



Fervent Prayer, Gbenga Offo

Praying with Jesus

A Revolutionary Manifesto for All Time

BY MAGDALENA I. GARCÍA

Like most patients approaching the end of life, Betty¹ had been losing weight and sleeping more and had been withdrawn for weeks. Upon admission to hospice, her family agreed that it was a good idea for the chaplain to visit. Betty had not attended church for years due to her illness, but she had grown up Baptist. During my initial assessment visit as chaplain, after some introductions and storytelling, I asked Betty if she wanted to pray. Her response was immediate; she started reciting the Lord's Prayer without missing a beat:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
 For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.²

The family was shocked that, despite her failing memory, Betty could still remember the words to the Lord's Prayer. And this is often the case, even when patients have some form of dementia. Did she know what she was saying? It was hard to tell. And yet, in a way, it didn't matter; the prayer brought her comfort and peace.

But what about us? Do we know what we are saying when we recite these ancient words? We say these words in worship and in our personal devotions as a mantra, and they give us comfort and peace—which is not a bad thing—but they should also wake us up and shake us up. After all, the Lord's Prayer is a revolutionary manifesto for all time.

Jesus' life and ministry were consumed by the regular concerns of everyday people, and especially people who were marginalized. In everything that he said and did—as he prayed, taught, welcomed, healed and fed—he addressed the needs and longings of ordinary people. But he did more than that: Jesus also engaged—directly and indirectly—the underlying values and structures that perpetuated injustices in his day. And he called his followers to a new way of life, where allegiance to God is foremost and love of neighbor is a must. All of these are very political acts.

Politics comes from the Greek word *polis*, meaning “city” or “community.” Therefore, anyone who is concerned about the well-being of the city or community is, by definition, involved in politics. Many of the sayings, parables and discourses attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are, indeed, very political in nature. And the prayer he taught his disciples, as recorded in Matthew 6 and Luke 11, is perhaps the most political prayer ever said. Let's consider some phrases from the prayer and their implication for our faith and politics.

Our Parent in Heaven

Prayer is an ongoing, intimate conversation with God that takes place in the context of a trusting relationship. The way that Jesus chose to approach God confirms this understanding. Jesus called God “Abba,” which was a household word in the Aramaic language, similar to our use of the word “Daddy” or “Papa.” In the patriarchal society in which Jesus lived, the father was the highest authority in the household, the one responsible for protection and provision. Jesus, as a man of his time, borrowed the language at his disposition to emphasize not the masculinity of God, but the affectionate nature of God's relationship with humans.

The apostle Paul did the same as he instructed the early Christians in Rome: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:15–16). However, we now live in a world where families are diverse and the head of a household may have any gender identity. Therefore, it is appropriate for us to address God as “Parent” or “Mother.” The point is to emphasize that God desires a close relationship with us, so positive labels, or labels that do not invoke gender, may speak more precisely toward our relationship with God.

But there is more to the way Jesus addresses God. Jesus says God is *our* parent. This has a social dimension and a political implication. We are all in equal standing before God. We are all children of God, members of the same human family, without distinction of gender, race, creed or any other sociological marker. That plural pronoun *our* makes it clear that there are no second-class citizens in God’s sight, and that those who seek to honor God must shape societies with the same vision and principle.

And this caring Parent is close at hand, ever present, yet always beyond us. We are made in God’s image and not the reverse. In the first century’s cosmology, the earth was flat and heaven was a place above where all deities resided. The opening phrase in the Lord’s Prayer includes this tension between the intimate and the distant. It reminds us that God is separate and different from us, and, thus, is worthy of being praised: “Hallowed be your name.” As we pray, we are speaking, pouring our heart out, to a God who is spirit, and who is both, and at the same time, unseen and real.

Your Kin-dom Come

Praying for God’s kingdom to come is a rejection of all other kingdoms. And

that is, without doubt, a political statement. Jesus preached about the “Kingdom of God” or the “Kingdom of Heaven,” a new world order that he described using parables and stories. And no matter what metaphors he used—a mustard seed, a bit of leaven, a pearl of great price or a net—Jesus was referring to a social order completely different from the governments of the world, where power and greed prevail instead of respect and care.

We nowadays use the word *kin-dom*, which better captures the nature of the realm Jesus envisioned. “Kindom Building for the 21st Century” was the theme of Bible studies at the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which met in St. Louis. “Kingdom tends to be very exclusive,” said Raj Nadella, co-leader of the Bible studies. “The metaphor of kin-dom allows us to envision an inclusive community, built on common humanity and shared values,” he added.³

This petition is reinforced with a second phrase that expands the concept of the reign of God: “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” The implicit message is, of course, that in the present world’s dominions, God’s will is not being done. To pray “your kin-dom come” is to ask that God’s power to create and sustain will prevail over forces that destroy and diminish. To pray “your kin-dom come” is to align our purposes with God, and to enlist in the work of leveling the playing field. In the words of the refrain from a contemporary hymn by Spanish composer Miguel Manzano:

“Tu reino es vida, tu reino
es verdad;
tu reino es justicia, tu reino es paz;
tu reino es gracia, tu reino es amor.
Venga a nosotros tu reino, Señor;
venga a nosotros tu reino, Señor”.

