

First Sunday after Christmas

December 29, 2024

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St. Joseph Parish

Let's say you're sitting and saying the Morning Office at your breakfast table and come to the Lord's Prayer, or let's say we come together to the Lord's Prayer at Mass...How often do we let the words "Our Father" or, "Lord God of Hosts", just roll off our tongue and into the ether? How much of God are we missing? What crucial truths lie unappreciated in the names with which we worship God?

And how did it come about that we might call God our "father"? It only comes about in our having been saved and being adopted as his sons and daughters, a work wrought by God's own son. He gave us "Father" for God's name, or more closely, "Abba".

We TRULY have cause to rejoice in the God of History. Our experience of Him through life rings true to that of our ancestors in the faith through thousands of years.. back to the first set of human eyes that looked up into the night sky for meaning. The first ones to appreciate His presence gave Him the character-revealing names we still employ in our worship of Him.

The Collect for Purity begins, "Almighty God". God uses this name for Himself in Exodus, before giving his personal name to Moses: "I appeared unto Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name YHWH I was not known to them." El Shaddai showed his mighty power to free His chosen people in the events of the Exodus, the delivery from Pharaoh's armies, the parting of the Sea. So the Collect for Purity acknowledges that God has the immense power to part us from what enslaves US.

In the Nicene Creed, we say " I believe in God the Father Almighty, MAKER of heaven and earth".. "Elohim" .. In the beginning, Elohim created

heaven and earth. The spirit of Elohim moved upon the face of the waters of chaos. It is the first name of God..appearing in this first verse of Genesis. As Creator of all that is, was, and shall be, this name grounds us on the ground we flesh were given to live upon and the heavens from which all good things descend..think of our Lord's Incarnation! Our Lord, God of Gods, for there is no God greater.. He simply spoke all things into creation.

In the Sanctus, we pray, "Lord God of Hosts" .."Lord Sabaoth" in the Hebrew. What Host? Who are the hosts?.. God's armies. The armies in God's hands cleared away the occupants of the Promised land Canaanites, Amalekites, and Philistines so His people would settle where he wanted them and bear children for Him as countless as the stars..The judges of Israel credit God alone for the victories in settling the Promised Land. For the judges and kings only went to battle with one dependable weapon: a trust in God to fight for them, for this was God's promise. Only then was their victory assured.

So our Hebrew forbears were also given the name for their God, YHWH, through Moses' encounter with God as he stood tending Jethro's sheep and in confrontation with Pharaoh. YHWH is a word we translate "I am who I am"..a most intimate word and gift to His people. It is derived from the one of the most ancient names for God, El and given during the nomadic experience of earliest Israel..but it is a semitic verb, "to be", in the sense of "a being who helps". God reveals Himself as a loving God to the people He was choosing to be His own, to be His "peculiar" people. Admitting their culpability for the Exile to Babylon, Judaism had decided that this personal divine name YHWH should not be allowed to be profaned anymore. The Jews no longer felt inclined to call him by the name they had defamed by their constant turning away. It was too holy. Could they not let go of their

sin..their pride.? YHWH, once the distinguishing name of intimate divine presence now became the essence of God's unapproachability. His personal intimate name is no longer uttered in Jewish worship.

The word, "Abba", is an Aramaic term of familial closeness that can still be heard through the Middle East, uttered by children to greet their father. I think we are at risk of sentimentalizing this name when we refer to it as a mere baby talk. There are certain legal texts in later Jewish writings (the Mishnah) that confirm "Abba" as the name to be used by children who have reached the age of reason and stand to claim the inheritance of the father. So it is not so much associated with infancy as it is with intimacy with the giver.

Jesus prayed and sobbed his father's name, Abba, only once in scripture: in the garden of Gethsemane. This "Abba" is Jesus own word for the Father to Whom He reconciled us. Abba directly links the Christian believer as an adopted heir and son or daughter of God to Jesus Himself..we can now utter the intimate name Jesus used for His father, whether in joy or terror, for there was nothing more intimate between father and son than what transpired between the two of them at Gethsemane.

For the first gentiles had superstition and the worship of idols from which they were saved. But the Jew contemplating converting to Christianity and using the name "Abba"? How could a Jew leave the Law and the all powerful, all knowing God of the highest heavens whom His people had ungraciously profaned by their straying up to their exile? And yet, here in flesh and blood was their Messiah.. a Savior- not a scroll. The idea is that it would be presumptuous and daring beyond all faithful reverence and propriety to call God, "Abba", had Jesus Himself not encouraged to do so.

Something like the lightning strike implied in having just uttered for the first time “Abba” as a name for “God Almighty, Lord of Hosts, our heavenly king, Maker of heaven and earth” is veiled behind our praying, “we make **BOLD** to say”. The sense of overwhelming awe and holy wonder that accompanied the praying of the Lord’s Prayer by the first Jewish converts and Gentile believers was doubtless related to this fact. We call on the God who as YHWH freed our forbears from bondage in Egypt to free us from enslaving ties we have to hopelessness and even our coziest sins . We call on El Sabaoth, God of hosts in the Sanctus, to battle not the Canaanites, but all that fights against our longing for Him, our private demons and the public disdain for things holy and precious to God. In the Gloria, we call on our heavenly King whom our ancestors called Adonai, meaning our Lord and king who truly and finally came in Jesus. We proclaim, “Jesus is Lord”. He proclaims, Abba is the Father.

One theologian (J.Bligh) has reconstructed the atmosphere that might have obtained when the clergyman would introduce the Lord’s Prayer in this manner: “bearing in our mind the permission granted us after the apostles, we are bold to say- here he wipes his hands, takes in a deep breath- “Abba”- ..he pauses while everyone winces- “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done”!!~

This must have been a moment of tension and climax in the earliest Christian liturgies..a moment when the believer EXPERIENCED his and her being a son and daughter to God, feeling and sensing that God was drawing each of them into an almost frightening intimacy.”...Indeed!

Let that almost frightening intimacy with Abba, Father, be here..upon our lips..in this holy place.

