

The Lord's Prayer

In Ghana, where from 1600-1700 between 10,000 and 15,000 slaves were exported per year, the ghastly slave castles remain horrific monuments that bear silent tribute to a horrific practice.

We visited the Elmina slave castle at Ghana's western edge and the shore of the narrow Benya river. It was built in 1482 by the Portuguese, but was inhabited by the Dutch by 1637 and Britain by 1872. A stronghold of the Gold Coast, it served, as did all the European castles of that era, as a combination of trade center, point of military presence, and slave holding-tank.

lightless slave chambers with the narrow stone walkways that led out through gateways to the awaiting slave ships one floor under the little stone chapel in which the castle's European residents worshipped God.

a: Our Father

In Luke, the prayer is given in response to the disciples' request that they be given a prayer like John the Baptist had given his disciples. Most commentators who note that such prayers were often given by rabbis to their followers, do not allow this fact to exert any force on their interpretation of the prayer itself. But these prayers were community-defining, outlining what was distinctive about the rabbi and his followers, articulating their concerns, passions and beliefs. In this sense, the Lord's Prayer then already fulfils the primary function of the Creed – to establish and proclaim a community's identity. However, unlike the Creed the Lord's Prayer is primarily inclusive, opening as it does with an implicit welcome invitation. It addresses not only 'the' Father but 'our' Father.¹ If Jesus is the Son of God, the prayer by which his followers are known has a gravity which draws worshippers to participate in the being of God.

b: Hallowed Be Thy Name

This entire prayer itself is finished by the second phrase, 'Hallowed be Thy Name'. This request sounds bizarre to many modern Christians, but every word that follows this concluding petition simply unpacks and applies it. If God's name is to be made holy there must be some sense in which it is not. Throughout the Old Testament narrative, God's Holy name is profaned amongst God's people before the Gentiles. Hence the command "You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be sanctified among the sons of Israel; I am the LORD who sanctifies you." (Lev 22 :32).

So if God's name is to be hallowed, who is that does the hallowing?!

*the petition to make the Father's name holy is Given by God,
to be made by God's people,
directed to back to God himself,
batted back to be effected by and amongst God's people who are doing the asking,
all of which - by the logic of Leviticus – is enabled by God himself.*

¹ The original Greek of Luke's version does not contain the word 'our', but it is legitimately inferred by the fact that Jesus invited the disciples to address his Father directly.

The Lord's prayer is neither *about* God, nor even simply made *to* God, but immerses those who pray it *into* God.

c: Thy Kingdom Come

Only from 'inside' God can one genuinely request God's government to be established, 'Thy Kingdom Come'. This is not a request for the space-time continuum to reach its climax. It expresses a longing for the world to be put to rights, for justice to flourish. In the world where God's name is profaned, amongst a people where his name is profaned – the community of the Messiah (the anointed King of the Kingdom) is one that shares the Messianic ministry and longs for its fulfilment. This is stated most clearly by Luke at the so-called 'Nazareth Manifesto', when citing Isaiah, the Messiah declares:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me
To preach good news to the poor
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
And recovery of sight for the blind,
To release those who are oppressed,
And declare the year of Jubilee.

Those who have prayed 'our Father' have, in so doing, made this manifesto their own. This will be the means by which God's name is made holy in the earth. It is rather tempting to reduce the notion of God's will to a general set of expectations about how God ought to get his own way in general. However, this is a messianic prayer, with a particular set of beliefs about the will of God in this context. The italicised section above highlights the will of God that is to be fulfilled [on earth as in heaven], the purpose for which the Christ (and we may infer, the body of Christ) is anointed.

And heaven is not so much the destination of well-behaved departed souls, as the divine control centre of the universe. So thus far through the prayer, the request has remained explicitly God-centred, asking God to fulfil his own purpose – in and through the Messianic community. The followers of Jesus have, by praying this prayer, implicated themselves in the hallowing of God's name. The prayer now moves to make this involvement explicit.

d: Daily Bread

The disciples of this prayer now undergo another dangerous 'our'. 'Give us this day our daily bread.' This is not merely a demand that God cater for our basic needs. This prayer is community-defining. It carries the people of God into the midst of hunger and poverty. 'The poor' are not a distant group of people for us to be concerned about. In this prayer, we locate ourselves with those who hunger. This is not simply a request, it is a commitment of radical solidarity with those who hunger, so that their hunger is no longer *theirs* but *ours*. God's people are hungry. The moment we pray 'for' the poor we have distanced ourselves from them. By asking for 'our' daily bread, we identify with those who do not have it. This is the only location from which the prayer can be made.

Event this coming week!

e: Forgiveness of Sins

The hallowing of God's name is the major theme of Ezekiel 36, which should be read in full before grasping this phase of the Lord's prayer. For a first century Jew, the forgiveness of the community's sins did not mean repenting from this or that particular moral shortfall. Forgiveness of sins meant primarily the return from the exile that had been imposed upon Israel because of her sins. Her sins, in particular, were profaning God's holy name. According to Ezekiel, the forgiveness of sins is the means by which God hallows his own name, because to do so means sanctifying his people. But again, in the Lord's Prayer the offer of forgiveness for the sake of God's holy name is made not only by God himself, but by the people who are to be characterised by this prayer ('... as we forgive those who sin against us...').

Having been drawn into the character of God himself, God's sanctified people make God's name holy in the world by offering the world same forgiveness that God has offered to them. If the forgiveness of Israel's sin effected their restoration, then the world itself is restored to its divine calling by the forgiveness offered by the people who pray this prayer. This is a petition for and a commitment to justice, because it unpacks still further the hallowing of God's name.

f: Resistance to Testing

What kind of Messiah – what kind of a church will we be?

Not grasping straight for fruit, but being open to what God is doing in the world.

The fact is, we do worship in that slave castle – as we worship here, there are people within a few hundred yards of our church who are being abused, kept prisoner, who are homeless, in all kinds of need.

And of course we think beyond the doorstep in our global village. What does it mean to pray the Lord's prayer in the slave castle?