OUR FATHER

By JOHN ASHTON

FATHERHOOD is a word that arouses different feelings in different people. All human beings have a father, and most have some experience of what it means to have one; but the experience can be very diverse, and the response to it ranges from awe to contempt, love to hate. Jesus always spoke of God, his Father, with love, respect and dutifulness: 'piety', in the original sense of that much-abused word. But although even a cursory reading of the gospels assures us that his use of 'father' was invariably positive, we need to delve deeper into the contemporary jewish background if we wish to understand the assumptions that must have coloured his own experience. Reading a victorian novel or biography makes us aware that our ancestors' attitudes to the father's role in the household were worlds apart from our own. We would be foolish to suppose that the affectionate, indulgent, slightly bewildered attitude of most modern parents is an attribute of parenthood as such.

Jesus, brought up as a Jew, shared with Mary and Joseph ideas that had taken centuries to mature; embedded in the book of Genesis we find concepts that must have originated in the era of the hebrew patriarchs long years before the Pentateuch reached its final form. By the time of Abraham, the first of the patriarchs, the strict biological notion of paternity – if indeed it was ever found in a pure form – had expanded into the much richer concept of the father of the tribe or clan. But Genesis presents a curious paradox, seldom enough observed. Though placing enormous emphasis upon paternity as such (starting with Abraham's longing for a son), it nevertheless wrestles throughout against the assumption that a first-born son enjoyed an undisputed right of inheritance. All the patriarchs, each in his own way, had to learn the lesson that his power, authority and wealth did not depend upon primogeniture but upon the grace and favour of Almighty God. Abraham was asked to sacrifice the child in whom he had invested all his hopes; Isaac's first-born son was the victim of deceitful stratagem that probably seemed just as shoddy to the first readers of the book as it does to us today. As for the sons of Jacob, their right of inheritance, though starting from

the physical bond, was really vested in a powerful and mysterious blessing delivered at the end of their father's life.

Israel's tendency to read a deeper meaning into human parenthood is, of course, shared by the majority of the races of mankind. And even the notion of the fatherhood of God was by no means confined to the Jews. Nevertheless, as a people their experience was unique. The Exodus, preceded by the slaughter of the first-born of the Egyptians, was conceived as an act of fatherhood: 'Out of Egypt I have called my Son' (Hos 11, 1). Israel never lost this awareness, but it emerged most strongly when her own ancestors appeared no longer capable of protecting her: 'For thou art our Father, though Abraham does not acknowledge us; thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer from of old is thy name' (Isai 63, 16).

Throughout the period of the monarchy the sense of God's sovereignty, though preserved and argued for with some vehemence,was in other respects played down. And it was not until the exile that one of Israel's greatest poets seized upon the insight that only if the recent disastrous events could be held within the concept of God's over-arching creative might, would the old faith resist new challenges. Restored and refurbished, celebrated in a 'new song', Israel's massive confidence in the power of God came to encompass both creation and redemption in a single huge architectonic span:

> Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces,
> that didst pierce the dragon? (*creation*)
> Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,
> the waters of the great deep;
> That didst make the depths of the sea
> a way for the redeemed to pass over? (Isai 51, 9–10).

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name

With this much of the jewish background in mind, we are in a position to turn to the first petitions of the 'Our Father': certainly a christian prayer by the time it was penned by Matthew and Luke, but carrying with it, precipitated as it were, many of Jesus's own deepest concerns and preoccupations.

The very first word of the prayer is rich in implications and has been commented on, often most beautifully, by christian writers ever since. To be allowed, encouraged even, to address Almighty God in this way is an honour of which we are not insensible. But it is hard not to lose sight of the revelation that made it possible: Jesus's unwearying insistence upon the generosity of an all-pro-

viding Father. To call him Father in the company of our fellow-Christians, and a shared eagerness to pray along with Jesus: this is a grace that binds together all who have ever responded to the preaching of the kingdom, from Jesus's own time onwards. All barriers of class, race, colour, even creed, hinder the fulfilment of a prayer whose first word proclaims the solidarity of the human race and whose second acknowledges the complex links of intimacy, love, dependence, trust and obligation between parent and child.