“Your kingdom is life, your
kingdom is truth;
your kingdom is justice, your
kingdom is peace;
your kingdom is grace, your

“Our Father and Our Mother”

An updated version of the Lord’s Prayer and an invitation to write your own:

Our Father

and our Mother,
who art in heaven,
and came into the earth,
hallowed be your Name,
and your Femininity dignified.
Your kingdom come.

May we build community,
behaving like family,
embracing diversity.

Your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Let us honor your intention
by acting with justice and mercy
in all relations.

Give us this day
our daily bread.

Remind us that the land and
the wheat

that you give us each dawn,
each year

are meant to be shared
so that poverty may disappear.

And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.

And make us aware of the
burden of indebtedness
so that we may forge equitable
societies

where no one lives enslaved
and sexual exploitation comes to
an end.

And lead us not into
temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

Keep us from the ways of
selfishness and malice,
and guide us down the path of
the common good
and progress for all humanity.

For yours is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.

For yours is the cosmos,
the dominion, and the celebrity,
for all eternity.

Amen.

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But in light of the witness of the Bible and the life of Jesus, being apolitical is not a faithful response. As long as we live in this world, we are part of society, and we either contribute to its misery or its well-being.

For further exploration

Read these Bible passages and consider: How do they connect with the Lord's Prayer? How do they reinforce the notion that Christians are called to build God's kin-dom on earth? How might these teachings drive us as Christians to be involved in the public sphere?

Deuteronomy 24:14–22

Psalms 24

Jeremiah 29:4–7

Matthew 13:31–33

Matthew 13:44–50

Matthew 25:31–46

Luke 10:25–37

Galatians 5:13–15

James 1:27

kingdom is love.
Your kingdom come, Lord;
your kingdom come, Lord.”⁴

Our Daily Bread

Jesus shared meals—all the time, many meals—so much so that he was accused of being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Mat. 11:19b). And few things are as political as food and meal sharing. Ponder for a moment the food you eat. How much do you buy and how much can you stock? What stores do you frequent, and what prices can you afford? Who grows, transports and serves your food? What wages are they paid, what benefits are they granted and what protections do they have? Sincere answers to these questions should lead people of faith to question the policies and politics of our governments.

“Give us this day our daily bread” constitutes the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer, and here the vision is communal. We are invited to pray not for personal comfort, but for communal sustenance; to pray not for private goods, but for public welfare. This vision is not particular to Jesus; it is rooted in the teachings of the Torah and the prophets. When we pray for “our daily bread,” we remember the God who gave manna to the Israelites wandering in the desert, and the God who provided a well for the slave and refugee Hagar in the desert. When we pray for “our daily bread,” we are praying for all hunger to be satisfied. There is a Latin American meal blessing that captures this idea:

“Bendice, Señor, este pan,
y da pan a quienes tienen hambre
y hambre de justicia a quienes
tienen pan.

Bendice, Señor, este pan”.

“Bless this bread, O Lord,
and give bread to those who hunger,
and hunger for justice to those who
have bread.

Bless this bread, O Lord.”

There are those who claim that “politics must be kept out of religion.” Such a proposition might seem laudable—and the church has far too often turned a blind eye to the abuses of society, or worse yet, influenced a misguided vision of exploitation and colonization. But in light of the witness of the Bible and the life of Jesus, being apolitical is not a faithful response. As long as we live in this world, we are part of society, and we either contribute to its misery or its

well-being. The church can neither be indifferent nor silent in ethical and moral matters that affect the life of humans and the planet. A church that is silent in the face of evil is not a faithful church, but rather, a complicit church. In the words of one of our newest confessions, the *Brief Statement of Faith*:

In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to
Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and
culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long
silenced,
and to work with others for
justice, freedom, and peace.”⁵

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Notes

1. Name changed to protect the identity.
2. Matthew 6:9b–13, King James Version.
3. Eva Stimson, “Bible Study at GA223 Will Explore ‘Kin-dom’ versus ‘King-dom,’” Presbyterian News Service, February 12, 2018; www.pcusa.org/news/2018/2/12/bible-study-ga223-will-explore-kin-dom-versus-king/.
4. “Tu Reino Es Vida”/“Your Kingdom Is Life,” © Miguel Manzano, published by OCP; Available at <http://cdn.ocp.org/shared/pdf/preview-30112309.pdf>.
5. *Brief Statement of Faith* available at www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/brief-statement-of-faith/.