Sunday 27 July 2025 – Sixth Sunday after Trinity - *The Lord's Prayer* – Ian Wallis

' Our Father…'. Every prayer is implicitly a theology. Ian Wallis explores the theology behind the opening of the Lord's Prayer. which invites us to know God as Diviine Householder, whose family is all who relate to Him as dwelling in His house.

Readings:

Genesis 18:20–32. Colossians 2:6–19; Luke 11:1–13.

Sermon: *The Lord's Prayer* – Ian Wallis

In our Gospel reading this morning, we heard something that sounded both familiar and yet a little strange or, at least, different. I refer, of course, to the Lord's Prayer of which at least three ancient versions have come down to us. Luke's, which we heard a few moments ago (by far, the shortest), Matthew's longer version which is closer to the form we regularly recite, and the one contained in the *Didache*, the *Teaching*, an early church manual, which is very similar to Matthew's, although unlike Matthew's, it contains a closing doxology. Of these three, most scholars conclude that Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is the earliest, with those in Matthew and the *Didache* showing signs of embellishment through liturgical use in the worshipping life of the early Jesus movement.

We'll turn to Luke's version in a moment, but before doing so, we're going to learn a little Latin – four words to be precise, *Lex orandi, lex credendi,* which can be translated as 'the law [or way] of praying is the law [or way] of believing' – an adage characterising Anglicanism from the outset and one that reflects the intimate and reciprocal relationship between how we pray and what we believe. For, if you think about it, underpinning every prayer is an implicit theology.

What do I mean by that? Well, consider a prayer that will be on most of your lips at the moment, 'O God, have mercy upon us and make this sermon brief.' A simple enough petition, you would have thought, but, none the less, one that is informed by beliefs about how we understand God and how God relates to the world.

For example, it assumes there is a God, one that is interested in human affairs, and is able to influence them in some way. Also, that God is fundamentally generous-hearted and well-intentioned, although sometimes needs a little encouragement or even persuasion, to act accordingly. Finally, it assumes that God is able to hear our prayers and is, in some sense, at our behest.

Lex orandi, lex credendi – underpinning every prayer is an implicit theology. I wonder if you have ever thought of prayer in this way. And now that you have, I wonder what your praying reveals about your believing.

And, presumably, what applies to our prayers also applies to Jesus' prayers and, in particular, the Lord's Prayer as it became known from the third century (Cyprian, *De dominica oratione*, c 250 CE) – a title disclosing not only its provenance, but also its essence. This is Jesus' prayer both in the sense that he composed it and prayed it. It is the prayer that embodies his way of relating to God and, as such, reveals his own personal beliefs. Equally, it is one that he offers to us all and, by so doing, invites us to embrace the identity and vocation it bestows.

So let's accept his invitation, although this morning, I fear that we may progress no further than the first word, which, for some of us, may prove to be the most problematic – *Pater* in Greek, *Âb* in Aramaic, Father in English. We'll explore the apparently gendered nature of this mode

of addressing God shortly, but before doing so we should notice something easily missed, namely that Jesus addresses God personally.

Although not unique in Judaism of Jesus' time it was unusual, where God would more often than not be addressed using the Tetragrammaton – the four sacred letters: yod, he, vav, he – which were so holy that they could not be uttered, replaced with *Ha-Shem*, 'The Name,' or another substitute. Other forms of addressing God included the generic Hebrew words for God, *El* or *Elohim*, or *El Elyon* (God Most High) or *El Shaddai* (God Almighty). *Adonai* (My Lord) was also deployed, but in the sense of emphasising God's transcendence – God's lordship and authority.

Yet Jesus relates to God personally which is not to say that he believed God was a person as you and I are persons. Rather, at the very least, Jesus is affirming that the way he related to God was more like the way he related to persons in contrast to the way he related to things. Jesus evidently recognised that God isn't an object existing in the universe, one that is open to scrutiny – to being observed or measured or manipulated. Rather, God is, to borrow the language of philosopher Martin Buber, a 'thou' rather than an 'it,' a subject rather than an object. One who must be related to personally, that is to say, respectfully and receptively, in openness and trust, in a spirit of honesty, integrity and mutuality.