But this is not all. For the gospel writers, as Raymond Brown has argued,[1] the gift of divine sonship is bestowed in the last days and in the heavenly kingdom. In addressing God as Father, Christians are anticipating the state of perfection which will come about at the close of time. They are looking forward to the coming of the kingdom which is already incipient in the preaching of Jesus. In the beatitudes, alongside the promise to the peacemakers is another promise: that the poor in spirit shall inherit the kingdom of God. And so the community that says the Our Father is not the jewish nation. It is the poor, the sick, and the needy, who accept Jesus's preaching of the kingdom, a kingdom prepared by the Father through Jesus (Lk 22, 29–30).

It is extraordinarily difficult to find parallels to the first petition, 'hallowed be thy name', in the preaching of Jesus: the closest parallel in the gospels is Jesus's prayer to the Father, 'glorify thy name' (Jn 12, 28); there are much closer ones in contemporary Judaism. Yet there can be no doubt that the words 'hallowed be thy name' sum up admirably one of Jesus's central concerns. From the very beginning, the glory of God, his 'good name', is what he had most at heart. All his teaching is God-centred, all his life is devoted to the service of the Father.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that the prayer of praise has not always kept its central place in christian thought. With the swing back to a God-centred theology, which has learnt much from the East, there may be those who are satisfied, in saying 'hallowed be thy name', to think of God alone. But for Irenaeus, as early as the second century, *gloria Dei vivens homo*: it is the life of man, his vitality and vivacity, that is the true glory of God. We may prefer this insight, with its sanity and expansiveness, to Luther's narrower creed: 'God's name is hallowed when our life and doctrine are truly

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[1] 'The Pater Noster as an Eschatological Prayer', in *New Testament Essays* (London-Dublin, 1965), pp 217–53.

Christian'. But the glorification of God remains, however we see it, one of the truly irreducible elements in all religious practice and belief.

Thy kingdom come; thy will be done . . . daily bread

The prayer for the coming of the kingdom is the central petition of the Our Father, the one from which all the others flow. Yet it is at the same time most widely misunderstood: even in the original Greek the kingdom is sometimes thought of as a reign to be inaugurated, sometimes as a city or territory to enter, sometimes as a precious prize or possession. Clues to its meaning are scattered throughout the gospels; perhaps one of the main ones lies in the words that follow, spanning as they do the whole of God's creation, heaven and earth.

If submission to the will of God is the one sure sign of sanctity, then it might seem that only a saint can be truly sincere in his prayer to see God's will accomplished at all times and in all places. And if we reflect on the matter we may find it strange, after the selfless, noble, God-directed petitions with which the 'Our Father' opens, to turn back to our own world of poverty and trespass. After all, does not his loving providence reach out to cover all our needs, so that the very hairs on our heads are numbered? Why then should we bother ourselves any further? Why should be we preoccupied with food and clothing when we see the sparrows eating their fill and the lilies so beautifully clad? Does the prayer for bread make sense in the general context of the preaching of Jesus? It is one thing to pray alongside Jesus that God may be glorified, his reign accepted, his will fulfilled. It is quite another, surely, to ask him to attend to our own mundane necessities, inescapable though they may be.

These questions betray a misunderstanding of the prayer for bread. The bread is indeed ordinary and not, as the Vulgate would have it, 'supersubstantial'. Jerome was scandalized by the ordinariness to the point of wishing to exclude or transcend it. The prayer is really the antithesis of the preoccupation with the material side of life we sometimes make of it. Under Jesus's direction, the disciples hand over to God the responsibility for looking after their material needs, so that they may truly busy themselves about 'the one thing necessary' (Lk 10, 42). The little story of Martha and Mary teaches the same lesson, one we can grasp with difficulty, living as we do in an age when work is supposed to be ennobling, and full employment

is a desirable goal. Those who have consented to work instead for the coming of the kingdom cannot evade their basic human needs; but they can, in faith, be liberated from the anxiety that frequently accompanies them.

