

Our Father

It doesn't need me to tell you that this evening marks the start of Lent – the annual period of reflection and preparation for greatest festival of Christ's death and resurrection at Easter. Building on the symbolism of death and resurrection that is so potent in the festival of Easter, Christians from the earliest years associated our own death to old ways and re-birth to new – our baptism – with the Easter celebration. So it was that Lent developed as a time to prepare new initiates to the Christian faith for their baptism and for those already initiated to reflect on their own baptism – and their continued attempts to live out the life of one born into the new creation.

Part of the historic preparation for baptism was the learning and understanding of some key texts: the Creed, the Summary of the Law and the Lord's Prayer. During Lent there is a chance for people to meet informally with myself and Steve to reflect on what one of these texts might mean for us – both as individuals and a local church – as we explore the meaning of the Summary of the Law, which calls us to worship God and love our neighbour. And at our Sunday morning services during Lent I have asked those who are preaching to focus on the Lord's Prayer so that as we all approach Easter we might do so refreshed by different perspectives on our faith – not as laid out in Church dogma, or partisan teaching – but through reflection on the words of Christ as they have been passed on to us.

So tonight, I would like to draw together these two strands as we start by thinking of the petition 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name'. This statement of Christian belief grounds our faith in an understanding of God who is both personal (we can address God in personal terms) and beyond our ability to experience fully (for none of us has yet experienced the full joys of heaven). This grounds our faith in a paradox that we can both know God fully, yet also find him beyond comprehending – it is perhaps fair can apprehend the broad outline of God as love, but that the detail might evade us.

Just as the first part of the Summary of the Law bids us to worship God with all that we have, this first petition of the Lord's Prayer demands that from the starting point of the God who is Father, we are called to wonder at the depth, the glory, the humility of the God who we understand as the force behind creation who longs for the perfection of all that is by drawing everything into right relation. So we are called to open our hearts to God's presence – whether we find God in the music of the angels, in the perfection of the mathematical equation, in the glory of the natural world, in the stories of scripture, or in the face of the overjoyed child. We as a people are called to worship God: together as his people, and apart as a leaven in the world in which we walk.

But the demand of our faith does not stop at worshipping God – at opening our hearts so that we might know him more deeply – it goes on to demand that we participate in the love of God; that we make the name of God holy so that it may truly be hallowed by all. Here we find the second part of the Summary of the Law running alongside us once again as we are bidden to ‘love our neighbour as ourselves’ – something we are called to do not that it may advantage them (or indeed make us feel better about the state of things), but rather something we are called to do so that people might see through us the love of God – that God’s name might be hallowed by them too.

So as we start our Lenten pilgrimage and turn our faces toward the glory of transforming love that we see revealed at Easter, let us pray that we might learn to open our hearts to God in worship – that we might draw closer to Our Father in heaven – and that we might walk in all humility as children of a loving God so that our neighbour is drawn into the love of God, that they might hallow it and make it holy with us. So let us lift our hearts and minds to the glory of the God of heaven, and walk through this world as a pilgrim people who hallow his name here on earth. Amen.