



Bill Wittman/CNS

The Our Father has deep roots in the Old Testament but is presented in a new way so that Jesus' followers will recognize that the heart of this faith is found in the preaching and life of Jesus himself.

Prayer is rooted in Old Testament

By Fr. Lawrence Boadt, CSP/CNS

With its emphasis on justice, mercy and forgiveness, the Our Father is deeply rooted in Old Testament faith and its tradition of prayer.

In Exodus 34:5-6, God passed before Moses and allowed him to see the divine glory. God proclaimed:

"The Lord, the Lord, a god merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in loving kindness and faithfulness, maintaining his loving kindness for a thousand generations, and forgiving evil and crime and sin; still, not judging the guilty to be innocent, but punishing the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for their fathers' sin."

That powerful statement is repeated often in the Bible, so we know it was considered a summary of the relationship God established with Israel in the Sinai covenant.

Its central spiritual insight is that "justice" and "mercy" work together to reveal the nature of God.

Psalm 33:5 says, "The Lord loves justice and right; he bestows goodness on the earth." The same psalmist quickly adds an appeal for mercy on the afflicted. Verses 20-22 conclude: "Our soul waits for the Lord who is our help and shield. ... May your mercy be on us, O Lord."

More than half of the 150 psalms are what we call "lament psalms," prayers that petition for justice while also hoping for mercy.

In a Nutshell

Jesus taught his disciples to address God on the same intimate basis that sons and daughters address fathers.

The Our Father is a privileged means of communicating with God. It challenges Jesus' followers to trust their Father's care fully.

Jesus expects his disciples to bestow forgiveness as his Father does. In the Our Father we ask forgiveness and challenge ourselves to imitate God's forgiveness.

The psalmists often combine mercy with divine forgiveness. Psalm 130:2-4 says, "May your ears, Lord, be attentive to my cry for mercy. ... For with you is forgiveness, and so you are revered."

Isaiah 59:12-14 combines a plea for forgiveness with an affirmation of just behavior: "Our offenses are present before us, and our crimes we acknowledge ..., while right order is repelled and justice stands far off."

This core insight is reflected in the Our Father. Jesus teaches a prayer that works in two directions: We pray that God will make his will done everywhere and forgive our sins; but we also pray that we may learn to do God's will and forgive as God does. From an Old Testament perspective,

the Our Father divides into two parts:

- One emphasizes God's goodness to the world: "May your Fatherhood be over all things on heaven and earth, your name be praised, your rule over all people be established and your just plan, the divine will, be accomplished."

- The other addresses our need for God's compassionate help: "Give us our (eucharistic) food, forgiveness of sin, protection from trials and temptations and merciful deliverance" from evil's power in the world.

Indeed the construction of the Our Father echoes that of the psalms. For example, the psalmists frequently combine the mention of God's justice with praise of God's goodness. In verses 1-4, Psalm 72 prays that God will strengthen love for justice; then, it goes on to pray that the earth will be filled with goodness and bountiful blessings as a result.

The prophet Daniel prays, "When we present our petition before you, we rely not on our just deeds but on your great 'mercy.' O Lord hear! O Lord, pardon!" (9:18-19).

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Paulist Father Boadt is the publisher of Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J.

FaithAlive!

This month's adult-education package considers the "Our Father." What did the petitions "Thy kingdom come" or "Give us this day our daily bread" mean when Jesus' followers first heard them?

Food for Thought

Expressing an intimacy between God and his people, the Lord's Prayer is rather comforting. So it might be easy to overlook how much it demands.

But right after presenting the Lord's Prayer, Matthew's Gospel lays it on the line: "If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions" (6:15).

Yet according to Pope John Paul II, forgiveness is at once a source of joy and a powerful act. In his 1997 World Day of Peace message, he said: "The intense joy of forgiveness, offered and received, heals seemingly incurable wounds, restores relationships and firmly roots them in God's inexhaustible love."

D. Gibson
Editor, Faith Alive!

Faith in the Marketplace

Earlier this year, Faith Alive! asked readers around the country to describe a project they undertook in a group or alone to learn more about the Bible.

Selected reader responses:

"I made a New Year's resolution once to read the Bible. It took me a year, but I finished it. I found this to be a very worthwhile experience, and it motivated me to become a lector." — Sheryl Eddie, Gainesville, Fla.

"I belong to a prayer group. We meet weekly to read and discuss the upcoming Sunday readings. I find this very helpful." — Marie Greenwell, Knottsville, Ky.

"As an RCIA instructor, I feel obligated to learn as much about the Bible as I can. I read a lot and our priest ... does an excellent job of explaining the Scripture readings. ... The more I learn ... the better I will be able to discuss and relay this information to others." — Paul Gramlich, Charleston, Ark.

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