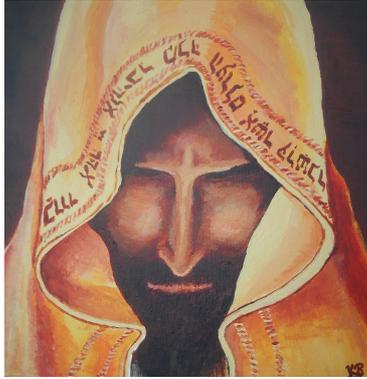


Studies on the Lord's Prayer

1. Our Father in heaven...



Jesus is constantly appealing to our imagination as he teaches his disciples and the crowds, and challenges their religious understanding and their behaviour. 'To what shall we liken the kingdom of God?' he asks them, playfully. 'What parable shall we use to describe it?' In other words, 'What is it *like*?' That's a question we constantly ask as we seek to get some grasp on something new and unfamiliar, or something deep and mysterious. We want helpful comparisons to be drawn with other things, more familiar to us, to help us begin to get our head around it. And teachers of all sorts find themselves constantly resorting to the same strategy 'It's a bit like this...', they say; or, 'think of it like this...'. Those sorts of imaginative appeal are fundamental to the way in which we learn about and come to understand anything. And they are at the heart of Jesus' life and teaching, and the wider patterns of Scripture within which we learn about him.

The kingdom of God, Jesus suggests, is like lots of things. It's like treasure hidden in a field. It's like a merchant seeking out the best pearls to buy. It's like a net cast into the sea. It's like a field planted with wheat and tares. And so on. Of course, it's not any of those things, and it's different from all of them in all sorts of ways. But there's something in each, a shred of similarity that, when we grasp it, illuminates our appreciation of the kingdom. And Jesus does the same thing where God is concerned. To what should we liken God? How should we picture God in our mind's eye in helpful and healthy ways? How should we address God in worship and in prayer. When you pray, Jesus tells his disciples, you should begin like this: 'Our *Father* in heaven...'

The image of God as father has become so familiar within western religious culture over the past two thousand years or so that we easily forget how distinctive it actually is. Again, of course, God is not *literally* a father, any more than (as Scripture suggests elsewhere) God is a shepherd, or a judge, or a rock. And yet each of these biblical word-pictures points us suggestively to something true about God's character; something about God which, despite the huge differences between God and ourselves as his creatures, draws close to things with which we are familiar in our human experiences of fatherhood, shepherding and so on. These are central to the way in which God gives himself to be grasped by us, taking our imagination captive and helping us to think and to speak meaningfully about and to God. And, for Christians, the image of God as 'our Father' plays a particular and a prominent role in all this.

Judaism certainly knows the image of God as a father and uses it. So, for example, it crops up in the traditions about God's choosing and calling of Israel, and especially God's rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Moses is told by God to say to Pharaoh: 'Thus says the Lord, "Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I said to you 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'"' (Exodus 4.22-3). Here, notice, it is *the nation of Israel as a whole* that is God's son or child (as we might properly say), and so by implication able to think and speak of God as her Father. And what grants her that peculiar privilege is God's choosing of her to be his people, and his entering into covenant with her. Fatherhood in God is linked to Israel's election and adoption, her calling and vocation as 'my people', and to God's

promise of salvation (release from captivity in Egypt). Later on, we find individuals spoken of in similar vein. So, in 2 Samuel 7.12-14 God says to David: 'When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish ... the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me.' Historically, the person concerned was Solomon, but the verse was soon interpreted as having a longer reach than this, and read as a prophetic promise concerning the Messiah—the one who would come and establish God's kingdom of justice and peace and human flourishing. The Messiah would embody in himself the purposes and promises invested by God in Israel of old, and so fulfil her calling to be the proper covenant partner of God ('You shall be my people, and I will be your God'), a calling she had never managed to fulfil. And so the Messiah would be the true 'son' of God, as Israel had been called to be and become. So, thinking and speaking of God as father is not unknown in the Old Testament; but it generally comes highly charged, and is linked to some of the most highly charged religious moments and ideas in Israel's history. It wasn't bandied around lightly.

