

Last week it was announced that the 9th edition of the definitive French Dictionary, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, had finally been published. Work on this edition began in 1986, so the 40 men and women who have undertaken the revision have been working on it for nearly 40 years. The publication was said to be a 'mirror' of the recent epoch, and contains 21,000 entries which were not present in the previous edition, published in 1935. But as one early comment expressed it 'the effort is praiseworthy, but so excessively tardy that it is perfectly useless'. So rapid is the pace of linguistic change that many of the 21,000 new entries are already out of date, and many other words which have come into use in the last few years have failed to be included.

Language never stands still. Undoubtedly it has changed far more rapidly in recent years than in previous generations, but it has always changed as culture and beliefs have changed; words have been heard and understood in different ways according to the context in which they have been spoken. Previous speakers in this series have pointed to the different ways in which words in the Lord's Prayer have been comprehended. The way in which the first disciples would have heard it was very different from its meaning today – added to which, of course, we have the problems of translation – first, from Aramaic to Greek, then from Greek to English. The chaplain pointed out that to us the word 'Kingdom' normally means a territory, ruled over by a monarch, whereas both the underlying Aramaic word and the equivalent Greek word in our New Testament means something more akin to 'kingship', or 'rule'. And last week we heard how a strange Greek word, *epiousios*, which certainly wouldn't have appeared in any first-century Greek dictionary, was used with the noun 'bread'. But did it mean 'daily' bread, or 'bread for today' or 'bread for tomorrow' – or did it perhaps even mean the bread that would be eaten at the messianic banquet? What would the first readers of the Gospels have made of Jesus' prayer?

But if words have changed since the first century, one of the most significant shifts took place within the New Testament itself – between the time when Jesus first gave this prayer to the disciples and the time when Luke and Matthew wrote it down. Because in-between those two events lay the death and resurrection of Jesus himself, and even though the prayer is not addressed *to* him or written *about* him, early Christian belief in who he is and what God had done through him inevitably colour the way in which the prayer is used.

To complicate things further, we have *two* versions of the Prayer – one in Luke, and one in Matthew. Compare them, and you will see that Luke’s version is shorter than Matthew’s; it looks as if Matthew may have expanded it somewhat – and in particular, added the final doxology. The doxology is appropriate, but it suggests a time when the prayer was being used in liturgy. Luke’s *setting* also suggests something earlier; the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, and he replies by giving them this prayer; in Matthew, the prayer is part of a block of teaching, suggesting that the evangelist has arranged it.

Matthew introduces the prayer with a command to avoid ‘babbling’ like the heathen. What he has in mind may well be the fact that pagans worshipped a plethora of gods, so hedged their bets by addressing them all: the result was a babble of prayers. By contrast, Jesus’ followers are told to address their prayers to the one true God, who is identified as their ‘father’.

The prayer begins with a meditation about God and his relationship with his people. Already in that opening phrase, we affirm that he is *our* God, and that we are his people. This is the essential starting-point. The Lord’s Prayer stresses our relationship with God and with one another. In Jewish thought, Israel is affirmed to be God’s child, but now it is *all* Jesus’ followers who claim that relationship, Gentiles as well as Jews. Already we see how different these words would have sounded after Jesus’ death and resurrection, since Christians affirmed that in his resurrection he was revealed to be *the* Son of God, and that Gentiles who believed in him were members of his people. NT theologians such as Paul and John speak of our becoming children of God through our relationship with Christ, the Son of God – we share in what he is and become like him. But whereas Jesus spoke of God as ‘my Father’, we address him as ‘our Father’. And ‘Father’ becomes the ‘name’ that is used of God in the New Testament more than any other, a name that reminds us of the mutual love between a father and his children, as well as of our relationship with one another, and of the expectation that God will care for us and that we should give him our obedience.

Some prayers used by Christians tend to sound a bit like a shopping list: I need this and that – please supply them; give me this; make me that; do something for me. The Lord’s Prayer, by contrast, begins from affirmations about God: he is ‘our Father’. Our first request is that his name be hallowed – in other words honoured. His name is not spelt out, but in the ancient world one’s name summed up who you were. ‘His/her name suits/doesn’t suit him or her,’ we say. The name of God expresses who God is; so may God himself be honoured. The Fourth Evangelist affirms that Jesus brought glory to God through his death. Now Christians pray that they too may bring him glory by the way they live, and that his kingdom – his rule – may come on earth, just as it is recognized already in heaven. How does God establish his kingship? Not through violence or warfare, as was commonly believed. Rather he is king when men and women acknowledge him as such: in other words, when his will is obeyed. For early Christians praying this prayer, the memory of Jesus praying ‘Your will be done’ in Gethsemane on the eve of his death would have shaped their understanding of what obeying God’s will could mean.

Having begun with this acknowledgement of God, we finally turn to requests for ourselves. ‘Give us bread,’ we ask; what sort of bread is this? Ordinary physical bread which we need to live? Notice that the pronouns used are plural – ‘us’ and ‘our’. This is no selfish demand, but a request to God – our Father – that he will give his people the sustenance they need. Inevitably, the image reminds us of the story of Israel in the wilderness, where they were nourished daily by a supply of manna – a supply which was just enough for their daily needs, and which could not be stored; when they tried to do so, it went mouldy. Is this a prayer for economic security? Are we to pray simply that God will provide sufficient nourishment for all in a community where all are equal, and there is no greed or dispute? If so, it reminds us how dependent we are in what God provides.

Again, Christians using this prayer after Christ’s death and resurrection might well have understood it somewhat differently, for now the manna was given a new interpretation, and Jesus himself was identified as the ‘living bread’. Is the prayer, then, not for anything physical, but for a deeper relationship with him? Or is the bread now ‘tomorrow’s’ bread – in other words, the messianic banquet expected when God is finally recognized as King by all?

Next comes a prayer for forgiveness. Is it forgiveness of sins – which is probably how you and I now understand it – or for the cancellation of debt, which may well be a better way to translate the Greek? The idea of debt would certainly have resonated with Jesus' disciples, for they lived in a society where people constantly struggled to make ends meet. But when we think of what we owe to God and have failed to give him, we naturally think of our shortcomings, so the request is understood as an idiom for the forgiveness of sins – something which the early Christians had come to experience. But there is an important *proviso*; we ask to be forgiven as we forgive. Our relationship with God is personal but not exclusive; it involves others. The prayer spells out what Jesus means when he sums up the law as the demand to love God and love one's neighbours. The two belong together.

What we ask for ourselves concludes with requests not to be led into temptation – or better, 'testing' – but to be saved from evil. Christians using this prayer will remember how Jesus himself was *not* spared testing, but was saved from evil. What sort of 'testing' is it? Modern translations of the prayer understand it as the time of trial at the end of time.

In some texts of Matthew the prayer ends with a doxology, as is customary in Jewish prayers, acknowledging that kingship, power and glory already belong to God. So the prayer concludes as it began, acknowledging God. The prayer is in effect a kind of 'sandwich', beginning and ending with declarations about who God is, and with prayers for ourselves in-between. But those central prayers are not about ourselves as individuals, but about our relationship with others. This is what it means to love God and our neighbours.

How do we understand the prayer today? It is an irony that it has become so central in our worship that we tend to recite it without giving any thought to its meaning; is this not the 'babbling' forbidden in Matthew? Perhaps we find the different ways in which it has been understood confusing; it is better, surely, to see them as a reminder that the prayer takes on meaning according to our need, and that its central affirmations of our relationship to God and to our neighbours are always relevant.