

SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST

Cowley



The Lord's Prayer

Dear Friends,

In the introduction to his book *The Divine Rule of Prayer*, our founder Richard Meux Benson opens by saying: "As prayer is the great work of life, so the Lord's Prayer is the great form and model of prayer. We often use it; but it is to be feared we search too seldom into the depths of its meaning."

If you have visited the Monastery, you will note that no other prayer is prayed with such frequency – at least twenty-seven times a week corporately, not to mention the times it is used in our private prayer. Inspired by Fr. Benson's own analysis of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, we Brothers reflected, as he did, on aspects of this prayer with the intention of deepening our own prayer lives.

As you read and pray with this volume, it is our hope that you, too, will be inspired to consider closely how the Lord's Prayer can guide you into deeper intimacy with Jesus and help you to realize the abundant life that God desires for you.

- Br. Jim Woodrum
Editor, Cowley Magazine

the Lord's prayer

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen.*

AN EXPLORATION
from the Brothers of SSJE

A Prayer Renewed

Todd Blackham, SSJE

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The treasure of the Lord's Prayer is so vast that Christians have been plumbing its depths since the very first days. It is a pearl of great price, and yet, in its ubiquity, perhaps it has lost some of its luster.

For as long as I can remember, this prayer has formed the backdrop of my spiritual life. I don't remember sitting down and learning it systematically. It was just in the atmosphere of the family and church community I inhabited.

And so, it usually takes some conscious effort for me to return to the words, the layers of meaning and desire expressed, to revivify otherwise dulled, ambient noise. In the pages of this issue of *Cowley*, devoted to the Lord's Prayer, we hope to do just that: to return to the words of this prayer, to strip away what dulls us to it, and to return anew to its transformative power.

Over the years and in different contexts, I can recall encountering slightly different versions of this prayer; sometimes we ask forgiveness for trespasses, for debts, or for sins. Sometimes saying the correct, or at least familiar word seemed really important, and at other times, I was just happy to be saying the words with others. And on

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some occasions, I found that hearing the prayer spoken in various languages – unknown to me but coming from the hearts of people from all over the world – seemed to rise like a beautifully rich fragrance to God. One prayer; many different experiences.

I wonder, how do you experience this prayer? Does it wash over you? Does your mind begin to wander as soon as the familiar words begin? Matthew's version (Matthew 6:9-13) is the more robust form of the prayer, which exists in most of our liturgical settings. Luke's (Luke 11:2-4) is a more sparse, bare-bones version. It rouses me a bit to notice what's *not* there.

I hope that this exploration of the Lord's Prayer will rouse us from the stupor of familiarity, as we strive to awaken and return to the Lord. If there is ever a time to refresh and renew our prayer it is now.

From the time of the early Christians, this prayer was handed on to new believers as one of the treasures of our tradition. The Lord's Prayer and the Nicene Creed were given to catechumens as they were preparing for baptism. New believers were invited to savor and cherish the precious gift of these words, so central to our faith they were often simply referred to as "The Prayer."

On the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, the Convent of the Pater Noster stands on the site of the fourth-century ruins of a church associated with the spot where Jesus first taught the disciples this prayer. The walls inside and out are bedecked with dozens and dozens of ten-foot-high tile plaques, painted with the prayer in at least one hundred languages.

Those plaques are not uniform. Like our own lives of prayer, they have a variety of states. Some have become dusty and dulled. Some are protected from sun and rain in cloister walks. Others are exposed to the elements, where dust, pollen, and bird droppings accumulate. Little bits of moss and mildew cling to some; others have been adorned with bits of graffiti. In time, they all need careful cleaning and repair.

What is the state of this prayer in your heart today? Could it use some sprucing up?

If your primary experience with this prayer is in corporate worship, perhaps you will find it helpful in these pages to take some time to reconnect with it, line by line, word by word. This *Cowley* invites us to slow down. As we move through the prayer, we invite you to take in each word and phrase, to lovingly abide with it, and allow it to once more shine light on your path.

We might first begin by asking for grace, "God, help me to set aside everything I think I know about this prayer, that I might have an open mind and a new experience of you."

We pray that the cleansing work of the Spirit will clear away contention and controversy for the purpose of attuning our hearts to God's beating heart of love.

