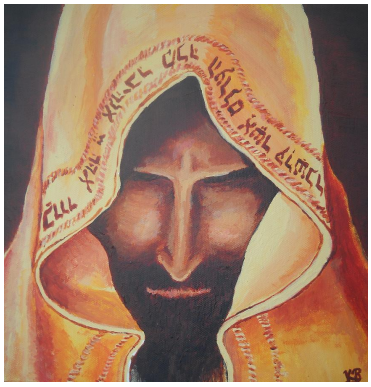
Studies on the Lord's Prayer

2. Hallowed be your name … on earth as in heaven



Perhaps the place to begin this week is with the observation that verses 9b and 10 of Matthew chapter 6 really form a single whole containing three petitions and a single over-arching sub-clause which applies equally to all three. The way that the prayer is typically punctuated in English tends to obscure this; but the hallowing of God's name and the coming of God's kingdom are just as surely invoked 'on earth as in heaven' as the doing of God's will.

So, we should really read: 'Hallowed be your name (on earth as in heaven), your kingdom come (on earth as in heaven), your will be done, on earth as in heaven.' Except that that would be time-consuming and liturgically clumsy. So the sub-clause comes just once, at the end; but it applies three times.

Where on earth is heaven?

Why does this matter? And where is 'heaven' anyway? (a question we didn't consider last week). In Biblical terms, 'heaven' is God's place (hence, 'Our Father in heaven…'). Heaven is where God is. It is the place where God's presence is, and the place of being in God's presence. More precisely, 'heaven' is the sphere where, in contradistinction from our fallen world, God is all-in-all, and where nothing exists, therefore, which conflicts with or contradicts the reality of God.

Of course, 'heaven' is not literally a place at all. It's not as though God were situated 'up there' somewhere, with us living out our lives 'down here'. Theologians have always recognised that the space and time which structure our experience are themselves part of God's creation, and that God himself is unable to be pinned down to any particular time or place. More to the point, God is equally present to our world in every time and every place. And, because he is not bound by the features of time and space that limit us (despite our best efforts, none of us can be in more than one place at once!) God can actually be even closer to us than we are to ourselves, while yet remaining distinct from us.

So, the language of heaven as a 'place' located somewhere far away and a very long way up (a sort of 'Star Wars', 'need to jump to light speed' view) can be very unhelpful and mis-leading if we fail to recognise it for what it is: namely, a poetic way of expressing God's *otherness* from the world/cosmos, and God's *exaltedness* over it as its Creator. If God does indeed have his own 'place', then it is not a place *within* or part of the creaturely

cosmos (not even its farthest reaches) but 'above' or 'beyond' it, though we may equally imagine it penetrating and being shot through the space/time of our world, present to it (and to us) just as God himself is. Imagined from this point of view, 'heaven' is as much like a further dimension of our world as it is like a 'place' within it. Strictly speaking it is neither, but for different purposes it may be helpful to imagine it in one way or the other.

Heaven is so closely associated with God in the Bible that the word 'heaven' can sometimes function as a virtual synonym for God. So, for instance, Matthew's gospel typically refers to the 'kingdom of heaven' (e.g. Mt. 3.2, 5.19, 7.21), rather than the 'kingdom of God' (c.f. Lk. 4.43), and we know exactly what he means. (So, too, e.g., Lk. 15.18; 20.4) When the Bible speaks instead, as it sometimes does, of heaven as a place distinguishable from God and created by God (e.g. Ps. 121.2, Isa. 37.16), and of creaturely beings cohabiting with God 'in heaven' (angelic beings such as cherubim and seraphim, or, occasionally, those who have died and gone to be 'with Christ' – see, e.g., variously Neh. 9.6; 2 Kgs. 2.11; Jer. 33.22; Mt. 24.36; 28.2; Lk. 2.15; John 14.1-3; Rev. 4; 5.11-12; 11.12), the context is always one in which what is stressed is the utter conformity of the relevant creaturely forms to the character of God himself—they worship, adore, glorify and obey God. Insofar as this is more than a picture of a future in which God has already redeemed creation, it is clearly a place very different to our world (where God is variously ignored, denied, rejected, disobeyed and displaced), and perhaps best envisaged as a sort of parallel reality existing in some sense alongside it.

