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The Undeniable Light

OUR
FATHER
WHICH ART IN
HEAVEN,
HALLOWED BE
THY NAME,

This is personal. From the moment that I had it off by heart, the Lord's Prayer became a constant in my life. It was there for some time before I found my faith in adulthood, the celestial equivalent of having a dedicated line installed before connecting up the computer. Now it elbows into my thought whether I summon it or not. Often it has some part of me praying it before the rest of me has caught up. At night it invades my unguarded moments to remind me of my self-absorption or my mortality. By day it can occasionally come to mind when my concentration is otherwise fruitlessly directed. It knows when it hasn't been said for too long and sometimes it encloses me in one of its phrases, capturing my attention for as long as it takes to rekindle my understanding. It even has a default system which, should I allow interruptions to distract me short of the 'Amen', will return me automatically back to 'Our Father'. It will be respected. Seldom is the door unlocked until it is done. Only then, after a full, concentrated saying of the Lord's Prayer, can my



extempore prayer hope to find real form.

Once the prayer is in your head, it seems, it is there forever. It is there whether it means to you as little as a mantra (I know lapsed Christians who found it such a continuing comfort that they subsequently lapsed back from agnosticism), or as much as the promised avenue to God's attention.

The version of the Lord's Prayer that dwells in my head chooses to use the active Elizabethan/Jacobean language of the Authorised Version of the Bible (AV). Its internal scansion, its rolling, rising surges of plea and declaration gather like an incoming tide with the power to carry my colloquy with God to a perfect, satisfying culmination, every single time. Every single time, that is, I'm ready and able to play *my* part.

Even in more recent, perhaps less poetic, probably more accurate and accessible translations – where 'trespasses' are softened to 'debts' or 'wrongs' or hardened to 'sins' at the cost of more 'sayable' syllables – still, somehow, the essential rhythms survive. These are the sounds to be spoken aloud, with others. These are also the sounds for us to hear in our heads, when alone.

It would surprise me if their force did not survive just as strongly in Greek, Aramaic, Chinese, Swahili or any other translation. It must be so for it was, after all, Jesus who gave us the prayer. He gave us what to pray; He showed us how to pray. He made it a constant, central

presence even, I suspect, for those whose faith may have thinned in all other observances.

A gift from God is not so easily discarded.

Yet Jesus did something even more marvellous than that: He gave us access. For to me – and perhaps to you – God the Father is such an immensity, so altogether 'unvisualisable' – able to know us intimately while placing us, speck-like and briefly, in a creation too boundless to grasp – that we might understandably shrink from thinking we can ever know Him, let alone *speak* to Him. Except we do know one thing for sure about our Creator God: we know exactly how He likes us to pray to Him. He allowed His Son to tell us.

Now here's the puzzle at the very heart of this prayer of prayers: while it feels private, the saying of it is unarguably communal. The word 'us' occurs five times, 'our' three times and 'we' once. Not a 'me' or a 'mine' or an 'I' anywhere in it.

There will be historical–liturgical explanations for this (the Church certainly takes it as the prayer-model for the conduct of our community of believers); there may also have been some me-or-we ambivalence between languages at a historically early point of translation. Yet it is our personal experience that, even when speaking the prayer aloud along with others as communal worship demands, the communication remains as much individual as corporate.

Surely it has to be so. Jesus came as our intercessor and gave us the Lord's Prayer as part of that mediation. He says in Matthew 6:6, 'But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.' And three verses later, after the instruction 'This, then, is how you should pray ...', the Lord's Prayer is set down. The Lord loves us all. The Lord loves us all, *individually*.

That's what this book is about. It is no learned exegesis, nor a guide to prayer or worship. It is the sum so far of one individual's wonder at the insistent presence in his life of this all-containing prayer. It is a setting-down of its surprises, some observations on the variants to it that exist, ideas and images that it engenders, thoughts on its meanings as they have touched him and some references to what Bible scholars and others have said about it, also some oddities that arise from its consideration.

What it is *not*, is a miscellany. The 'day books' of Victorian poets and authors were essentially egocentric miscellanies – fleeting inspirations caught on the wing and pinned down for later use as possible starting points for other enterprises. To reproduce them for their own sake would have amounted to little more than an impulse to decorate.

The Bible might itself be seen as a miscellany, a pulling-together of recorded events, religious proofs and

instruction over a long period from many sources of uncertain provenance and muddled chronology. Except that it cohered around a divine purpose and that its Old and New Testament editors, known and unknown, demonstrably worked under divine inspiration.

In the light of which I have to explain quite where this gathering of Lord's Prayer fact and fascination sits. It has a purpose – that is, I feel driven to share with others the resonances and illumination the prayer has given me – but claims no authority whatsoever. There is a great light locked into the Lord's Prayer – though nowhere near sufficient glimpses of it have reached me, I freely admit, to constitute a vision. What I have seen, felt or found, I'm anxious to share with you for no better reason than that it seems too good to keep to myself.

This entirely appropriate modesty on my part is reinforced by a quotation from Swift in illustration of the word 'miscellany':

When they have join'd their pericranies,
Out skips a book of miscellanies.

So here, loosely-ordered – with questions raised but few morals drawn, and all in the spirit of praise – out skip some pericranies of my own arising from a long and grateful acquaintance with the Lord's Prayer. I hope that a little of its light remains among them to shine for you,

since it seems certain to me that this light must be that of the Holy Spirit.

Though other text versions are used for illustration, to keep some order the one serving here as an anchor comes from the *Book of Common Prayer*, taken from the Anglican order for evening prayer. It is also the one that has taken up permanent residence in my head.

