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## Lent Talk on the Our Father 3

### 1. Introduction and Welcome

- 1.1. My brothers and sisters in Christ, welcome to this, the third and final talk on the Our Father. Thank you to Oscott College for acting as our hosts. The format of each talk will be that I shall speak for 20 minutes or so with two short breaks for questions, if there are any at either of those stages. I will also invite you to ask any further questions when I have concluded my remarks. However, if you feel that I could usefully clarify something immediately before moving on, then, please, ask a question right away. We will adjourn to the Aula Spencer at 4.15 for tea and then those that can stay are cordially invited to join me and the Oscott community for Holy Hour and Solemn Vespers in the Chapel at 5 pm.
  
- 1.2. In the first talk, we looked at what might be called the first half of the prayer: “*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name! Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!*” Before considering those petitions in detail, I began by explaining the context for our study of the Lord’s Prayer referring to Pope Francis’s designation of 2024 as a Year of Prayer in preparation for a jubilee year in 2025 under the title Pilgrims of Hope. I then went on to explain where the Lord’s Prayer can be found within the Gospel. The theme running through that review of the context, I suggested, is that the Lord’s Prayer expresses the core of our understanding of who we are, what our mission is and how we are to live in accordance with God’s plan. I next spent some time looking at the two opening words of the Prayer: “*Our Father*” because they can be the springboard for a reflection on our baptismal vocation. I then suggested that “who art in heaven” which is Matthew’s addition to the more basic form of the prayer we have from St Luke shows an adaptation to St Matthew’s intended audience. It shows that we too must adapt our way of presenting the Gospel to the circumstances of today. The challenge of witnessing to the Gospel in the circumstances of today is the key to understanding how St Cyprian and St Augustine interpreted “*Hallowed be thy name*”. We must show that we hold the Lord’s name to be holy if we want others to do the same. Finally, we looked at “*Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*”. This petition points us to the next world – very fitting for pilgrims of hope preparing for a jubilee year in this world and life eternal with Almighty God in the next.
  
- 1.3. In setting out the context for last week’s talk, I suggested that we could see in the Lord’s Prayer a division similar to the one we see in the 10 Commandments: the petitions we considered in the first talk are focussed upon God and our relationship with him, our vocation and our destiny; the petitions we have considered last Sunday (namely, “*Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*”), are more directed

towards our relationships between ourselves and those around us. However, when recall that the Lord's Prayer comes to us as an integral part of the Sermon on the Mount, we realise that the petitions in the Lord's Prayer direct our thoughts to God's plan for human living. I emphasise: God's plan; and an integral part of God's plan is to fulfil the promise of the Old Testament that the redeemed People of God would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

- 1.4. We need to remember this when considering these two petitions. When it comes to obligations, we can so easily fall into the error of thinking that fulfilling them depends upon our strength and that we have the autonomy to decide what limits to put upon the way we fulfil them. The petitions on which we reflected last week begin from a different starting point: God is in control and everything we do to honour his name in the way we serve his people must be empowered, encouraged and energised by grace and the Holy Spirit. For only when we are empowered, encouraged and energised by the Holy Spirit can we live as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation should.
- 1.5. From that perspective we looked at "*Give us this day our daily bread*". We saw that there were potentially three variant readings of this petition but we could reconcile them by reflecting on the fact that we say the Lord's Prayer in Mass as part of the Communion Rite. The Mass is a foretaste here on earth of the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb. When we receive the Bread of life in Holy Communion we experience the presence of Christ in our lives. Thus empowered we leave Church to be the bread of life for those who need our care in the name of social justice. We bear in mind that when it comes to the separation of the sheep from the goats on the day of Final Judgement, we surely want to be clearly identified as being within the Good Shepherd's flock and not outside it.
- 1.6. With a similar change of perspective, we discussed "*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*". It would be easy to read this petition as imposing a condition on forgiveness which is at odds with our texts in the Gospel. In fact, this petition is not placing a condition on our forgiveness on some sort of contractual legal model. It is a prayer that we be daily forgiven because we are growing more and more deeply in Christ. And what could be more Christ-like than to forgive? I would give further: I see this petition as a prayer that just as the Holy Spirit makes Christ sacramentally present in the Mass, so too we ask the Holy Spirit to make Christ spiritually present in us so that it is not we who live but Christ who lives in us. For only when Christ lives in us can we truly be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and truly fulfil our vocation to be priests prophets and kings; only then can we truly be Bread for a stricken and sick world desperately in need of forgiveness and healing.
- 1.7. A kingdom of priests and a holy nation fed by the Bread of Life so that we can bring the Gospel of forgiveness to a broken and distracted world; a kingdom of priests

