

## THE 'OUR FATHER' CONSIDERED

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### PART II: COMMENTARY<sup>1</sup>

(viii) OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN: At the very outset our Lord, whose teaching on concord and unity is habitually emphatic, shows that he does not mean us to pray as isolated individuals, everyone busy about his own affairs alone. We are not to say 'My Father, in heaven' or 'Give me daily bread'. We are not to pray forgiveness only for our own sins, nor seek merely personal deliverance from temptation or immunity from harm. Our prayer is to be comprehensive, for all. We are to pray for the whole body of the faithful and not for one alone; or, better still, to see each individual as really and inseparably one with the whole body which we are. Each is to pray for all as constituting one single whole. That is what God wants: he is the God of peace: as Teacher his theme was peace and unity; as Redeemer he gathered the whole of humanity as one man to his embrace.

The *Three Children*, as they are called, held fast to this law of prayer. As they prayed in the furnace of fire they were one in mind and heart as well as in the words they uttered. Holy Scripture is quite clear on this; and, whilst showing us how they prayed, it gives a good example of the sort of prayer ours should be were we men after their pattern. *Then these three as with one mouth praised and glorified and blest God in the furnace* (Dan. 3, 51). Untaught by Christ, still, as with one voice, they prayed; and the power of their prayer was such as to win for them the divine good pleasure. It is always so: the prayer that is earnest, straight from the heart, peace-loving, never fails before God.

Another instance of such prayer is provided by the apostles and disciples after our Lord's Ascension: *All these were persevering with one mind in prayer with the women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his brethren* (Acts: I, 14). These words, *all of one mind and persevering* point at once to zeal and concord in prayer, to that

1. For the Introduction cf. *Life of the Spirit*, January, 1952, pp. 294-7.

harmonious unanimity on earth which assures entry into God's house, into heaven: *Who maketh men of one mind to dwell in the house* (Ps. 67, 7).

(ix) What depths of meaning this prayer of our Lord unfolds; and how many the great truths embodied in it. As a prayer it is brief enough, but in spiritual import vastly different. It is a compendium of heavenly teaching, and nothing our prayers should reach out to but finds a place in it. *Our Father, who art in heaven:* thus do we pray. We should remember how man has been re-born by God's grace, renewed and restored to God. At long last his title again is *son*, so naturally the first word of his prayer is *Father*. *He came unto his own, we read, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, he gave them power to become the sons of God, to them that believe in his name* (John I, 11-12). Faith and divine sonship: but these indeed are gifts for which we should at once be grateful and by calling upon God in heaven and naming him Father we acknowledge them straightway. In Baptism, as is well known, almost the first words a man utters make clear that his father according to the flesh, his father on earth must yield place now to the one Father of all who is in heaven. *Who hath said to his father and mother: I do not know you . . . These have kept thy word and observed thy covenant* (Deut. 33, 9). And our Lord said: *Call none your father upon earth, for one is your father who is in heaven* (Matth. 23, 9); and to the would-be-follower who asked to be allowed to wait till his father's death, he replied: *Let the dead bury their dead* (Matth. 8, 22), speaking of the man's father as dead, because he is himself the one true Father of all who believe.

(x) *Our Father*—the emphasis on *our* should be especially noted. We do not simply say 'the Father who is in heaven', but assert our own association with him by using the word *our*. He is truly the Father of those who believe, of those who are sanctified through him, re-born to the life of grace and the spirit, and who have thus started on their way as children of God. The Jews can hardly ignore the mordant emphasis of these words. To them was Christ first announced by the prophets; later, in his own person, it was to them he came. Not only did they refuse to believe in him, but they treated him with contempt and delivered him to a cruel death. Impossible for them to claim God for their Father. In unmistakable language our Lord rebuts the claim: *You are of your father the devil; he tells them; and the desires of your father you will do.*

*He was a murderer from the beginning, and he stood not in the truth, because truth is not in him. When he speaketh a lie he speaketh of his own; for he is a liar and the father thereof (John 8, 44).* Isaias, long before, had thus voiced the divine indignation: *Hear, O ye heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken. I have brought up children and exalted them: but they have despised me. The ox knoweth its owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel hath not known me, and my people hath not understood. Woe to the sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a wicked seed, ungracious children. They have forsaken the Lord, they have blasphemed the Holy One of Israel, they are gone away backwards (Isaias I, 2-4).* That ancient reprobation is sounding in our Christian ears as we utter the *Our Father*. He ceased to be theirs, on their abandonment of him, and became ours instead. No sonship can be claimed by those in sin; but with forgiveness comes the title *son* and the promise of life eternal. *Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. Now the servant abideth not in the house for ever; but the son abideth for ever (John 8, 34-5).*

