

St. Mary's Sermons

Luke 11:1-13

The privilege of prayer to the Father

I want to begin this morning by asking you all a question. When you pray how do you address God? Because we have been praying for many years most of us start to pray automatically without really thinking about what words we use. I suspect that many of us actually pray to Jesus and start our prayers with something like, dear Lord Jesus. I have to admit that this is exactly how I have always started my prayers. Of course at one level there is absolutely nothing wrong with this because Jesus is unquestionably God. Or alternatively perhaps you start your prayers with Almighty God, which reminds us that we do have a big God and again of course that is entirely appropriate and absolutely true, he is all mighty and we can ask him to deal with things which seem so huge, even impossible to us, but somehow addressing God in this way seems very formal and make him seem distant and somehow less approachable.

In choosing to start our prayers in these sorts of ways we are not in fact praying in the way that Jesus himself taught us to. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that when Jesus taught his disciples to pray he taught them to address God as our Father in heaven. Mark Stibbe is as bold as to suggest that these are probably the four most important words ever spoken. The reason for this is because it means that God is no longer the remote deity of so many religions, the distant creator who demands submission but rather someone who is very close approachable and personal.

As Christians we have the enormous privilege of calling God our Father. Many years ago now I remember hearing the Baptist minister David Pawson say that while waiting in an airport to fly home he got into conversation with a Rabbi. He asked the Rabbi how he should pronounce various Hebrew names correctly. The Rabbi was very happy to oblige. David then asked the Rabbi how to pronounce God's name. The Rabbi said that Jews never pronounce God's name. The reason the Rabbi gave David for this was because they are so concerned not to break the third commandment, do not misuse the name of the Lord your God that they err on the side of caution and not use God's name at all. I wish that many people in our society today had a similar respect for the Lord's name, but that's another sermon. David of course was well aware that a

good Jew will not pronounce God's name but decided to try and push the Rabbi on this one issue so he said if a Jew did pronounce God name how would he say it? To which the rabbi looked aghast and said but a Jew would **never** say God's name.

Jesus teaching on God as our heavenly father, which we find not only in Luke's gospel but also in Matthew and Mark, contains three very important and surprising revelations. Mark Stibbe uses three words all beginning with the letter I to help us remember them.

1. That God an *intimate* father.

In our culture in normal day to day speech we tend to address our fathers as "dad" because it is much more personal and intimate, rather than father which is much more formal way of speaking. In fact Father is not the best translation of the original word that Jesus used which has much more informal, personal overtones.

When he was on earth Jesus spoke mostly in Aramaic. So the word that he used in teaching his disciples to pray would be Abba. Abba is in fact one of the very first words that Hebrew children still learn to the very day. Along with Imma which is 'mummy'. I have heard people describe how they have visited the Holy land and actually seen a young child calling his dad and the word that he used was abba. It is the way that a young child describes their parent.

But just in case we get accused of making God into our best mate abba also contains an appropriate measure of respect as well, in just the same way that a little child looks up to their dad with unswerving loyalty.

The use of the word abba in the opening statement of the Lord's prayer would have surprised and shocked the disciples primarily because Jesus did not follow the normal convention and use the Hebrew language which was the sacred prayer language that the pious religious people of his day always used when they prayed. Instead he chose to use the ordinary day to day language, Aramaic.

So easy for us to slip into the same habit of thinking that we need to use special holy words when we pray. When we lived in Walsall I remember on one occasion asking Rose to lead the prayers in Black Country, the local dialect. I thought they it were absolutely great but it caused quite a stir. Several people remarked afterwards that you can't talk to God like that. I said why not? No one gave me a satisfactory answer!

The obvious conclusion to draw from this is that Jesus saw prayer very much as an act of day to day communication. In other words it was much more to do with our relationship with God than making our requests to him.

Mark sums this up by saying that "prayer is not primarily the presentation of a list of petitions to God. God already knows what we need because he is all knowing. Prayer is much deeper and more joyful than this. Prayer is a child's communication with their father in heaven."

It is truly amazing that Jesus taught his apprentices to address God even though he created the whole universe as their father, their daddy God. As William Barclay once wrote Jesus is teaching his disciples that "We come to God with the simple trust and confidence with which a little child comes to a father who he knows and loves and trusts."

2. By using the word Abba Jesus teaches us that God is an **inclusive** father. The best translation of abba is 'our father' and there is wide agreement that this is the best way of translating the opening of what we know as the Lord's prayer. Jesus disciples are encouraged to enter into a personal relationship with him but we are also to remember that God is father to all those who call upon him and put their trust in him. The word abba has an inclusive dimension to it. Although we have that intimate relationship with him we also need to remember that none of us can approach our heavenly father as an only child.

3. The third and final thing that we learn from the opening of the Lord's Prayer is that Jesus teaches us that our abba is an *infinite* father. Having taught us that God is our abba Jesus immediately goes on to remind us that he is in heaven. We cannot and must not compare abba, our heavenly father with our earthly fathers. No matter how good and loving our earthly dad's are at the end of the day they are human, fallible, imperfect and as such prone to let us down and make mistakes. Perhaps this lies at the heart of the reason why many of us are reluctant to address God as father.

As we have already seen in the previous two sermons on the parable of what we know as the prodigal son, God truly is the perfect father. He is in fact far greater, far superior to any human father. He is exceptionally loving, compassionate, majestic, omnipotent, everlasting, King of Kings and we could go on and on. In fact it is completely impossible to sum up his character adequately there are simply not enough superlatives in the English language yet despite this he is still at the end of the day our dad.

In view of all this I want to make a radical suggestion. Why not try using abba father dad as the way to start your prayers from now on. I've been trying to do this for some time now. It not easy to get out of the old habit but I am finding when I do address God in these terms it does make a significant difference.