

The Old Testament story of Abraham's bargaining with God reminds us vividly that, early on, people of faith believed that the Creator is merciful and that God responds to the requests of people who are longing for mercy *on behalf of others*. Abraham is not asking God's favour for himself; he wants to save the righteous within a doomed city and, in the process, avert the doom about to befall the city. This manner of request *on behalf of others* is quite an advanced concept, but bargaining with God is more befitting to pagans than to those who know the One Creator, God of all life. The ancients always bargained with their gods. Homer is filled with such examples. *If the gods like your offering, they will bless you with victories; but it has to be the right kind of offering.* "If the gods like the sacrifice, they will give us good winds to sail against Troy," the Greeks thought; "if they don't, we will go so far as to sacrifice a beloved daughter," which is the tragedy at the heart of *The Iliad*. A more civilized kind of bargain is that of Hannah who begs God for a child as she offers to give this child, this gift, Samuel, back to God. Similar "bargaining with the divine" stories are told in most cultures—from the long-ago time of the horror known as child sacrifice to the time of Isaiah and Micah who understood more about the justice found in the heart of God than anyone else ever had and who declared that God cared more for righteousness, justice, and mercy than for animal sacrifices.

The story in Luke, found also in Matthew, of Jesus' teaching his disciples to pray includes no such bargaining. Instead it reminds us of the value of persistence and offers us the encouragement and reassurance that God's love is so much more superior to human love that only the simplest examples of fatherhood's mercy can describe it.

Several truths emerge from this Gospel story, the undisputed one being that Jesus prayed and prayed often. Again and again we read of his going away to pray, of his withdrawing from the crowds in order to pray. The disciples saw the results of his frequent and regular praying in his healing actions and unforgettable words. They recognized that he knew something about prayer that they did not possess. So one of them asked for help: *Teach us how to pray.*

The prayer quoted in Luke is much simpler than the one found in Matthew, the one we repeat whenever we gather together as a believing community. It is this simplicity that gives it such a bold stamp of authenticity. Jesus begins with the vocative of the word for father. It is difficult for English speakers to recognize the power of the vocative because in English it is the same as the nominative. For instance: "Father said for me to come," uses the same form of the word as "Father, come!" The form Jesus uses is the latter, *Pater*—it is a call, a cry, a pleading.

Father! Only the sound of the voice denotes the pleading in English, like a child crying at night, “Daddy!” This vocative is the same form as the word “Kyrie!” which is a cry to the Lord. Jesus is saying here, “Father, listen to us!”

We learn from this prayer that after the call, the first act is to honour God’s holy name. The word “Name” is another powerful term, in Hebrew this time, for the ancient Hebrews did not use a name for God. Using a name means having power over the person named. After blessing the Holy Name, Jesus makes it plain with his words and his own life that the pleading we must offer in our prayers first and foremost is *for the coming of God’s kingdom*. Up to this point, the words in the Greek are easy to understand. The rest of the prayer has caused countless discussions and questions through the ages. At its face value it asks for the simplest form of sustenance: for bread that must be given daily. These words and the examples Jesus gives later in this story tell us that God takes care of our most basic needs—those for bread (and for shelter). The rest seem to be our own additions, wants, and needs.

But for the rest of the prayer, questions arise. Is Jesus saying that we must forgive *before* we are forgiven? Are God’s actions dependent on ours? It is possible that it means that *only a forgiving heart is able to receive God’s forgiveness?*

What is the meaning of the rest? Are we to understand that it is God who leads us into temptation? In Mark’s story of the temptations of Jesus, he says that *The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness but it was Satan who tempted him for forty days* (Mark 12-13). Is this the meaning here? That Jesus wants to keep us from the agonies he endured during his temptations in the wilderness? Much depends on the meaning of the Greek word *peirasmos*, which is ambiguous and which we translate as *temptation*. The conviction of this writer is that the meaning lies in *spiritual* temptations, in just the kind of temptation that leads us into bargaining with God—this is what Jesus wants us to ask God to help us avoid. Being kept from this kind of temptation—of thinking that we have the spiritual answers to ultimate questions and that those who disagree with our interpretation are wrong—may be just the kind of temptation that only God can save us from. “Do not let the Spirit lead us into the wilderness where such temptations can occur!” In the simple parables that Jesus tells later to expound on the prayer, it is evident that seeking justice is much more important than being right. This is one way of looking at this complex request: *lead us not into temptation*.

The ultimate marvel of these few lines of prayer is that they are so full of meaning, layers and layers of it. How are we to pray then?

- We call on God as Father, or Mother. (Jesus had the example of a good father, so the association was not difficult for him; he was a man of his times and it is the custom of his people that he following here.) But for those who have no father to use as an example for God's love, a good mother is even more important.
- We are to ask that God's holy name remain holy (how troubling this is in the current climate when God's name is taken in vain in almost every sentence uttered!)
- We are to ask for God's kingdom (with all its attendant values) to come on this earth.
- We are to ask for sustenance.
- We must have a forgiving heart in order to be forgiven.
- We have every right to ask God to help us in avoiding temptation; we cannot do it on our own.

And, finally, we are to remember that God loves us more than we are capable of loving; that we who love our children so much can barely begin to imagine what God's love is like. As Robert Browning put it in his dramatic poem Saul: "Can the Creature surpass the Creator? The end what began?"

Let us offer thanks to God for this prayer that has sustained the faithful through ages past and will continue to do so for ages to come,

AMEN