So, to pray that something should be the case 'on earth as it is in heaven' is precisely to pray for the world as we know and experience it to be conformed to the contours of this other 'place', where creaturely existence corresponds properly to or is correlated perfectly with the reality of God himself, rather than being alienated from and opposed to God. Hence the popular association of the term ('Heaven, I'm in heaven…') with all that is good and fulfilling and unspoiled and joyful and glorious. Heaven is a state in which creature-liness finds its proper end alongside and in union with God through Christ, and one for which we hunger and thirst even if the craving is, as it is more often than not, misidentified and satisfaction of it sought in all the wrong places. It is what we were created for. And alternatives to it do not, finally, bear thinking about.

And what on earth is hallowing?

We saw last week that 'Father' was an image of God not likely to commend itself to Jews as part of their individual prayer life, and certainly not in the highly personal and

intimate tone in which Jesus encourages them to address him— as 'Abba, Father'. But the two petitions that follow recall words which any self-respecting Jew (including Jesus himself) would be familiar with from regular worship in the synagogue. The Aramaic prayer which ended each service (known as the *Qaddish*) went something like this:

'Exalted and hallowed be his great name
in the world which he created according to his will.
May he rule his kingdom
in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime
of the whole house of Israel, speedily and soon.'

'Hallowing' is pretty much a word that has ceased to function in everyday English. It's a hangover from the past, and preserved really only once a year, when small children dress up in bizarre costume and harry the neighbours in the hope of being blessed with sweets and a pat on the head. (Older children tend to push the boat out a bit further, offering to withhold menaces of one sort or another in exchange for cash, a manifestation of obnoxicity which renders sinister costume obsolete!) This is, of course, Halloween, the evening before All Saints Day, or All Hallows Eve. And that gives us the clue. 'Hallows', in this context, are saints; and hallowing has to do with holiness. So, we could translate Mt. 6.9b differently – 'Holy (or 'holied') be your name'.

The trouble is that that doesn't really get us much further in the first instance, since *holiness* itself (whether as a characteristic of God or of people and things and places) is something we moderns have rather lost touch with the resonances and connotations of. Popular use (as in Burns' "Holy Willie's Prayer") tends to reduce 'holiness' to moral goodness (or the self-righteous presumption of having already attained it); or more likely, defined negatively, the absence of transgression or sin. To be holy is to 'keep your nose clean' before God, and never trespass beyond the letter of the law.

Well, holiness certainly has something to do with goodness. But it can't simply be the same thing as moral goodness (let alone goodness defined in so thin, lifeless and joyless a way). That ought to be obvious from a quick consideration of the Bible's ascription of the term 'holy' to all sorts of inanimate and amoral things including places (Exod. 3.5), clothes (Exod. 31.10), pots and pans (Ezra 8.28), buildings (Mic. 1.2), religious rituals (Lev. 23.7) and so on. So if, as applied to creaturely things, 'holiness' *can* refer to moral rectitude of a rather antiseptic-sounding sort (Eph. 1.4), it does not *always* do so. Where morality is a consideration, then goodness rather than anything else seems to go with the territory of 'holiness'. But morality is not always a consideration, and holiness is about *more* than goodness alone.

In the Bible, 'holy' and 'holiness' are in any case words that apply first and foremost to God rather than to creaturely things, and to creaturely things by virtue of their association with God. If we wanted a convenient translation for 'holy' and 'holiness', then we could do worse than 'Godly' and 'Godliness'. Again, that's a term that connotes moral goodness; but it connotes much more than moral goodness alone.

