

“HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME” LORD’S PRAYER 2

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A little boy was convinced that he knew God’s name. His father wasn’t so sure, so he asked his son, “How do you know God’s name?” “That’s easy!” said the boy, “We say God’s name every Sunday at church – our Father in heaven, Harold is your name.”

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, what does it mean to ‘hallow’ God’s name? After all, the word ‘hallow’ is rarely used in common conversation these days. The only time I can remember hearing the word outside of church circles is when sometimes describes a revered public building such as a university with the words ‘these hallowed halls.’

In our secular society, there isn’t much that is sacred, let alone hallowed. The knowledge we have gained through science explains more and more about the world, so that for many people, God gets squeezed into a smaller and smaller box, or else is dispensed with altogether. Bible scholars call this “the God of the gaps.”

The English physicist Stephen Hawkin went so far to deny any divine role or activity that he developed a scientific theory for how the universe could spontaneously come into existence out of nothing, in other words, how it created itself.

And yet, despite the best efforts of the new breed of aggressive atheists, most people still have a vague sense of the spiritual world. We see this most often when some sudden tragedy befalls a nation. People commonly pray that their loved one has somehow been miraculously spared. When the death of their loved one is proven, next of kin often talk of them as “up there somewhere looking down on us”, or as “going to be with the angels.”

They may not know of Jesus as Lord and Saviour, but they do have a sense that there is more to this world than what they can see and touch.

In this first petition of the Lord’s Prayer, we are asking for more than that God’s name is treated as special. We are asking that God’s name is made holy, treated with the utmost reverence. Our society generally has a vague idea about respect for some special events such as Anzac Day.

In more recent times I have noticed references to the earth itself as sacred. The other night on the TV I saw an ad featuring Adam Goodes, a famous indigenous former AFL player, which managed to refer to his indigenous beliefs, ‘mother earth’, and ancient wisdom – all in the one advertisement. Take your pick Adam, which one is it?

Treating something as holy is on an altogether different level than it being regarded as special. Remember the story of Moses and the burning bush. What does God say when Moses goes to investigate the mystery of the bush that is burning, but is not being consumed?

“Do not come near; take your shoes off.” Why? “For the place you are standing on is holy ground.” God later commissions Moses to go to Egypt to tell Pharaoh to let God’s people go. Moses asks God what name he should use for God when he speaks to Pharaoh. God says, “I am who I am.”

I find these stories fascinating. The ground is holy, set apart, so Moses is not to approach. He is to take off his shoes. Then God reveals his name. A name is a personal thing, isn’t it? A name presupposes identity. While a hobby farmer names the animals he rears by hand, the cattle farmer does not usually name his cattle, and so is spared waving goodbye to Mabel or farewelling Nancy when the truck leaves for the abattoir.

Contrary to woolly New Age ideas, God is not some impersonal presence meandering about the universe imparting a warm glow to those who cultivate this presence. God has a name. God has qualities that can be described. God has a nature, a character, a personal identity.

Thus, we can have a relationship with God. God reveals himself, and there is familiarity between us. Yet we treat God’s name as holy, set it apart, hallow it. God is both the God of the Old Testament, whose name was so holy it couldn’t be said aloud, and the God of the New Testament, in which we are invited to call upon God as ‘Abba’ or ‘Daddy’.

When we are in the presence of holiness, the first thing that happens is that our sin is revealed. Sin is not just the wrong things we have done, or the right things we neglected to do. It’s in our nature to be sinners. That’s why Moses removes his sandals and doesn’t come any closer.

That’s also why in our worship services, right after we recognize at the start that we are in the presence of the Triune God, and we remind ourselves that God claimed us in baptism, we admit that we are sinners and ask for forgiveness.

If God is holy, and we are sinners, then we need God’s help to hallow his name. Let’s see what Luther has to say in his explanation in the Small Catechism.

“God’s name is certainly holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may be kept holy among us also. How is God’s name kept holy? God’s name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, lead holy lives according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven. But anyone who teaches or lives contrary to God’s Word profanes the name of God among us. Protect us from this, Heavenly Father!”

So, we make God’s name holy when we teach his Word purely and truly, and when we live according to it. The truth and purity of a Lutheran understanding of the Bible doesn’t mean we have to correctly interpret every last word in the Bible. There are difficult and mysterious passages for which we do not have agreement, for example the thousand-year reign of Christ in the Book of Revelation, or the risen Jesus going to preach to the souls in prison in 1 Peter 3.

Nor can we give a completely satisfying explanation for why God allows so much suffering in the world. It is not even devising the best metaphor for explaining the Trinity or the Real Presence in Holy Communion.

We teach God's Word purely and truly when we proclaim that Jesus died for sinners, and that we receive forgiveness of our sin by grace through faith.

In the second part of his explanation, Luther teaches that God's name is hallowed when we live in harmony with God's Word. It's not difficult to see the problem, is it? We admit we are sinners, so surely our sin has the opposite effect on God's name. Instead of our exemplary lives honouring God's name, won't our sin actually dishonour God?

There certainly are times when the sins of Christian people, especially leaders and those in the public eye reflect badly on the church and on God. At various times the church has been worldly and some leaders corrupt. The abuse of children and the unjust responses to the abuse has certainly greatly shamed the church and dishonoured God.

And before I get too high and mighty, I wonder what would happen if every single one of my thoughts and desires in just the last 24 hours was magically projected onto the wall for everyone to see, like some sort of mental data projector. Would God be glorified?

All of us are sinners. All of us need the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds, so that we can live more like Jesus did. That means not serving ourselves, but sacrificing ourselves. Not looking out for number one, but making God and his kingdom our number one priority.

When we love as Jesus loved, God's name is hallowed. God's name is also hallowed when we forgive someone who sins against us, and when we humble ourselves and ask for forgiveness when we are the one who has hurt someone else.

This is a mystery to the secular world. The world understands that when we have done something wrong to another person, we want that person to accept our confession and forgive us. But when someone has wronged us, the world rejects the whole idea of forgiveness, and demands justice, which really means revenge. People talk about 'karma', or someone getting what they deserve, or use the expression "What goes around comes around".

God's name is indeed holy, but we pray in this petition that by our teaching about Jesus and by our loving actions, we bring honour to God. Amen.