

When I was in University, every Thursday morning we held service in the chapel which was attended regularly by a retired professor. When it came time to pray the Lord's prayer this devout man would give a soul full rendition that as you listened would send chills down your spine.

"Our Father, who art in heaven." Familiar words. Words that we still repeat just as we learned them, right out of the old King James version of the Bible.

Dangerous words, those: say them if you dare. It was a number of years ago now when, a man apparently sued Renfrew County Council for opening their meetings with it. Those words upset him as a non-believer, so he took them to court, and the result was a pared down non-denominational version which even this past winter was still being contested.

"Our Father, who art in heaven."

Familiar words—at least to most of us. Maybe too familiar. Likely we knew how to say them even before we knew what they meant. Likely now we often say them without thinking of what they mean: just letting them trip off our tongues, without any real link to our minds and our hearts.

"Our Father, who art in heaven."

Controversial words, at times: some people even find them offensive. Such people often revise them, to get rid of the offence. The printed order of service for this past years World Day of Prayer, included an altered version of the Lord's Prayer that began this way: "Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be. Father and Mother of us all, Loving God...."

And Jesus just said, "Our Father...."

Why, I wonder, would Jesus' version be so simple? Why would he choose those two particular words to begin with? And why would he then go on to share with us those fifty or sixty other words that are still so familiar?

Most important: what can we learn from Jesus' prayer?

I thought we could take this morning and the next few Sundays to study the Lord's Prayer. Other people may find the prayer dangerous, controversial, offensive—but for us, it is special, because Jesus gave it to us. Let's see what we can learn.

So how does it begin again? Our Father. Those words don't sound all that dangerous or offensive, do they? So who do they refer to? They refer to God, and they make a statement about God. And—notice—we use those words to speak about God only because of Jesus. It was Jesus who told us to name God in this way.

You see, in Jesus' day, almost no one called God "Father." The common name for God was "Yahweh," usually translated as "the Lord." In the Old Testament section of the Bible, God is called "the Lord" over 7000 times. He's only called "Father" (in the Old Testament) about ten times—and in Jesus' time, no one called God "Father" at all. People thought it was disrespectful. So when Jesus invited his followers to do it, he was being radical. He was disregarding the wisdom of his day.

So why did he do it? The short answer is that we don't know—but it certainly wasn't because it was the common thing to do. We don't know why he did it—but we can be sure that if Jesus gave us the word "father" to use when we speak to God, it must be the best word there could be.

Of course, there are other words he could have chosen. He could have said, "Our Mother, who art in heaven." He could have said, "Our Grandmother who art in heaven," or "Our Best Friend in heaven," or "Our Master in heaven." But he didn't. And even though we don't know why he chose the word "father," we can trust that Jesus got it right.

We can trust Jesus. That's what being a Christian is all about.

So what does it mean if God is our Father? Does it mean that he is a male god, rather than a female god? Not at all. Nowhere in the Bible does it say (or even suggest) that God has a gender at all. God is a being who has no gender, what we would today call

gender neutral — but because no human language has personal words for beings without a gender, any personal name for God will make it sound as if a gender is being named, even though it isn't. The same thing happens when we speak of "Mother Nature" or "Mother Earth" or a person's "mother tongue": we're not suggesting that any of those things is actually female—and everyone understands that.

So if God is our Father, it does not mean that he is male as opposed to female. So what does it mean? It means that Jesus has given us a window to see into God's very heart.

When we look through this window, then, what do we see? We first of all see that God has a *family*. "Father" is a family word. You cannot be a father unless you have children. Take away the children and the word "father" must go as well. The two things stand or fall together.

Sometimes children at Golden Lake camp tell me about their families. Sometimes, when they do that, their father is not among the people that they list. When that happens, I just may ask, "And where does your father live?" And they tell me—sometimes cheerfully, sometimes a little sadly. They hardly ever say, "I don't have a father," because all of them know that they do. Their parents may have had problems, but since they are members of a family, the children do have a father, and they know that.

Father is a family word. And in this prayer it sets the tone for all

that is to come.

Try using some other word to say the Lord's Prayer, and see how the tone changes. "Almighty God who art in heaven"—even "Gracious God who art in heaven"—just doesn't do it. Why not? Because the family connection is lost.

Father is a family word—and the word that Jesus gives us.

Of course, in some people's experience, "father" may not feel like a good word at all. Some people have bad and abusive fathers, and the first emotions that word brings to mind are hurtful ones. Perhaps that has been your experience as well. But most of those same people also know that there are good fathers out there somewhere—and most people who have never known a good father long to find one.

And there is a Father to be found. Jesus tells us of a loving Father who welcomes every single person in the whole world who will come to him. There is a Father who just waits to be discovered.

And Jesus has given us a prayer that allows us to talk to him.

Our Father, who art in heaven.

Then, there is that other little word: the word "our." What do you suppose that's all about?

Suppose we left out that word: then we would just pray, "Father, who art in heaven." It's not quite the same, is it? Why does it feel

so different? Because it's missing the other half of the family connection. The word "father" gives each of us a family connection to God. The word "our" gives us a family connection to each other.

Do you see how that works? If you and I together pray the words, "Our Father," that makes us brothers, or brother and sister, of each other. People who share the same father are necessarily brothers and sisters of each other. If all of us pray those words together, we are not only admitting that God is our Father—we're saying that together we are all members of one family. We are family together, because of this God that Jesus speaks about.

And that is a very beautiful thing.

Our Father, who art in heaven.

Heaven. Now, there's the next thing. What's heaven got to do with it? Why is God found there? And what difference does it make?

Just where is heaven, anyway? We don't know. Down through the centuries, people have sometimes thought it was "up there," or "out there," or in lots of other places. The only place we've always been quite sure that heaven is not is right here, in our own dark and struggling world.

But—wherever it is—heaven is the place where God lives. That's what the Lord's Prayer tells us.

But if we don't know—and can't know—where heaven is, why does it matter? Why does Jesus bother to mention it? What difference does it make?

I think this may be a reason: since God lives in heaven, he has his existence outside the world he has created. In other words, God is not the same as the world. We all have places where we may feel God's presence but God is not Mother Nature. God is not the sum total of all the trees and the flowers. God is in but also separate from his world. That's what it means when it says that God lives in heaven.

Not all of the world's religions believe that. Buddhism and Hinduism, for the most part, believe that God or the gods are just part of the world we see all around us. And that means, in turn, that God or those gods are not in charge of the world. In fact, in that view, no one is really in charge of anything, and life and the world just flow along without any direction.

But our prayer tells us that God is in heaven, where he oversees all. Our God is the Lord, the Creator, the All-Powerful One. And because he is, we can pray to him—and he can answer.

On the night of February 23, 1987, an astronomer in Chile observed with his naked eye the explosion of a distant supernova. What he saw was a blast so powerful that it released in one second as much energy as our sun releases in ten billion years.

What is even more interesting is that the event did not actually occur on that February night in 1987. Scientists tell us that the explosion actually happened 170,000 years ago. In order to reach the earth, the light generated by that faraway event had been travelling at the speed light travels—186,000 miles a second, or 305,000 kilometres per second; 6 trillion miles a year—for 170,000 years

And our God was there when it happened. Our God was also here when it happened. He is still there, and he is still here. That is the God we belong to. That is the God who rules over all. That is the God who is in heaven.

And that is the God whom Jesus names as our Father, and who hears us when we pray.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.