In this opening petition of the Lord's Prayer as in the *Qaddish*, of course, it is God's *name* that is holy. At one level we might understand this as meaning something akin to 'the Rector's name is Trevor', and in the Old Testament and the Book of Isaiah in particular God is indeed referred to repeatedly as 'the Holy One of Israel' (see, e.g., Isa. 1.4; 5.19; 10.20; 12.6; etc.) In biblical cultures, much more so than in our own, the *name* of someone or something was understood to capture something of their quality or character, and it was natural enough to use an adjectival form ('holy' or 'the Holy One') in place of a proper name. The proper name of Israel's God in Hebrew is YHWH (usually left untranslated because its meaning is obscure, and generally rendered in English versions of the Old Testament as 'the LORD'), and the idea of holiness is very closely tied indeed to this unique name. In biblical terms to say 'YHWH is holy' is really unnecessary, because 'holiness' is by definition whatever God is. And other things (creaturely things) are holy because they exist or are drawn into the penumbra of God's life and activity, and because they reflect, or concur with, or correspond to the quality and character and behaviour of God himself.

This explains another common and still just about familiar use of the language of holiness to refer to things which are in some sense special (or 'sacred') because they have been set apart for use in religious ceremony, or set apart for some other religious purpose. Holy days, holy places, holy objects become 'holy' by being set apart by and for God. They are things which are, we might say, 'devoted' to God, and put wholly at God's disposal. Again, where human beings are concerned this is going to include our hearts, minds and wills as well as our bodies, which means that moral goodness comes quickly into play. But 'keeping our noses clean' as regards God's law hardly does justice to the idea of being 'wholly devoted' to God in all that we are, and have, and think, and say and are capable of. Such total devotion would mean the wholesale conformity of our lives to the character of God, and not simply the successful circumnavigation of some set of moral or legal prescriptions. Laws can be kept according to the letter only, without our endorsing them or acknowledging their inherent goodness. (My utterly inconsistent relationship with the speed limit regularly manifests just such a grumbling—but legally flawless—disposition.) Laws can be kept from fear of the consequences of breaking them (or rather, getting caught doing so) rather than love of the intrinsic value enshrined in them.

And it with the language of love that we begin to draw close, perhaps, to the heart of what holiness and hallowing (or 'holying') really means. If holiness is what characterizes who God is, and creaturely holiness is whatever corresponds to or reflects or echoes the character of God in the world, then 'hallowing' God's name means, in effect,

acknowledging God's character as the most important thing there is, the most worthwhile thing there is, the most glorious thing there is, the highest good there is. For creatures like ourselves that means not just 'obeying' God, but *loving* God, *desiring* God, more than we love or desire anything or anyone else. And then, loving other things as God himself loves them. 'Hallowing', we might say, begins with the heart, and only moves on to the mind and the will and the body once the heart is properly aligned with God. It is about *worship*: not the spiritless and empty repetition of religious rituals, but the love and devotion which alone brings those rituals alive and fills them with meaning. And it is about goodness in a much more full-blooded sense than moral or ethical goodness alone. It is about what it is good to *be* as human beings, and then and only then what it is good to *do*. As Augustine famously (and provocatively) said: 'love God … and then you can do what you like'. Because, of course, if our hearts are really aligned with the reality of God then what we like, what we desire, what we hope for, what we deem to be important and 'good' for ourselves and others, will follow on as a matter of course as something 'godly'.

Viewed in this way, the opposite of holiness where humans are concerned is not really sin (though that is indeed ungodly), but idolatry—our tendency to allow other things to assume priority of place in our hearts, to desire them more than we desire God himself, and to pursue them at the expense of our pursuit of him. And one can do all that (theoretically at least) while still keeping an awful lot of laws fully intact. Holiness is about the whole orientation of our being—thoughts, feelings, willings, imaginings, as well as actions. And it is about those being 'set apart' from an inappropriate preoccupation with the things of the world, and ordered properly in relation to God. Not so that we withdraw from the world, or prescind from any desires or enjoyment of what it has to offer. God, after all, created the world in all its rich and wonderful variety, and created as much for our enjoyment as anything else. The point is a different one, and summed up neatly by Jesus in another of his memorable teachings: 'Seek first the things of God's kingdom, and all these other things will be yours too', set now in their proper place. Or, to paraphrase Augustine again: we need to learn to love things *with* God, rather than instead of God.