But what kind of personal relating characterises Jesus' relationship with God? And here we should note that for Jesus, like the rest of us, whenever he uses language to address or describe God, he is using it analogically or metaphorically – that is to say, he is characterising his relationship with God in terms of another relationship. So, in this case, if we were able to ask Jesus, 'How do you relate to God?' He would reply along the lines, 'Well, my relationship with God is best characterised by the kind of relationship a son has with his father.'

Now it doesn't follow from this that Jesus believed God to be the biggest and best of all daddies, residing somewhere in the heavens; rather, what he is affirming is that the earthly relationship that most resonates with his relating to God is that between a parent and child – perhaps, as some would claim, specifically between a father and his son. Which begs the question of whether Jesus related to God in a gendered way? Did he conceive of God as masculine and if so, at the exclusion of being feminine or, in some sense, as embracing or even transcending gender?

Self-evidently, these are timely and vital questions with significant implications for all of us, perhaps especially for those who struggle to relate to a male God or, in particular, to a God who is fatherlike. In addressing them we need to recognise the gulf between how the familial language of father, mother, son, daughter, etc was used in Jesus' culture and how it is deployed in modern western democracies. For one thing, the notion of the nuclear family with mum, dad and the kids didn't exist in Jesus' day.

Rather, central to the idea of family in much of first-century Middle Eastern culture is the 'household' – in fact, biblical language for family embraces words that can equally be translated as house or generations or relatives (eg *bayit, mishpachah, oikia*). Households in Jesus' day were multi-generational – grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren. They included unattached siblings, married sons and their families, as well as relatives more broadly. They could also include clients and their families, servants and slaves, even livestock and property. Households constituted the principal unit of social cohesion and identity – they were mini-economies supplying most, if not all, of what was needed for survival and flourishing, from the cradle to the grave.

Households were also central to religious life where children would learn the faith and everyone would seek to live it out – ritually, through observing Sabbath and annual festivals, maintaining

purity and the like; practically, through learning to love one another and to follow in the way of God's commandments. If a household was run well, then all members would benefit with commensurate improvement in quality of life and well-being. Equally, if a household was poorly managed, then all would suffer. While cooperation and collaboration was expected from all participants, the lynchpin within every household was the *ba'al bayit* or *oikodespotês* – the householder.

This, then, is the background for interpreting Jesus' ministry as a whole and the Lord's Prayer, in particular. So when Jesus invokes God as 'Father,' in all probability, the personality and role he had in mind was that of a householder – only, in this case, the householder of the *oikoumenê*, the inhabited world.

Although this prospect may seem alien to us, it wouldn't have been in Jesus' day – not least because one of the titles that could be bestowed upon the Roman Emperor by the governing Senate was *Pater Patriae* – 'Father of the Fatherland or Homeland' – in other words, Householder Supreme. What is more, subjects of Rome, including all the inhabitants of The Galilee, Samaria and Judea, were expected to acknowledge the Emperor as such, not only by supplying financial tribute, but also by offering suitable veneration.

Equally significant, in Jesus' day householders were not exclusively male. For instance, in the New Testament we learn of the households of Martha (Luke 10) and Lydia (Acts 16), of Prisca (Rom 16) and Nympha (Col 4). Nor should we overlook the eulogy to female householdry in Proverbs 31.

Lex orandi, lex credendi. If our reflections this morning have been on the right lines, then key to Jesus' understanding of God is a way of relating personally to one whose being can be likened to a *particular role*, that of a divine householder evoking associations such as creator, sustainer, protector, arbiter of justice and agent of reconciliation, fount of wisdom and minister of peace.

And this is the way of relating to God that Jesus invites us to share. It is, indeed, a challenging and controversial invitation, although perhaps not only for the reason we may initially have thought.

For if we are to relate to God as divine householder who presides over a new community extending beyond existing sources of kinship, allegiance and identity – with potentially universal reach – one wonders how this new lived reality will influence our commitment to other sources of identity and belonging.

For the Jesus who invites us to know God as Divine Householder could also, in the company of his natural family, ask, 'Who are my mother and my brothers? … Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (Mark 3.31–35).