In fact, a simple glance at some statistics reveals quite a disparity between the two testaments of our Bible in this regard. In the Old Testament (which was, more or less, the Bible of Judaism in Jesus' day and is still in our own) God is referred to as 'Father' just 15 times (to which we should add the 9 occasions where the term 'Father' is not used, but where Israel or someone else is spoken of as the 'son' or child of God, which presupposes the same image). In the New Testament, on the other hand, the image of God as Father crops up hundreds of times, especially in the gospels where it appears on the lips of Jesus alone more than 160 times. It was Jesus' favourite way of referring to and addressing God (interestingly, Jesus never addresses God as 'Lord', the most common term for Jews), and he taught his disciples to think and speak of God as *their* father too.

When Jesus taught his disciples to think and speak of God in this way, of course, part of what he was doing was deliberately drawing on and evoking some of the stuff about God as Israel's father in the Old Testament. In other words, he was expecting that when they heard him addressing and referring to God as 'my Father', they would immediately think of Israel's ancient calling and mission, and God's promises to bring in his kingdom and to save his people from oppression—both political oppression and that other sort of 'enslavement' that blights human life and prevents God's kingdom (his reign in our lives) from triumphing, namely, our enslavement to sin. Jews in Jesus' day might well occasionally refer to God as 'our Father', meaning the father of the nation. But for someone to speak openly of God as 'my Father' was, in effect, deliberately to set some theological bells ringing, and to associate themselves directly with the agency of God's coming kingdom. It was to evoke the hope of a new Exodus, and to raise expectations of its being close at hand.



But that doesn't really explain the frequency and single-mindedness with which Jesus spoke of God as his Father. It wasn't just, as it were, a bit of religious shorthand, laying claim to a particular role in the pattern of God's ancient purposes. To do that, all Jesus would have needed to do would have been to use the term publicly on a number of well-minuted occasions. Instead, what we find is that the image of God as Father is everywhere upon his lips, in his private conversations as well as his public pronouncements; and, crucially, in his own prayer life. It is clear that for him the full

meaning of God's fatherhood went well beyond formal associations, and lay at the very heart of his personal understanding of who God was and who he himself was, and structured his own relationship and approach to God. There was an intimacy and a warmth about his account of God as 'my Father', and this is captured especially in the fact that the word he is thought typically to have used (because the NT occasionally preserves it) was the Aramaic 'Abba', a word used by children (of all ages) within families, and probably roughly equivalent to our own use of the term 'Dad'. There is no known instance prior to Jesus of any Jew thinking of or addressing God in this familiar or colloquial way (the more formal Hebrew term 'Ab' would have been used, if any). Jesus is flagging up the fact that God is his Father in a special and a new sense which earlier uses of the term hadn't even begun to fathom; and part of this newness is an awareness of the love and intimacy which characterizes Jesus' relationship to God.

In fact, the course of Jesus' teaching and his own prayer life as we see them in the gospels show us that this special relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father is something quite unique, and something to do with who Jesus is not just humanly and historically, but eternally. In other words, the language of Father and Son is the language God chooses to express for us a distinction and relationship in his own life, revealed for us when the 'Father' sends his 'Son' into the world for our sake, to be 'God with us' and,



in his death and resurrection, God for us. This means that there is something in who God is eternally that is best pictured, best likened to the relationship between a human father (or parent) and son (or child). And so, when God becomes a human being, the one who is eternally 'son-like' expresses his own relationship to God in terms of the language of Father. This means, in the language of the New Testament, that there is no other 'Son of God' in quite this sense, because this sort of sonship rests on Jesus' divine identity. He is 'the only-begotten Son' of God.