In Ezekiel 36 we find God complaining against Israel that, by their behaviour (and not least their idolatrous behaviour) they have 'profaned' God's holy name. In other words, they have failed to give God the place due to him in their own life as a nation, and by their behaviour have failed to bear faithful witness to the nations to who God is. Interestingly, the imagery used here and elsewhere when holiness is talked about is not so much that of the law (transgression, guilt, judgment and punishment) but that of hygiene—staining, soiling, defiling, spoiling, and (as a remedy) cleansing and purifying. There are things that have no place in God's presence, or in things, places, and people belonging to God. And the presence of those things 'spoils' or 'stains' what is in itself pure and healthy. And so, God declares, 'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you' (Ezek. 36.25-6). It's not just a different code of behaviour that Israel needs. It's a new heart and a new spirit. A new way of being, rather than just a different set of deeds. Once the new heart is in place, once Israel begins to love God, to desire God, the value God more than anything else in her life, the deeds will follow on. And then, at last, she will 'fit' together with God in her

life and her witness, and the ancient call to her will be fulfilled: 'You shall be holy as I am holy. And you shall be my people and I will be your God'. That's a wholesale business—body, mind, spirit, will, heart, actions, the whole of us properly correlated with the character of our Creator.

It's a vision of things which is hardly realized in the present, of course, where so much in the world and in human lives (including our own) stands in blatant contradiction to the character and purposes of God as we come to understand those through our reading of Scripture. So there is a sense in which the hallowing of God's name is still very much a future reality, something we long for and pray for rather than see happening all around us. And yet, the Bible insists, there are things, places, people and activities who are 'set apart' by way of a sort of divine downpayment, an anticipation of the time when 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea'. And it's in that sense, for instance, that the apostle Paul can happily refer to Christians as 'saints', 'holy ones'. It's not so much that we have arrived at the conclusion as that we have been set apart and set upon the way which will end finally in our complete holiness—ours, and that of the world around us. And that's something only God can accomplish and has promised to accomplish. So the petition in the Lord's Prayer is actually rather stronger than the form in which it appears, which might sound more like an aspiration than a plea for God to step in and act! The original greek sentence reads almost as though it had been drafted by Yoda: literally, 'Be hallowed … the name of you'! And it's actually an imperative with a sense of urgency built into it: 'Come on Lord, hallow your name on earth, as it is already hallowed in heaven'.

Jews have an annual holiday which occurs between one set of prescribed readings from torah and those prescribed for the following twelve months. It's called *Simhat Torah*, or 'rejoicing with the torah', and involves a huge celebration, including the practice of dancing with the torah scrolls! And it reflects the idea that holiness, the hallowing of God's name in our lives, our institutions, our relationships, our leisure time, our whole being, is the best and highest enjoyment of life that there is, because in it we find ourselves properly aligned with our Creator and the world he made for our indwelling and enjoyment!

So, praying that God's name may at last be hallowed on earth is praying that our individual lives, our congregations, our communities, but much more widely *the whole of creation* may come ever more fully, and in the end completely to 'fit' together with God, to correspond to God's own character, and so to enjoy the boundless goodness for which God originally intended and created it. It's precisely a joyful vision! And it's a million miles away from the dour, joyless hypocrisy of Holy Willie.

Questions for reflection and/or discussion:

What characteristics of God do you most naturally associate the idea of 'holiness' with?

What are the gains and losses of biblical and liturgical talk about God being 'in heaven'?

What are the things which, in contemporary life, might most easily and subtly displace God in the ordering of our hearts?

In Scripture, idolatry is not typically a secular but a religious pastime. What areas of our Christian living or our life as a congregation might become a nest of 'idolatry'?

How (other than by praying for it) might we encourage 'holiness' in one another?