As you pray this prayer across these pages, let its expansive themes unfold: relationship with God, the holy name, the Kingdom, God's will, daily bread, forgiveness, and freedom from temptation. Allow your soul to adore God as the words are burnished and restored to a brilliant luster. We pray that, being thus renewed and refreshed, we can bring this prayer to worship as a lamp on a stand, an offering of incense, fragrant and pleasant, as our prayers rise before God.

Jesus' invitation is for you: Pray then, in this way...

ALLOWED

be
your
NAME

Being an Answer to the Lord's Prayer

Curtis Almquist, SSJE

The Son of God existed prior to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. What we witness in the human form of Jesus is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... All things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:15-17). The Son of God had already lived forever, eternally, prior to taking on human life as Jesus.

The best sense the Church has been able to make of this comes from experience. There is One God, the Creator of everything, who, while remaining God, takes on human form: God the Son. This is Jesus, who grows up, ministers, prays, dies, is resurrected, and returns to the life of God, who has no beginning or ending. Jesus departs from earth. He ascends. He leaves us, not abandoned, but with another manifestation of the One God, whom Jesus calls "the Spirit," another Person of the One God (John 14:26; 15:26). It took the Church several centuries to find the language to try to describe this mysterious yet undeniable experience: that there is One God in Three Persons.

God took on human form in Jesus. How did God make this decision? (I'm speaking here very anthropomorphically.) How did God decide to become human? What was the

"cost" to God to become human? The great Welsh poet and Anglican priest, R. S. Thomas, in his poem "The Coming," pictures God's decision in a primordial conversation between God the Father and God the Son. The picture is of a desolated, hopeless, helpless earth:

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

God comes to us as a child of Bethlehem. We know him as Jesus, who grows up, like we grow up, and after many, many years, he finds his voice and claims his power.

He also prays. Jesus prays, enough so as to catch people's attention. This is God the Son in a very human way praying to God the Father. Very mysterious, and yet, clearly, this is what was happening... frequently. Jesus prays.

Eventually, Jesus' disciples ask him to teach them how to pray. Jesus responds with what we call "the Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). Most revealing in the Lord's Prayer is the opening word, the plural pronoun: "Our Father in heaven." The Greek word translated "our" literally means "of us," i.e., "Father of us."

Consider the context: Jesus is speaking to his disciples, and Jesus' prayer envelopes his disciples as if he and they

are all one: the first person, plural possessive pronoun, "our." How to pray? Jesus says we begin like this: *Our Father...* Jesus and we are one with the Father (John 10:30; 17:20-23).

Jesus here regards his disciples not as his servants, but as his friends. They are his peers. They share the same prayer. He doesn't say, "My Father," or "Your Father." He says, "*Our Father.*"

The name Jesus uses for "Father" shows a very tender, childlike, trusting intimacy. A better, sweeter translation of the Greek word would be "Papa" rather than "Father." "*Our Papa in heaven.*"

Jesus speaks as a human being, as human as you and I are, and as full of as many wonders and needs as the rest of us. His prayer is not just "heavenly"; his prayer includes our need for food - our "daily bread" - and this is not metaphorical. This is about sustenance.

Just prior to this - the verse preceding this prayer - Jesus has said, "Your Father already knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8). So Jesus is teaching us to pray, but this is *not* about the dissemination of information to God. God already knows our needs because God is God. This prayer is about our trusted and tender relationship to God.

The Lord's Prayer is so familiar, perhaps too familiar to some of us for us to be mindful of its profundity, revealed even just in these opening words. Jesus' words completely embrace us, as if we, with Jesus, all belong to the same Father, the same Papa. I invite you to ponder and pray on the Lord's Prayer as if you are hearing it again for the first time.

You might use it to reflect on God's "deciding" to become human, and its "cost" to God to be both truly human and truly divine: the humility of God. Take R. S. Thomas' haunting last line in his poem, "Let me go there." Why? Why did Jesus come to us? Why does Jesus come to *you*? How might this prayer, which he taught us, help you to draw near, with him, to "*Our Papa in heaven?*"

your
KINGDOM
COME

your
WILL
be **DONE**

Our Daily Bread

Lain Wilson, n/SSJE

One of the great gifts of living at the Monastery is the view from my cell window. It's not just the beauty of the Charles River; it's the activity that takes place on it that captivates me, which resonates with my own deep-seated need.