And yet, Jesus is quite clear that the disciples should, as a function of their following him and of their new commitment to the cause of the coming of God's kingdom, begin to think and to speak about and to God as their own 'Father' (their Abba) too. Paul reflects the centrality of this radical element in Jesus' message and mission in Galatians 4.4-7: "When the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law ... that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God'.

What does this mean? Well, it means first that to be a disciple of Jesus is to make our own and to 'own' an active role in the carrying forward of the ancient calling and promises of Israel. It is to identify ourselves with the coming of the kingdom, and with the cause of the coming King (who is, of course, in NT terms, none other than Jesus himself). It is to align ourselves with the dynamics of the new Exodus, the promised liberation from sin into a life of freedom and living to serve and worship God in a new way in the midst of history. More than this, though, to speak of God and to speak to God as 'my Father' (as Jesus teaches his disciples to) is to recognise that, as a consequence of his incarnation, his ministry, his death on the cross and his resurrection, all undertaken 'for us', we are granted access to a wholly new sort of relationship with God, something much more intimate, much more personal and much more transformative than anything any human being could ever expect or accomplish. In Paul's language, we are 'adopted' into a relationship which by right belongs only to Jesus himself, the one who 'earths' a relationship existing within the very life of God himself. That eternal relationship,

between Father and Son, enjoyed in the power of the Holy Spirit, is now opened up for God's creatures to share and to enjoy. We are, in other words, permitted by God's grace and goodness to share in the joy and the love that is the very core of God's own character and being. That, finally, is the mind-boggling thought contained in the seemingly simple reference to God as 'my' or 'our' Father in the way Jesus taught.

No wonder the more traditional form of Anglican liturgy prefaces our recitation of the prayer with the words 'as our Saviour has taught us, we are *bold* to say!' For, to say these opening words is indeed to make an incredible claim, and we ought to tremble whenever we utter them. But utter them we may and must if we are followers of the One who insisted that we should.

Notice that the popular idea that we are all 'sons and daughters' (all 'Jock Tamson's bairns') by virtue of our having been *created* by God is therefore actually thoroughly unbiblical. According to Scripture we are granted the privileged status of sons and daughters *only* by God's own coming to share with us in our fallen, broken and sinful creaturehood, so that we might in turn (and in exchange) share in the loving relationship between Father and Son which is part of God's own eternal life, full of joy and glory. And to know God as our Father has some radical implications for our lives, keying us into his kingdom purposes and promises as active agents rather than passive observers or recipients. It is something, furthermore, that we have to own for ourselves and grasp and make our own by the response to the work of the Holy Spirit which the NT calls 'faith'. Again, therefore, 'our Father' is something 'we are *bold* to say', because in a vital sense it is a status we are still very much growing into but still fall far short of.

References to God as 'Father' in the Old Testament:

Deut. 32.6; Isa. 63. (twice) 16; 64.8; Jer. 3.4; 3.19; Mal. 1.6; 2.10; 2 Sam. 7.14; 1 Chron. 7.13; 22.10; 28.6; Psa. 68.5; 89.26.

Other relevant Old Testament references:

Exod. 4.22-3; Deut. 1.31; 8.5; 14.1; Psa. 103.13; Jer 3.22; 31.20; Hos. 11.1-4; Mal. 3.17.

Places in the New Testament where Jesus' use of the Aramaic 'Abba' is preserved by transliteration in the Greek:

Mark 14.36; Rom. 8.15-16; Gal. 4.6.

The same use probably lies behind many if not most of the instances of the Greek 'Pater' used in the wider records of Jesus' teaching.

Questions for further reflection:

What does Jesus' use of Abba ('Dad') convey about God that other common titles for God in the Bible (Lord, King, the Almighty, Ancient of Days, Holy One, etc) do not?

What might the problems of the predominant use of 'Father' to refer to God today be?

How might these be most helpfully addressed?

If you were wanting to find an alternative term to capture some of the resonances of 'Father' as Jesus used it, what might you come up with?

Is there any sense, biblically speaking, in which *all* humans are God's sons and daughters?