and a holy nation offering prayers here on earth through Christ our Head to our Father in Heaven who promises us life eternal: how can we fail to be pilgrims of hope?

## 2. Context

- 2.1. This week we are going to consider the remaining petitions, “*and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*”. In setting the context for this final talk I want to expand upon an answer I gave to a question put to me from the floor at the end of last week’s presentation. I was asked, “how do we make the changes which I was advocating in my remarks?” The answer I gave was that we needed to take seriously the fact that at Baptism we become temples of the Holy Spirit. Since we had already been disturbed by a fire alarm I more or less left it at that. Let me take this opportunity to go a little further.
- 2.2. I have already mentioned the covenant made between God and the people of Israel. I explained how it was not just a matter of the rules handed down in the 10 Commandments and the Book of the Covenant. The making of the covenant was accompanied by a theophany – a true experience of the presence of God. That is why in the Hebrew Scriptures, the covenantal relationship is often likened to a marriage. The kind of covenantal relationship God had in mind was clearly one in which heart speaks to heart. That is why when Christ says in Matthew 22 that the whole of the Law and the Prophets are summarised by love of God and love of neighbour he is not saying anything new. These insights are to be found in the Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy in which we also find the promise that the People of God will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.
- 2.3. Now if we think of marriage: the marriage is made when the couples says to each other “I do”. But the marriage is not complete until the couple lives out their partnership for the whole of life for their mutual good and the good of their children. But no marriage can survive if that original “I do” is not remembered, cherished and nurtured. Likewise, our baptismal vocation though given for most of us at an age when we can’t speak has to be lived out daily: we need our daily bread: the daily experience of Christ feeding us whether through sacrament or word or both. But just as the “I do” of marriage has to be remembered, cherished and nurtured so too must our Baptismal promises be. We will all soon be invited to do just that on Holy Saturday Night and Easter Morning.
- 2.4. So, then, we must take seriously the fact that by Baptism we are temples of the Holy Spirit. This is not to suggest that we must all speak in tongues, sing funny hymns and wave our hands about. Actually, I quite like a bit of charismatic worship but it’s not for everyone. What is for everyone is offering our lives to God as citizens of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation should. That is my starting point for today’s talk.