Yet though many a saint in the christian calendar has exhibited a child-like trust in the loving providence of God, we may feel that only the privileged few, born to wealth or vowed to poverty, can ever reach the degree of detachment Jesus seems to demand. This conclusion is unacceptable because the detachment of the rich is grounded in Mammon, not in God; while the professionally 'poor', the religious, are freed by other vows from the responsibilities of family life. But we must reckon with the unpalatable fact that Jesus himself considered these responsibilities to be inconsistent with full discipleship, and acknowledge the huge gap between ourselves and Jesus's earliest followers. The closest we can get to the response expected of them is a growing conviction that all we have and are comes from the hand of God. In the words of the beautiful prayer ascribed to King David in the Book of Chronicles:

> . . . all things come from thee, and of thy own have we given thee. For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as all our fathers were; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding.
> (1 Chron 29, 14–15)

So if it is true, as of course it is, that the Our Father is a prayer intended not for angels but for men and women, still the men are those who, unlike the rich young man who went away sorrowful, can accept the call to abandon all their goods; and the women are represented by Mary and not by Martha. Jesus's own experience of the uncompromising demands of God is reflected just as much in this petition as in the two that precede it. The familiar combination of love and submission, absolute trust and filial obedience, remains as a religious ideal for all his followers.

Forgive us our trespasses

The next petition presents a very different kind of puzzle. On the one hand, here is a prayer which, we feel, we can both understand and make our own; on the other hand, it is hard to make sense of it on the lips of Jesus.

The first point to be made is that modern translations obscure the meaning of the original Greek, which refers to 'debts' rather than to 'trespasses'. The original prayer is another reminder that all we have is from God.

To be in debt is an uncomfortable situation. It carries with it not merely a sense of obligation but a feeling of insecurity as well. Maybe this is not altogether true of modern systems of mortgage and hire purchase, but in the ancient world and far into our own, as the universal detestation of money-lenders proves, borrowing was at best a disagreeable necessity. So in what sense are men God's debtors? The answer to this question must be sought in the words of Jesus. A surprising number of his sayings, especially the parables, draw upon the imagery of money transactions of one kind or another. In some of these stories the creditor, invariably a personage of some wealth and standing, is exigent and unyielding, in others lenient and open-handed to an amazing degree. In all, though, the rest of the characters, the ones with whom Jesus's hearers were clearly expected to identify themselves, play the roles of stewards and servants. They are all debtors. And their relationship to God is summed up very simply: 'We are unworthy (unprofitable) servants; we have only done what was our duty' (Lk 17, 10). But balancing these stories are others in which the relationship is not debtor/creditor, but son/father. Between them the two types contain the essence of Jesus's teaching about God, who is at once the most exigent of masters and the kindest of fathers. The demands of the master would be intolerable were it not for the generosity of the father.

There can be no doubt that the spirit of this petition is glowingly exemplified in Jesus's dying prayer on the cross: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Lk 23, 34). These words are not particularly well attested, being omitted by most of the best manuscripts; but, authentic or not, they faithfully reflect his mind. During his hour of ultimate trial, scarcely a word of reproach passed his lips; and we cannot suppose that he who urged all his hearers to love their enemies ended his own life by hating them. Once again we find the words of the Our Father anticipating, with a kind of dramatic irony, the events of Jesus's own passion.

And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil

The last point is even more true, or at least more obviously true, of the remaining two petitions, so reminiscent of Jesus's own mysterious and tormented prayer on the eve of his Passion. His experience of sonship culminated in the garden of Gethsemane; no consideration of it can be complete without some account of the vulnerability and the pain. And here more than ever we need to go

back to the jewish tradition, which is so much tougher than our own. In it, one way in which a father shows his love, strange as it may seem to us, is his severity.

Lying behind the synoptic account of the agony is the tradition of God's testing of his Son. There are three elements in the tradition: the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (the so-called *Aqedah*), the story of the trial of the people of Israel in the desert, and the wisdom tradition of the trial of the just man (of which the best known example is the Book of Job). The first is a particularly intriguing example of midrash, in which Isaac is portrayed as volunteering to shed his own blood in order to ensure a perfect sacrifice. Many scholars believe that this ancient legend has strongly influenced Paul's theology of redemption (and probably also that of the Letter to the Hebrews). However that may be, the Isaac of the *targumim* furnishes us with an unusually convincing ante-type of Christ.

