



Pastoral Letter of the Bishop of Nottingham appointed to be read at all Masses on the Second Sunday of Lent, Saturday 23 / Sunday 24 February 2013

My dear friends in Christ,

Have you ever thought about why in the introduction to the Our Father the priest says, 'we dare to say'. Why does it require us to 'dare' – to 'make bold' to utter the words which Jesus gave his disciples when they asked him to teach them to pray? After all, it seems to us that the Our Father is a prayer for everyone.

This was not always the case. In the early Church, the Lord's Prayer was limited to the baptised members of the Church – it was called the 'prayer of believers'. This is because, from the time of Jesus himself, it has been the prayer that marked out his followers (cf. *Lk* 11:1). Throughout the history of the Church, the praying of the Our Father has been an important part of the baptismal liturgy and the Communion Rite in the Mass – two important moments in the life of the Christian.

Today at Mass, each of you will be given a copy of the Lord's Prayer to cherish as we journey on in this Year of Faith. Many of us say the Lord's Prayer every day as part of our daily prayers, and I would encourage you to do this, because praying the Lord's Prayer on a daily basis will deepen and enrich your faith. It takes courage to say the Lord's Prayer. That is not always obvious to us, as it is probably the first prayer that we learnt when we were young – that is why we sometimes take it for granted.

But just think of how astounding it is for Jesus to invite us all to open the prayer by addressing God as 'Father'. His Father is our Father: we are all called to be sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus.

No longer is God a remote figure to be feared and worshipped from afar; he is now in the closest of relationships with us, because we are his children. Jesus has empowered us to speak to our heavenly Father in an intimate way, calling him *Abba*. It is this new relationship that first opens the door to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said, 'I tell you solemnly, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (*Mt* 18:3).

Saying the Our Father puts us in the presence of God from the very first words we utter. We can get an inkling of what this means by the apprehension we feel before we meet an important person. Even in today's world of relaxed relationships, we would still feel butterflies in our stomachs if we were to be presented to the Queen. How much more should we feel nervous about praying before our God!

Yet God wants our relationship with him to be one of blessing and forgiveness. That is why we approach him in the Lord's Prayer in the firm expectation of him granting our request that he will provide for us, not just for our daily bread here on earth, but also in eternity when his kingdom comes in its fullness.

For the Christian, eating a meal is always an act of communion with our family or friends. Every meal is a meal in God's presence, so the daily bread that we pray for also speaks to us of the Bread of Life. God is the host who fills the hungry and the thirsty with the fullness of his blessings.

When we gather around the Altar at Holy Mass, this promise becomes a reality, as we are invited to share in the Body and Blood of Christ.

Then, we ask him to forgive our sins, just as we will forgive others who offend us. Our Father is so near to us that he is ready to forgive our sins and receive us anew into his loving embrace. The words of Jesus that often touch my heart are those from the parable of the Prodigal Son: 'While he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion. He ran to the boy, and embraced him and kissed him' (Lk 15:20). But forgiveness cannot be a theory or something that we just receive passively: we must be ready to forgive others – and by God's grace we can.

The practicalities of daily life have a heavenly dimension – we must ask God always to bless us, and we should never forget to seek his guidance in the life we lead and the choices we make. In saying the Our Father, and requesting our daily bread and the forgiveness of sins, we are making a clear act of faith that God will provide for us.

We are also declaring our willingness to enter into a new relationship with him. But this means that we have to change – and that can be a frightening thing to do. Leaving the security of our old ways and becoming a person who is alive with the faith that we profess takes courage, and that is why we **dare** to say the Lord's Prayer.

When we receive our prayer cards with the Our Father written on it, we will be uniting ourselves in action and prayer with those who are on their journey through Lent to Baptism at Easter. In the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the handing over of the Our Father is an important stage on their journey of faith. Every one of those who are journeying to Baptism is taking a life-changing course of action. They do this in faith, and that takes great courage. Pray for them!

But we can do more than this – we can travel with them. So I encourage you to receive the Our Father with faith as it is handed to you today, and to treasure it because it is a gift from Jesus himself. Say it carefully every single day, praying each line slowly with thought and reflection.

This Lent, I hope that we will all make a firm resolution to change our lives and follow Jesus more closely. May our Lenten journey be filled with grace as we glimpse the joy of the Resurrection in the transfigured Christ!

With my prayers and every good wish for you and your families,



Right Reverend Malcolm McMahon OP
Bishop of Nottingham



**Bishop's House
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