I rowed crew off and on for fifteen years before entering the Monastery last winter. Watching the stream of crew boats cutting across my window now, I remember the feeling of being in a boat and I can imagine myself in one again. But more than anything, I feel the beauty of it all. I feel it in my body as tension unknitting in my stomach, as a weight lifting from my shoulders. In this physical response, I become aware of how important this encounter with beauty is for me - not only in watching the river, but in countless small and unexpected ways each day. I realize how much this beauty nourishes me, giving shape and color and texture to my day - to my life. And I recognize, deep down, how my senses, my memory, and my imagination - all those faculties that allow me to find, experience, and appreciate this beauty - are total gifts from God.

You may be surprised that this image of a crew boat on the Charles River emerges in the context of the familiar line from the heart of the Lord's Prayer, "Give us today our daily

bread." I know I was. You may be surprised that beauty, not bread, is the need I name. I know I was. It can be difficult, for those of us who don't lack food or experience the sharp pangs of hunger, to know how to pray this petition. It can feel abstract, disembodied. Are you, like me, lucky enough to feel far removed from the precariousness and scarcity that we hear about in the Israelites' journey through the desert, or that we read about in stories of famine, or that we see around us in those who sleep on the streets? Are you blessed enough to know you will have bread today?

You might not know the urgent cry for bread that haunts others. But we all have needs. We all have hungers. And I think that by identifying them, and in recognizing how these needs affect us physically, we can begin to recapture something of the immediacy and materiality of praying for our daily bread.

In praying to God to meet those needs, to nourish us, we are invited to move beyond ourselves to trust in and rely on God's limitless provision. And, perhaps most importantly, when we name our needs and realize how often their satisfaction lies beyond our control, we can grow in compassion for those whose lives are more precarious and whose needs are more urgent than our own. In recognizing our commonality as needful people, we can stand alongside our brothers and sisters, placing our trust in the God who gives us our daily bread, in all its many forms.

God Loves Humans

David Vryhof, SSJE

If forgiveness is one of the most powerful forces for redemption in the Christian faith, unforgiveness is one of the most powerful forces for destruction. Unforgiveness hardens the heart. It magnifies a perceived offense to the point where we can no longer appreciate a person's value because all we see is how they have grieved us. No wonder the petition about forgiveness - "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us" - sits at the heart of the Lord's Prayer.

In the gospels, Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). In this question, Peter thinks he is being generous. The rabbis of Jesus' day taught that a person was obliged to forgive three times; Peter raises it to seven. "No," Jesus answers, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

The astounding generosity of such forgiveness can only come in response to the extravagant mercy and compassion of God.

Here's the Good News: Jesus came for sinners. He was born, lived and died, and was raised again for people like

you and me. When he lived among us, he preferred the company of sinful humans to that of those righteous souls who believed they were pure and above reproach. He befriended tax collectors and prostitutes. He made it clear that he had come not for the righteous, but for sinners. He insisted that his purpose was not to condemn, but to save. Even now, he unveils our hypocrisies not to shame us, but to help us to see how much we need him, how much we need his divine life flowing through us, transforming and changing us so that our actions may become true expressions of who we really are, so that we can live authentically as God's children in the world.

If we consider our sinfulness; if we are aware of our countless transgressions against God and against our neighbors in thought, word and deed; if we realize our need for forgiveness and mercy; then we will begin to appreciate what has been done for us.

Forgiven people should not be unforgiving towards others. "Be kind to one another," Saint Paul urges the Christians at Ephesus, "tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). Those who have been forgiven much ought to love much, and that love should include forgiving others with the same generosity with which we have been forgiven.

Living in a fallen world means that it is inevitable that we will be sinned against. Christian faith does not diminish the pain or damage that someone's sin against us has inflicted. We need God's help to work through our anger and bitterness to arrive at the place where forgiveness is possible. But we need to do this work - it is not an option - because without it, we will be imprisoned by our own unforgiveness.

Sometimes forgiveness can only come over time. Be patient with yourself but be equally determined to stay on the path towards forgiveness, even if it is an uphill climb. Our hearts harden when we harbor unforgiveness. Forgive, then, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

An Intercessory Lord's Prayer

Where [name] appears below, substitute the name of the person whom you will hold in prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name in [name],
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven for [name].
Give [name] this day his/her/their daily bread.
And forgive [name] his/her/their trespasses,
as he/she/they forgive those
who trespass against him/her/them.
And lead [name] not into temptation,
but deliver him/her/them from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

FORGIVE
US

our
SINS

Prayer with Substance

Keith Nelson, SSJE

Monks pray often. But as we learn, many times over, quantity or frequency in prayer doesn't equal quality or depth. Neither, as Jesus points out, does length or verbal sophistication equal substance. Even when the phrases of our prayer are full of meaning – such as those drawn directly from Scripture – it is possible to come to them with absence of mind or heart, or to miss their meaning because something in us is missing.