### 3. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil

- 3.1. The first question is whether those are in fact the right words to use. A few years ago there was a bit of “fuss” to say the very least when it was widely reported that Pope Francis had taken it upon himself to change the prayer our Lord had given us for the whole Catholic Church. It is often said that one should never let the facts get in the way of a good story. But we are here to reflect carefully on the prayer so we do need to take a moment to get our facts totally straight.
- 3.2. The text of the prayer which I have been using is the one approved for liturgical use in England and Wales in accordance with the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the Roman Missal. The Roman Missal is, of course, written in Latin. We do not use Latin from one end of the Mass to the other. We use an approved translation of the Missal in accordance with a decree from Rome. Nothing Pope Francis has said and done changes that one bit. So talk of him making changes for the whole of the Catholic Church is simply ill-informed.
- 3.3. What, then, did he do? Well two things: first, referring to the approved translation in use in France, he told Italian TV in 2017 that he thought the French translation was closer to the true spirit of the prayer and ought to be used more widely. Then in 2019 he approved for use throughout Italy the same form of words for inclusion in the Italian 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the Roman Missal. So in France and Italy, Catholics use a different form of the prayer from us here in England. The Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales has confirmed that there are no plans for us to follow the continental lead. I don’t think that this is the spirit of Brexit making its mark. I think the difference in the text reflects a genuine and permissible difference in theological opinion. The French and Italian approach as supported by Pope Francis holds that God as a loving Father would never lead us into temptation. Rather he helps us up when we fall. So in the French and Italian missals, the text reads: “Do not let us fall into temptation”. I will come back to the question whether that is actually an improvement after I have looked at the text we use: “*lead us not into temptation*”.
- 3.4. The first question is: why would God wish to lead us into temptation? Because if could never be possible that God would lead us into temptation, there would be little point in praying to him not to. This is obviously what bothered Pope Francis.
- 3.5. The baptismal vocation is about growing to be as holy and perfect as God. St Augustine, though not specifically commenting on the Lord’s prayer preached a sermon in which he explains that without an opponent we will not struggle for the faith and without struggle we cannot win the victory and the crown. In this respect, the model of our Lord’s temptation in the desert would seem to support this view. Our Lord was tested by Satan but on each occasion he reaffirms his commitment to his and our heavenly Father and angels minister to him when

Satan departs. Not only that: if we think about the Book of Job, God specifically consents to Job being tested by Satan. So you can see where this line of thought comes from. But then, if the prayer is that we be not led into temptation, it does not seem to make sense. If battling with Satan is the key to winning the crown, then surely we should not be asking to be exempt from the contest. On the contrary, if we want to emerge as strongly from confronting temptation as Christ did, then shouldn't be looking for an opportunity to enter the battleground?

- 3.6. When St Augustine does specifically comment on this petition, he says this: "When we say, 'Lead us not into temptation', we counsel ourselves to make this petition lest we be abandoned by his help, and either be deceived into consenting to some temptation or be so downcast as to give into it." I think there are difficulties with this reading as well. If God loved the world so much that he sent his only-begotten Son to die on the cross for it, it is a bit difficult to imagine a God who abandons us. We can abandon God, of course, by turning away from him and towards mortal sin. But the other way round? The First Letter to Timothy really rather suggests that abandonment is never on God's agenda. "This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim 1.15). So says the text. If we then look at the Second Letter to Timothy, we read this: "This saying is trustworthy: 'If we have died with him we shall also live with him. If we persevere, we shall also reign with him. But if we deny him he will deny us. If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful for he cannot deny himself'" (2 Tim 2. 11-13).
- 3.7. Now we die with Christ at baptism and rise from the water of Baptism to new life. We become Temples of the Holy Spirit and Christ lives in us through the action of the Holy Spirit. Baptism conforms us to Christ. So that is why Christ cannot deny himself. If we are part of his Mystical Body, we are part of him. He will forgive those sins of which we repent, evidently. That is how I read, "If we are unfaithful he remains faithful". But an outright denial – well that is a different matter and one which only we bring about. An outright denial is our responsibility and no-one else's. So let me link this to a couple of points made earlier. We must take seriously the fact that by Baptism we are temples of the Holy Spirit. That is how we fulfil our baptismal vocation to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. That is how every single citizen of this holy nation fulfils their baptism vocation to be priest, prophet and king. This can only be achieved by offering our lives to God who so far from abandoning us, promises to accompany us every step of the way as the Letters to Timothy show. From that perspective, neither of the interpretations of St Augustine will do. But neither will the approach taken by Pope Francis. We can agree that a loving Father does not lead us into temptation but if we pray that we be prevented from falling into it, aren't we asking God to take away our free will? So we need to find another way of reading this petition.
- 3.8. Bishop Tom Wright proposes three potential readings.. Now we need to remind ourselves that Bishop Wright's fundamental perspective is that Christ shared this

prayer with us, his disciples, so that we could share his prayer life. This means that we share in his relationship with his and our heavenly Father. Against that background, he proposes three potential readings:

- 3.8.1. Reading No. 1: the petition is a prayer that we the Christian faithful escape the Great Tribulation that is coming. By “Great Tribulation” he is referring to the End Times and the final climactic battle between Good and Evil, as represented in the Bible by the imagery of St Michael leading the heavenly forces against the Dragon. In other words, this would be an eschatological reading.
  - 3.8.2. Reading No.2: the petition is a prayer that we be not lead into temptation so great that we cannot bear it.
  - 3.8.3. Reading No 3: the petition is a prayer that we be enabled to pass safely through the testing of our faith.
- 3.9. Personally, I find reading no.1 completely unconvincing. Why we would pray to be saved when the whole point of baptism and the Christian life is that we have the promise of salvation already. Recall what St Paul says in his Letter to the Romans: “Therefore since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God...But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved by his wrath (Rom 5: 1-3 and 8-9).”
- 3.10. Reading No.2 has a little more to recommend it. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians (10:13): St Paul writes: “No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it”. Now if when we offer this petition we are praying for the grace to remember and take to heart God’s promise to provide a way out, well, I can see some merit in Reading No.2. But even then if you go down the line of asking for the grace to remember, you are interpreting the text rather than taking it literally. There is another concern too. If you offer this petition with Reading No.2 as your intention, praying that that we be not lead into temptation so great that we cannot bear it, are we not asking God to deliver on his promise? And if so, are we not sliding into the sin of putting God to the test. Who are we to call upon God to make good his promises? Wasn’t that the sin of the Children of Israel who whinged and wailed all the way from Egypt to the Promised Land.
- 3.11. Reading No.3 is far more satisfactory. Praying that we be enabled to pass safely through the testing of our faith is a prayer for the grace to grow stronger as Christians. It is a prayer that we have the grace to say not my will but yours be

done. It is a prayer for the grace to survive whatever Gethsemane comes our way and say with our Lady: I am the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy will. Hence we come back to offering our lives to God as she did. And then what happened? The Holy Spirit overshadowed her and thus she became the archetypal temple of the Holy Spirit setting the model for the rest of us to follow. She was delivered from evil through her glorious Assumption. The rest of us have to go through the departure lounge of death. But the flight path is surely written in God's holy will for each and every one of those precious souls for whom Christ mounted the wood of the Cross.

#### 4. Conclusion

- 4.1. It is time for me to draw these remarks to a close. My approach to examining the petitions in the Our Father has been founded upon two fundamental building blocks. The first building block is that we can see in the Our Father a division similar to that which we see in the 10 Commandments. The second building block is that because the text of the Our Father is found in the Sermon on the Mount it must be telling us something about God's plan for human living. So we have to approach every petition from the perspective that we are praying it as a baptised member of the faithful. We are praying it as a citizen of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We are praying it as a persons called to be priests prophets and kings. We are praying it as temples of the Holy Spirit whose vocation is to grow ever deeper into Christ.
- 4.2. The petitions we considered in the 1<sup>st</sup> talk are like the first four commandments: they are asking for the grace that enables us to love the Lord our God with all our heart mind and strength. The petitions we considered last week are all about loving our neighbour as ourselves. These two are two sides of an integrated whole. But running through all these petitions is the fundamental principle that God is the guiding and creative force. We are potentially opening ourselves up to mistaken readings if we think that the Christian life is all about fulfilling obligations. For then we might think that we are in control and not God. This shift in perspective requires us to take seriously the truth that by baptism we become temples of the Holy Spirit so that Christ has a real presence in us just as much as he has a real presence in the Blessed Sacrament. It requires us to take seriously the truth that we must fall in love with God because ours is a religion in which heart speaks to heart. That will not be achieved without a thoroughgoing offering of our lives to God and earnest prayers for the grace not to fall when Gethsemane comes into our lives. But we know we should walk forward in faith on our pilgrimage through life with complete confidence. We have been saved by the precious blood of the lamb and so we must always be Pilgrims of Hope.