The second element, which has also clearly influenced the temptation narrative, is the story of the people's trial in the desert, once again an experience of *sonship*. Where the people failed, Jesus triumphed, but the cost of his victory, achieved by an appeal to the words of Scripture, is not seen until the Passion, Jesus's own personal Exodus.

However, it is the third element, at once simpler and more enigmatic than the others, that is the most fascinating of the three. Its flavour can be gauged from two quotations: 'The Lord reproves him whom he loves, and punishes the son in whom he delights' (Prov 3, 12 – Septuagint); 'the Lord warns the righteous as a beloved son and chastens him as a first-born son' (*The Psalm of Solomon*, 13, 9).

It may be objected that God's testing of the righteous man cannot have influenced the account of the Agony; otherwise it would be hard to make sense of Jesus's warnings to his disciples. And it is true that with the possible exception of Hebrews the New Testament nowhere hints that Jesus stood in need of instruction of chastisement. Nevertheless, as R. S. Barbour has argued in a fine article, 'the related idea that the sufferings of the righteous are God's instructions or chastisements is so essential to the whole jewish outlook on the world that it would almost inevitably be present in the telling of a story like that of Gethsemane'.[2] Moreover, we must not lose

[2] 'Gethsemane in the tradition of the Passion', in *New Testament Studies*, 16 (1969/70), p 246.

sight of the idea that the purpose of God's testing is to discover the true mind of the one who is submitted to it. The notion of trial by ordeal is fundamental to jewish thought; and the persistence of the association is attested by the ambiguity of the word 'trial' itself.[3] It must be stressed that though the whole scene in the Garden is heavy with the sense of God's predestined plan, the Son prays that the Father's will may be changed. Is not God testing him here to see what is his true heart? At this point in the narrative, and at this point alone, the overwhelming sense of inevitability yields to one of struggle and conflict, in which everything (and how much is contained in this 'everything'!) turns on the decision of one man.

It might be said that for us, at any rate, victory is assured; the battle is won, and the possibility that it might have been otherwise is unreal and therefore unimportant. But it was not so for the early Christians. They continued to feel touched by Christ's warning, 'Watch and pray'. Christians today are unlikely to experience the same awe or the same sense of impending tribulation; but it is possible that they have recovered at least some awareness of evil and some obscure feeling of urgency, without which these final petitions can be recited only mechanically or else trivialized beyond recognition. Perhaps the best way of finding fresh meaning in them is to associate them consciously with Jesus's own prayer. As disciples of Jesus, they expect to be called upon to relive his experience of the demands of God. Because he loves them with a father's love, God will see that they too 'learn obedience through suffering'. Yet through the severity shines the love of the universal Father, manifested in the sacrificial death of the Son.

There is one more passage in the gospels which must not be left out of account. This is Jesus's profound and beautiful prayer of thanksgiving, a source of inspiration and comfort to countless Christians ever since:

> I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke

[3] Cf the French *épreuve*, and the German *prüfrung*.

> upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Mt 11, 25–30).

What we know of the Father we know through Jesus himself, the only true way. His own quiet assurance of God's power to save, an assurance that survived desolation in the Garden and dereliction on the Cross, is our greatest comfort. The promise of a full revelation does not eliminate toil or hardship, but it does make them endurable; it does not remove burdens, but it does lighten them.

But the most important lesson from the passage, whether or not the words were actually uttered by Jesus (as many scholars believe), is the testimony that he is the one source of knowledge about God. The quest for 'the consciousness of Christ', not as easy or as unproblematical as used to be thought, is justified by a conviction that Christians have shared from the earliest times: 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn 14, 9). And part of his message, surely, is to be found in the experience of sonship as this is expressed in the prayer he taught us. Though the meaning attached to these words alters with circumstances and attitudes, the words themselves remain. And since Christ lives on through the Spirit, his prayer retains a force no other can match.[4]

[4] Some of the material in this article has already appeared in the french journal *Christus*, 96 (1977), pp 359–81.