The Church, throughout its history, has sometimes wrestled to strike a balance between praying beautifully and praying simply, directly, and with purpose. Individual believers can struggle with the same temptation. When we “heap up empty phrases,” we ultimately miss the mark on both accounts.

You may be the type of person who crafts words because you love them. You may be that way by temperament, by communication style, by education, by vocational calling, by type of employment, by personal talent, by gift of the Holy Spirit, or any combination of the above. Maybe fine phrases follow you, are attached to your name, or the things you have produced. Maybe they flow from your mouth or pen: phrases with power to express, to articulate,

to persuade, and to impress. I have had the privilege to meet, work alongside, and pray with many such people. Sometimes, I am told, I am one of them. A venerable company of monks, past and present, have been just such people.

If you are that type of person, you have probably experienced the occupational hazard – or the temperamental, communicational, stylistic, educational, vocational, or personal hazard – of heaping up an empty phrase or two. Maybe you've experienced that moment when the words sound smooth but ring hollow. Or when the undergrowth of verbiage obscures the path onward or homeward. Perhaps your words were beautiful, but lacked the gracious editing of the Author of Life.

It is quite easy to heap up empty phrases. In such moments, what hope do we have?

For me, it is the Lord's Prayer. The prayer that Jesus taught is a simple, supremely effective tool to slice away anything in us that is not humble or sincere. It is the best, most straightforward antidote to all our articulate spiritual *nonsense*. Over time, it makes us *real*: real servants of a Savior with substance, which a world full of words desperately needs.

Lead Us Not into Temptation

Jim Woodrum, SSJE

Of all the petitions offered in the Lord's Prayer, the one that most provokes my curiosity is "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

The early desert monastics (beginning in the fourth century) acknowledged the sobering reality of temptation in their lives. Yet for them, temptation was not something to be avoided, since the refining of our spiritual lives required an engagement with temptation. My study of that period of monasticism has helped me to appreciate that temptation reveals areas of my spiritual armor that need to be fortified in order for me to become more fully the person God created me to be.

Even Jesus, in his humanity, was tempted after his baptism by John in the Jordan River. You'll recall that he withdraws into the desert for forty days, where he faces a series of temptations. In each temptation delivered upon him by the devil, Jesus withstands by recalling scripture that he had learned and memorized growing up in his faith. The desert monk, Evagrius Ponticus, adapted this method of engaging temptation in his book *Antirrhetikos*, which means "Talking Back," by using scripture to confront the wiles of the devil, empowering the individual to avoid acting upon temptation.

The crucial insight we can take from the desert monastics is seeing that temptation itself is not a sin. They deemed that only entertaining temptation in such a way as led to acting upon it was sinful.

Like the teachings of the desert monastics, our own Rule of Life acknowledges the reality of temptation in our life of faith: "For the hours of the day to be permeated by mindfulness of the divine life we must be engaged in constant struggle, depending on God's grace. Powerful forces are bent on separating us from God, our own souls, and one another through the din of noise and the whirl of preoccupation." For me, this preoccupation usually occurs when I'm not feeling my best. When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the desert, he was in the midst of a forty-day fast from food and water. In my own life, when I am facing temptation, I recall a slogan from the rooms of 12-step recovery: H.A.L.T., which is an acronym for "Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired." Whenever you feel tempted to do or say something that is not conducive to the life to which God has called you, you might find it helpful to notice if you are feeling hungry, angry, lonely, or tired and then tend to some self-care. Seek nourishment, counsel for your anger, the company of a trusted friend, or take some time for respite. You might want to recall the words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel: "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Temptation is inevitable; and we have at our disposal many tools we can use to help us withstand it.

In our Monastery, we use a modern adaptation of the Lord's Prayer in contemporary language which renders this line, "Save us from the time of trial." For me, this prayer means asking for God's grace in resisting the trap of entertaining temptation, which I can do by remembering Jesus' example and recalling God's desire for wholeness and abundance of life for me.

In the recitation of the Lord's Prayer each day, I am reminded that if I turn to God in my moments of temptation, then I, like Jesus, will be able to dismiss temptation's toxicity, and be fortified and empowered to live into the divine life which God has enabled in me.

