

Jesus Christ left us only one prayer, which is therefore usually called the Lord's Prayer. When the disciples implored him, "Teach us to pray" (Luke 11.1), he gave them this prayer, which we generally call The Lord's Prayer - known to us from childhood. This prayer has been said without interruption for two thousand years. At every moment somewhere on the globe people are saying those very words which were once uttered by Christ himself. This is why we have no better path to the very heart of Christianity than by this short, and on first observation simple prayer.

Let me begin this explanation by saying directly that its meaning is inexhaustible, that it is impossible to give this prayer one final and conclusive explanation. As with the Gospels, the Lord's Prayer is always addressed to each one of us personally anew, in a way which makes it seem to have been composed specifically for me, and for my needs, for my questions, for my pilgrimage in life. Yet, at the same time it remains eternal, and unchanging in its essence, always calling us to what is most important, to the highest and the ultimate.

In order to really hear the Lord's Prayer and participate in it, it is first necessary to rid ourselves of that inner confusion, that fragmentation of our attention, that spiritual sloppiness in which we constantly live. Possibly, I think, our most horrible trait is that we regularly hide from everything that seems too exalted and spiritually meaningful. It's as if we unconsciously choose to be petty and trivial, - this is often a choice that is easier to live by.

Indeed, so much of our inner strength is often directed at stifling this inner voice, which calls us to an encounter with the ultimate - with God Himself.

And so, we must exercise at least some minimal effort to enter that framework, that state of spirit and soul in which this prayer of all prayers, begins to sound, to resonate with us, and is revealed in all its full meaning and becomes for each of us the one thing needed - food and drink for our souls.

So this morning, let us lift up our minds and begin to explore just the first two words. Let start with the salutation, which is at the same time both an appeal and an affirmation: "Our Father".

The first thing Christ offers to those who ask him to teach them to pray, is the very first thing he leaves them as a priceless gift and consolation, as joy in the spirit, is the possibility of calling God "Father", to regard him as their father.

How many ideas have evolved in our imagination about God! He has been referred to as the Absolute, the First Cause, Lord, Omnipotent, Creator, Benefactor, God, and so on, and so forth. Each of these ideas and designations relates to some element of truth, to a profound experience and a depth of understanding. Yet this one word "Father", together with the word "Our" contains all these concepts, yet at the same time revealing them as a relationship with God as intimacy, as love, as unique, unrepeatable and a joyful union.

"Our Father" - here we find the meaning of love, and the answer to love, here lies the experience of intimacy and the joy of this experience, here faith opens into trust, and dependence yields to freedom, to intimacy, - which ultimately unfolds as pure joy. This is no longer an idea about God, but already knowledge of God, this is already communion with him in love, in unity, and trust. This is already the beginning of us knowing eternity. For Christ himself said to the Father " For this is eternal life, that they would know you" (Jn 17:3)

This salutation is therefore not only the beginning but the very foundation of the prayer; it renders all other petitions possible and fills them with meaning. In its deepest and original sense Christianity is the *religion of a personal relationship with God*, which means that it is not founded on intellectual ideals, or philosophical deductions, but on the experience of love which floods our whole life, - the experience of *personal* love.