

## The Lord's Prayer

In 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus published a book, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*. In which he argued against the traditional view that the universe revolved around the earth – claiming instead that the earth revolves around the Sun. It was the beginning of the so called Copernican Revolution and was a contributory factor to the major scientific revolution of the sixteenth century.

I'm not sure if you can imagine how world changing it must have been. If you have grown up believing that the earth is at the centre of the universe, that the entire created order spins around this planet, can you imagine how disturbing it must have been to discover that in fact, the earth is not at the centre – we are on a little rock, helplessly cascading through an enormous universe. It's no wonder it took a long time for this disturbing idea to become accepted.

There is something very similar at work in the dynamic of the Lord's Prayer as we have heard it. For those who make the Lord's prayer, their prayer – the entire structure of the universe is encountered differently. We discover that life, the universe and everything does not revolve around us, and our worthiest hopes and dreams and ambitions and goals and targets.

It is natural for us to come to God with a shopping list of things we'd like to get done. And when this is how we come to God in prayer, it is just a basic expression of the paganism that asserts itself in every age – a desire to find some supernatural means of manipulating the world in our favour. I heard a charismatic Christian in Birmingham boasting of the power of prayer, saying to this poor young woman – that he could use prayer to bring her to her knees! Paganism with a fish badge and a formula that ends with the phrase – in Jesus' name!

The Lord's prayer in the first instance, is not so much a prayer where we ask God for stuff. It is more of a creed, a badge of identity. Most religious leaders would have a prayer that their followers would use and that would say something about who they claimed to be. And so the question from Jesus' disciples is that he teach them to pray as John taught his disciples. And Jesus obliges.

And the first part of that prayer is utterly God centred. No assumption that the universe revolves around us. No assumption that it is God's job to make our dreams come true. No shopping list. At the outset – the focus is utterly upon God:

Our Father in Heaven – make your name holy – Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. One introductory word "Our" to say that the God we worship brings us out of ourselves. Because everything else is your – Hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, your will be done. Those who pray this prayer are brought utterly out of themselves.

This part of the prayer contains within it a basic idea of what it means to be human. Of what some theologians now call the "external constitution of the self". That is to say, the things that genuinely make us who we are come to us from beyond. Our relationships with other people are what shapes our identity – for better or worse. But at the outset – Our God, is one who draws us out of our selves to revolve utterly around him. A Copernican Revolution as Kierkegaard once said.

Children are selfish. It's not their fault. When a child is born, the world revolves around them. And it has to! It is natural and right that the child's needs are primary. But it seems to me that the job of bringing children up well is to bring them on this necessary and difficult journey from self-centredness to self-lessness. That, after all, is the challenge of Jesus himself. Jesus never says – fulfil yourself, improve yourself, love yourself. Jesus says deny yourself, take up your cross, and come with me. And the prayer he taught his disciples follows that basic structure.

By the time that the focus is on us, on those who make this prayer their own – our attention has been taken out of ourselves towards God – so any shopping list that we may have brought, any dreams and ambitions and hopes and goals, will probably have found themselves redrawn. But it's not that we replace those desires and prayer requests with different, worthier stuff that we need. Instead, they force us still further out of ourselves.

Give us today our daily bread: For wealthy people in particular – in Jesus' day as in ours – praying this section of the prayer locates us in solidarity with people who are hungry. We want our community to have the security of food. It is not that we ask God to give us the stuff we need to sustain – it is rather that we cannot but commit ourselves to those who are hungry who pray this prayer alongside us.

And forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors! Once again – the assumption is that we are part of a community where forgiveness is the lifeblood of our relationships. Again, this hurts, and again it brings us out of ourselves!

And do not bring us into the time of trial! What does that mean? Don't make life too difficult for us? Living in the way that this prayer suggests – is going to spell trouble. It is not a safe prayer for anyone – because living the way that Jesus lived meant that he was going to end up a condemned man. I presume that the time of trial may refer to his experience in the garden of Gethsemane. It was Jesus who prayed at that time – Father, if it is possible to take this cup from me... Yet not my will, but your will be done. At that moment – he seems to refer all the way back to the prayer that he had taught his disciples.

So the Lord's prayer is not simply a prayer. Still less a bunch of headings about the kind of things that we ought to ask for. The Lord's prayer is a manifesto, a creed, a commitment that is made by anyone who dares to pray it. Because any who dare to pray this prayer are committing themselves to being part of a revolution of Copernican magnitude.

The Lord's prayer today is probably the closest thing that the Baptists have to a creed. And if it is our creed – it is a good one. Not, like some of the creeds produced by the emperor Constantine in order to bring political cohesion to his empire. Not a statement of faith that defines who we are at the exclusion of others. But this is a creed that is directed to no one other than God himself. It is a creed that Jesus taught us, that reaches into the depths of who we are and draws us on the journey that Jesus himself walked. This is a creed that commits us to a way of life, that draws us out of ourselves, and that draws us ever more fully into the presence of the God whose Kingdom we long to see!