Unravel the Familiar

Sean Glenn, SSJE

If your experience is anything like my own, you will have found that the praying life is often littered with shifting seasons, fresh insights, old wounds (which continue to sting), and ever expanding and contracting horizons of the heart.

Perhaps, too, you will have found that even the most familiar phenomena can take on new valences and, to your surprise, unveil themselves in a beautiful complexity to which you had previously been blind. The Sermon on the Mount has often been, for me, one such site of this very unraveling of the familiar – a place where the real limitations of my spiritual vision meet the scandalous, expansive, sometimes terrifying truth at the heart of all things.

More than any others, perhaps, the words of the Lord's Prayer contain such inestimable, unquantifiable freight. These words – so dear, so familiar, so second-nature – stir the gaze of our hearts toward the One whom Jesus invites us to name "Our Father," and they articulate, in six remarkably short petitions, some of the deepest content of the "hope that is in us" (1 Peter 3:15).

And yet, as with anything we hold in close proximity, the very familiarity of these words can sometimes obscure

this prayer's true power to transform us, and can dull the radical challenge by which it seeks to summon us beyond our illusory sense of self-dependence.

More than familiar words of comfort, this prayer challenges our easy temptation to imagine that we ourselves are the authors of our own salvation and the world's. The trials of our age may tempt us down such a well-intentioned road, but the reality of the Christian experience is something much more complex. Jesus urges us, "Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:7).

The same One who spoke to Elijah's fearful need – not in the din of created noise, not in earthquake, wind, or fire (1 Kings 19:11–13), but in the silence from which all sound emerges (created and uncreated) – is also the One who knows, better than we ourselves ever could, all that we need. As Matthew's Jesus declares, "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Matthew 6:11).

And this is perhaps one of the greatest perplexities of petitionary prayer: God knows, yet still bids us ask in our praying. Yes, we may say, God knows what we need; why, then, do we even bother with the exercise at all? The next clause of the prayer answers our curiosity: our need for forgiveness – which only God can grant. In this way, Jesus teaches us that in our asking, we are somehow cooperating with God in the process of our redemption. In this way, we cast ourselves anew into God's hands: "Save us... deliver us..." The prayer closes with the ultimate recognition that God alone is God, whom we worship and on whom we depend for all: "For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever." It is this cataract in our condition into which Jesus speaks when he teaches us to pray this way. As one who shed all power, privilege, and the riches of his divinity to enter into our humanity,

Jesus invites us to pray to become uniquely aware of our own poverty – of our inability to save ourselves – by asking God to meet our needs one day at a time: Give us this day our daily bread. As we are apt to mistake our wants for our needs, “heaping up” many-worded petitions for the fulfillment of a reality according to our own, limited vision, this can be a difficult revelation to stomach. God knows what we need.

We should not be surprised to find, as Jesus’ followers did, that the kingdom being unveiled to us in and through our prayer will not meet our expectations. But do not despair; it will surely surpass them. Clouds and darkness may indeed hide God from our knowing, but righteousness and justice are the foundations of the divine (albeit cruciform) throne.

The tension between our human vision of peace and justice (what we want the world to look like), and the socially indecent charity of God’s ways (how God’s world actually is), has been with us from the beginning. Just as the people of first-century Judea were surprised by the content of Jesus’ revelation, so too should we be surprised. The kingdom, God’s final setting-right of the world, defied the familiar expectations of the disciples. “Do you also wish to go away?” he said to them. ‘Lord,’ Peter replied, ‘to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life’” (John 6:67–68).

What sort of familiar expectations do you have about God’s kingdom? What needs to be recognized as the cultural baggage it is? What needs to be recognized as the subtle allure of the Accuser?

Lord, teach us to unravel the familiar.

The Prayer of Jesus

This interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer comes from the Benedictine Women of Madison (Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI: 2007).

Holy One, our only Home,
blessed be your name,
may your day dawn,
your will be done,
here, as in heaven.
Feed us today, and forgive us,
as we forgive each other.
Do not forsake us at the test,
but deliver us from evil.
For the glory, the power,
and the mercy are yours
now and forever,
Amen.

AS HUMANS MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE, WE CO-CREATE WITH GOD , BUILD-
ING UP THE KINGDOM, USING GOD'S POWER, AND REFLECTING GOD'S
GLORY. HOW MIGHT YOU OFFER YOURSELF MORE FULLY TO GOD IN THIS ?