(xi) Our Lord shows great mercy towards us and lets us see something of his love and condescension in thus inviting us to make this open declaration of God as our Father. He is himself in very truth the Son of God, but we too are to be allowed the title, *God's children*. We should see to it, then, as something to be ever borne in mind, that in calling God our Father, our lives should be in accord with our words. To have God as our Father is joy to us: to have us as sons should be joy to him. Let us walk as befits God's harbourers, that it may appear God dwells within us. Practice must not lag too far behind ideals. As men who have begun their way towards the realities of the spiritual world, let all thoughts and deeds of ours be permeated with spiritual purpose. *Whosoever shall glorify me him will I glorify: but they that despise me will be despised (I Kings 2, 30).* *You are not your own, St Paul reminds us, you are bought with a great price. Glorify and bear God in your body (I Cor. 6, 19, 20).*

(xii) After this we say: HALLOWED BE THY NAME. We must not think of this as meaning that God could be sanctified by our prayers, but we pray that his name may be by him raised high in our hearts. How could God be sanctified who is sanctity itself? *Be you therefore holy, he has said to us, even as I am holy.* What we pray for so earnestly then is this, that sanctified as we have been by Baptism we may never give up what we have begun. Our

need of sanctification is a daily one, because in some way or another we are liable every day to slip back. The best way to counteract this is to direct one's whole self towards God with great earnestness. St Paul shows us the sort of thing God in his mercy has ready for us: *Do not err, he writes, neither fornicators nor idolaters, nor adulterers nor the effeminate, nor liars with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor railers, nor extortioners shall possess the Kingdom of God. And such some of you were: but you are washed, but you are sanctified, but you are justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of our God* (1 Cor. 6, 9-11). He speaks of us as sanctified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. Our prayer is that there may be no setback to this work of sanctification. Our Lord—who is Judge also—when speaking to the man whom he had healed and renewed in soul, warned him about not sinning again lest some worse thing happen to him (John 5, 15). Such, then, is the purpose underlying this oft-repeated prayer, that the life of sanctifying grace—God's gift to us—may in his mercy never be lost.

(xiii) *THY KINGDOM COME*, is the next petition. Just as we have prayed that God's name may be hallowed in us, so now we pray that his kingdom may be truly established within us. But was there ever a time when God did not reign? Can that begin which always has been, and can never cease to be? No—what we are really praying for is *our* kingdom, the kingdom won by the blood and passion of Christ, and promised by God to us. Slaves before, now we hope to share in the triumphs of Christ and to reign. *Come*—his promise runs—*Come ye blessed of my Father and possess the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world* (Matth. 25, 34).

Or again we may think of Christ as himself God's Kingdom. The coming of Christ is something we daily long for, something we desire to be realised in us. He is our resurrection, for in him we rise: he is our kingdom, for in him we reign. And this kingdom of God, this spiritual kingdom is something we do well to seek, for there is another, a kingdom of this world. Above the royal honours of the world, he who has renounced the world stands aloof. Dedicated to God and to Christ, he longs for the kingdom not of earth but of heaven. The promise came to the Jews first, but they forfeited it. We must pray unceasingly lest we too be severed from it. Our Lord's words are so plain, so urgent: *Many*

will come from the east and the west and shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven: but the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into the exterior darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matth. 8, 11, 12). We see from these words how the Jews were children of the kingdom as long as they persevered as children of God: once that divine paternity was jettisoned, the kingdom was lost to them. As for ourselves, we begin our prayer by acknowledging the fatherhood of God, and then go on to pray that the kingdom of God may come to us.

(xiv) The next petition is: *THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN*. We are not praying here that God may be able to do his will, but that we may. But how can anyone withstand God? The trouble is in ourselves, for the devil withstands us and keeps us from giving ourselves wholly to God in all our thoughts and actions. That is why we pray so earnestly that the will of God may be fulfilled in us; and for this we need God and the strength of his protection. There is no security to be looked for in our own feebleness but only in the loving mercy of God. Our Lord himself as man bore witness to man's weakness: *Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me*; and added, to show his disciples how God's will must always come first: *but yet not as I will but as thou wilt* (Matth. 26, 39). *I came down from heaven*, he said on another occasion, *not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me* (John 6, 32). If such was the conformity of the Son to his Father's will, how much more should it be that of the servant to his Lord's. St John is very urgent in his instructions to us on this: *Love not the world*, he tells us, *nor the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the charity of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world is the concupiscence of the flesh, and the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life, which is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the concupiscence thereof. But he that doth the will of God abideth for ever* (1 John 2, 15-7). Would we share in God's eternal life? In the doing of his eternal will, then, lies our purpose.

