts, while the beads slip through the fingers of the mechanical repeater of muttered Paternosters. Instead of wrangling about this subordinate question, let us try to pray after this manner. We shall find it hard, but blessed. Be sure that every prayer not after this manner is after a wrong manner.

This prayer helps to reverse our foolish desire to make earth foremost. The true end of prayer is to get our wills harmonised with His, not to bend His to ours. Surely if self-denial and submission be the very heart of Christianity, that should be most expressed in prayer which is the very sanctuary of religion. The prayers that are to be offered after this manner will not be passionate, petulant pleadings or prescriptions to God to do this or that, but in them God and His glory will be first, I second, and through Him and as He wills.

Ah, brethren! this is an awful requirement of Christ's. Who dare take such holy words into his lips? It is a hard matter to pray as Christ taught us. The prayer seems to move in a height of unapproachable elevation, and the air there is too thin and pure for our gross lungs. For be it remembered, we are not praying after this manner unless our lives in some sort repeat and confirm our prayers. Do our hearts seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness? Are our energies given to this, as their noblest aim, to hallow God's name; or does the very blood in our hearts throb hot, passionate desires for worldly things, and God's name and kingdom and will seem dreamy and far-off objects which kindle no desire in our souls and rule no effort of our lives, like suns far away which shed little light upon the earth and sway not its rolling tides, that are obedient to the nearer but borrowed light of the changeful moon? If so, no matter whether we use this form or not, we are not praying after this manner.

Look, now, at this first clause, which is the basis of all.

I. The divine Name which is the ground and object of all our prayers.

It is not merely a formula of address, like the superscription on a letter, but the reality of His character as revealed before us. There is inseparable from all prayer the effort to conceive worthily of Him to whom we speak; to raise our souls to that height.

How much of our prayer, even while truest, fails here! We may be distinctly conscious of our wants; our wishes may be right, and our confidence may be firm that God will give us what we ask; yet how often there is no vivid thought of Him filling the mind! How often our prayers are offered to a mere name! How seldom through the cloud-wrack beneath His feet do we see His face!

This absorbed contemplation is the necessary preliminary of all real prayer, and there is a truth in the thought that such losing of self in gazing on God is the highest form of prayer. We should feel as some peasant come to court who stands on the threshold of the presence-chamber, and forgetting his grievances and his embassy, gazes entranced on the splendour and benignity of his sovereign.

Look, then, at this Name: what it expresses. It is not new. The Jews dimly had it, and even Greek and other paganisms knew of a 'father of Gods and men.' The name of Father carries with it primarily the idea of the Source of life ('we also are His offspring'), and also, secondarily, that of loving care.

How wonderful, how beautiful, that that earthly relation should find its deepest reality in God! God be thanked that, 'like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him.'

But the true Christian idea of God's fatherhood is more than all this. This is a prayer for disciples, for those who alone can really pray. All men are God's children because all draw their life from Him, were made in His image, and are objects of His love.

But there is a fatherhood and a sonship which are not universal, and for which another birth is necessary. Its conditions are plainly laid down by the Evangelist: 'To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become sons of God,' and by the Apostle, 'Ye are the children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.'

We are made sons through Jesus. We are made sons by faith.

And now, how should this Fatherhood affect our prayers? We shall come with hope and familiar confidence, for 'your heavenly Father knoweth what things ye have need of.' Does a father love to have his children about him? Does a child shrink from telling its wishes to a father? Also we must bend our wills to His—to a Father.

Contrast that conception with the ideas of God which we are all tempted to cherish, the slavish one which dwells upon the gulf between God and man, with the cold deity of 'natural religion,' with the Epicurean notion of Him which divorces Him from all living interest in His creation.

Contrast it with the ghastly image which our consciences and our fears frame, the heathen notion of an avenger and cruel. We do not need to seek to avert His anger. This mighty word shatters all cowering terror and abject prostration.

And it is a vow as well as an Invocation, binding us to supreme love to Him, to obedience to Him, to moral conformity with Him. Be ye perfect as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. The noblest prayer is 'Abba, Father.'

Continued:

Re: 'OUR FATHER' - posted by pastorfrin, on: 2008/6/10 19:37

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Alexander Maclaren

'Our Father which art in heaven.'—MATT. vi. 9.

II. The loftiness and perfectness of that divine Name.

'In heaven.' Not fact, but symbol, to express His exaltation above the earth, and so suggesting all ideas of remoteness from creatures, from earth's limitations and conditions, changes and imperfection, and showing the gulf between man and God.

1. The thought that He is in heaven deepens our reverence, love casting out fear, but making us more lowly. It leads to familiar yet awe-stricken approach.

2. It exalts the preciousness of the Fatherhood, as being free from all weakness and all change. It reveals a better Father than we can know here; one not narrow of view, infirm of purpose, weak in tenderness, bounded in power. As the heavens stretch calm and serene above us, far from all our trouble and noise, unvexed, pitying, and dropping rain and dew on earth, so is He.

3. It draws our hearts and hopes to our Father's home.

4. It delivers us from worship of the visible and from worship by means of the visible. So the Name guards against placing stress on externals and secondary forms, places, times of worship.

III. The Community of Brotherhood of the Worshipers.

Our Father.

1. All true enjoyment of blessings depends on our being willing to share them. To keep for ourselves is to lose. We enter by faith into a great community.

2. The effect of this on our prayers: to destroy their selfishness. We bow to Him of whom the whole family is named.

3. Effect on our lives.

Dare we rise from our knees to plan and plot for ourselves? How we are tempted to forget our brotherhood in personal animosities, vanity, and self-interest, competing with others! Our differences of ideas arising from differences of race, training, occupation, country, fling us apart. Our differences of wealth and position alienate us. Our differences of conception of Christianity often separate and embitter us. But do these not crumble when we say 'Our Father'?

Think of the generations who have gone to the grave saying this prayer. What a prophecy of the heaven, where all shall be gathered and each feel his sense of Fatherhood increased by his brethren!

And this is the only possible basis for true fraternity among men.

Opinion? Men are not thinking machines.

Interest? Men are not ruled by calculations, and such union is the destruction of true unity.

Common aims?—shallow.

Nation or race?—artificial and not capable of universality.

There is no brotherhood but that which rests on God's Fatherhood, Christ's Sonship. For the world Christ has come, therefore we are no more 'strangers and foreigners.'

Therefore, listening to His voice, and trusting in Him who has made us heirs together with Him, let us lift up our voices, 'Our Father,' and therein proclaim that God who loves every soul of man, who knows each man's wants, who bends over him in pitying tenderness, who can neither die nor change, and who will gather into His eternal home all His prodigal children and keep them blessed by His side for evermore.

Alexander Maclaren