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OURS

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

James Koester, SSJE

Several years ago, I found myself in a small, subterranean chapel within sight of the Old City of Jerusalem. It had once been a cave. At some point, a modern church was built over it. The floor was littered with scraps of paper. On them people had written prayers, and then dropped them through a grille in the floor of the upper church, onto the floor of this cave chapel, where I stood with Sr. Elspeth. Elspeth was an American. She had begun her religious life as a sister of the Order of Saint Anne, here in Arlington, Massachusetts. The deeper she entered the mystery of her vocation, the more she realized it was to the contemplative life she was called. So, there she was, a Carmelite nun of the Pater Noster Carmel, showing me the cave where, tradition says, Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer.

Like many of the holy sites in Jerusalem, it is impossible to know if this is *the* place where Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer. Nonetheless, this place has been hallowed by the memory of that occasion, as well as by the prayers of countless believers. Like our Monastery Chapel, the walls of that cave are soaked in prayer. You feel it the moment you enter.

Of all the prayers we pray, none is so universal, so loved as the Lord's Prayer. Wherever we go as Christians, we find others who love and pray this prayer. We may be divided by language, culture, race, gender, economics, education, ecclesiology, or theology, but we are united by this prayer and by praying it.

For all its familiarity, the Lord's Prayer is one of the most radical acts a Christian can do. It is radical, because from the first two words, we say something profound about ourselves and about God.

The prayer begins not with Almighty and Everlasting God, or Holy God. It does not begin with Merciful God, or Blessed Lord. It begins quite simply: Our Father. With those two words, we enter a relationship with all the people throughout time and space, who have ever said them, and we enter a relationship with the One whom we call Father.

At its heart, the Lord's Prayer is about *belonging*. That is what we proclaim whenever we say: Our Father. In those words, we proclaim that we belong to God.

And in praying this prayer, we proclaim that we belong to one another. It is through our relationship as the beloved daughters and sons of God that we are sisters and brothers to one another. Thus, we have the audacity to say "Our," in union with those near and far, those like us and those different from us. In this prayer of belonging, we affirm our common identity as God's children, and we place ourselves in relationship, with God and one another. In this age of individualism, being in relationship - especially with people who are not like us - is a radical act.

And we do more.

As we proclaim our belongingness to God and to one another, we affirm our common need and responsibility for one another. As the prayer progresses, we pray: give us, forgive us, save us, deliver us. Nowhere do we say *me* or *I*. Instead, we pray, *us, us, us, us*.

In this prayer, we come to God not as individuals, demanding our share, but as members of a community, who know our common need for sustenance, forgiveness,

salvation, and liberation. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from the evil one. In those words, we pray for all in need, and we take responsibility, not just for our own well-being, but for the well-being of others.

The Lord's Prayer unites us, makes us and shapes us into a communion, a community, a commonwealth, where none are left out, left behind, or left alone. In an age of self-interest, taking responsibility for the well-being of another, especially if they are not like us, is a radical act.

That is what I felt standing in that cave chapel. What was important was the union I felt with thousands, if not billions of Christians who have said those same words, no matter the language, the place, or the time.

No matter how different, they are my sisters and brothers, related not by blood, but by the waters of Baptism, and we all have the same Father.

In that prayer, they prayed for, cared for, and were concerned for me, just as I prayed for, cared for, and was concerned for them.

What I heard as Elspeth and I prayed together, was not just the familiar words, but also the echo of other voices, in other places, and other times, which joined our voices, making Elspeth's and my two rather feeble voices into *the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out: Our Father in heaven!*

It's easy to pray the Lord's Prayer. It trips lightly off our tongues.

In fact, we should pray it with fear and trembling, not as individuals cataloging our personal needs, but as part of a great chorus of believers, stretching across time and space, united as sisters and brothers of one Father, who are asking, not for our own needs, but for the needs of those we love and those we don't, those we know and those whom we may never know.

Praying the Lord's Prayer is perhaps the most radical thing a Christian can do. It reminds us who we are, and to whom we belong. It reminds us that we are not a collection of individuals, but the community of the redeemed who, in the words of SSJE's founder, Father Benson, "live like the saints not as separate individuals...but...as members of one living body."

We belong. And with this prayer, we remember that we live, not for ourselves, but for all those to whom we belong - God, our neighbor, and everyone who has ever said those words: *Our Father in heaven...*

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