(xv) Jesus Christ not only did God's will, but also taught it. Humility in our way of life, steadfastness in the faith, justice and mercy in our dealings with others, self-control, forgetfulness of injuries, tolerance and brotherly concord; to love God with the whole heart; clinging to him as our Father, fearing him as our God; setting nothing before Christ who set nothing before us;

holding fast to his love, sharing bravely his cross, unafraid; when his name and honour are at stake, showing constancy in our profession of the faith, courage under the 'question' wherein we must contend; and patience in death wherein all is crowned. Thus may we, if we would, become Christ's co-heirs, obeying God's commandments and accomplishing our Father's will.

(xvi) We pray that the will of God may be done on earth as it is in heaven. Happiness here and salvation hereafter are closely bound up with both. We have our body, of the earth; we have our soul, which is spiritual. Thus there is something of heaven and earth in all of us, and we pray for God's will to find fulfilment in each. For between the carnal and the spiritual there is conflict, and every day the discordant elements are at grips. What we would, that we do not; the soul longs for the divine and eternal, whilst the flesh yearns for what is of this world and passing. Concord between the two, God's grace aiding us, is what we earnestly pray for, and that, whilst God's will prevails in soul and body, the soul re-born to him may be ever secure. The apostle Paul is very outspoken on all this: *The flesh lusteth against the spirit, he writes, and the spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary one to another, so that you do not the things that you would. But if you are led by the spirit you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are manifest; which are fornication, immodesty, uncleanness, luxury, idolatry, witchcrafts, enmities, contentions, emulations, wraths, quarrels, dissensions, sects, envies, murders, drunkenness, revellings and such like. Of the which I foretell you, as I have foretold to you, that they who do such things shall not obtain the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the spirit is charity* (Gal. 5, 17-22).

And so our daily, nay, almost constant prayer is that God's will may prevail in our heaven and on our earth, that the earthly may yield place to the heavenly and that all that is of the spirit and of God may rule. Such is God's will.

(xvii) And now here is another interpretation. Our Lord, we know, urges us strongly to love our enemies and to pray, for those who persecute us, for those who are still of the earth with nothing of heaven about them at all. Our prayer, then, is for these, that the will of God may be fulfilled in them too, and that they too may come to share in that renewal of the human family which Christ brought about and for which he preserved it. The disciples are not called *the earth* but *the salt of the earth* (Matth. 5, 13); and

the Apostle speaks of the first man as of the slime of the earth but the second Man as of heaven. We are meant to be like God, our Father in heaven, like to him *who maketh his sun to rise upon the good and bad, and raineth upon the just and the unjust* (Matth. 5, 45). It is at Christ's prompting, then, that we beg to be allowed to offer our prayers for the salvation of all men, that as God's will is done in *heaven*, i.e. in us, for faith brings something of heaven to us, so also it may be done on *earth*, i.e. amongst those who have not the faith. By their first birth they are of the earth, but, by being born again of water and the Holy Ghost, they may begin to be of heaven.

[To be concluded]



## DAVID (II)

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**D**AVID fulfils the long-hoped-for ambition of all Israel in taking Jerusalem, and establishes himself there with the ark of God, the central, sacramental thing in the religion of the chosen people. He is unaware that his own kingly office is to become a no less venerated centre in the dynasty he founds. For to be king of Jerusalem entailed far-reaching consequences. To be the anointed of Israel gave him an office that could be set in rivalry beside the priesthood of the house of Aaron; and to the general populace of Israel (especially the tribes that had no love for Levi and what they deemed its pretensions) he, not the successor of Aaron, was the spiritual head of the nation. This was because the formed religious faith of Israel as seen in later works had but partially or weakly taken root in the nation as a whole, and the pagan tradition of a god-king was both the instinct of humanity in that culture, and the practice of all the neighbours of the Israelite tribes. But to these, the now submissive populace of Canaan, the king of Jerusalem had for at least a thousand years been such a god-king, and to them David's occupation of that office gave him a sacred supremacy, founded on the natural desire of men to see a divinity embodied as a person, in the highly specialised tradition of Jerusalem. This tradition, indeed, dated