

If you read the back of breakfast cereal packets, like Weeties or Corn Flakes, you might sometimes come across competitions that ask you to write about the product. They might say, “In 50 words or less, tell us why you like this particular cereal.” If you were really keen on the cereal, you might have a lot to say. The challenge would be to get the answer down to 50 words or less.

Now imagine a similar contest about writing a prayer. In 50 words or less, write a prayer that sums up the key elements of the Christian faith. That would be quite a challenge. But it has been done . . . in the prayer we call the “Our Father”.

This is the prayer that the Lord Jesus taught his first followers, so it’s often called “The Lord’s Prayer”. Jesus brought together the main strands of his teaching about God and about humanity and put them into a short prayer. The version we have in today’s reading from the Gospel of St Luke is even less than 50 words.

The Lord’s Prayer is like high-energy food. The words are few but they’re packed with meaning.

One of the great teachers in the early centuries of the church was St Augustine. He pointed out that many of the prayers in the Book of Psalms flow together into this prayer of Christ. He said, “Run through all the words of the holy prayers and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord’s Prayer.”

Another great teacher in the Church was St Thomas Aquinas. He wrote that the Lord’s Prayer is the best of all prayers. He pointed out that the Lord’s Prayer teaches us the things we should pray about and it also teaches us the right order of praying about these things.

The opening lines of the Lord’s Prayer put the focus on God. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.” Up to this point in the prayer, all the attention is on God . . . *God’s* name, *God’s* kingdom, *God’s* will. When we pray, it’s good to lift our eyes first of all to God. Only then do we come to the petitions that refer to our needs. “Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

We focus first on praise and thanks to God. Then we mention our own needs. The order is the same as that of the two great commandments that Jesus spoke about. A lawyer asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the greatest?” and Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” So, the first of the great commandments directs us to love God with our whole heart. The second directs us to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Likewise, the Lord’s Prayer starts with the focus on praise and thanks to God. After that, we pray for our needs.

We ask for “our daily bread”. We can understand this in a broad sense to include all the gifts we need. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that under the heading of “our daily bread” we can include “all the goods and blessings we need, both material and spiritual”. (par 2830)

We also pray that God will forgive us our offences as we forgive those who offend us. This petition can remind us of Jesus’ teaching about mercy. Jesus spoke a lot about the mercy of God. He also spoke about the mercy we should show to one another.

We say the “Our Father” every time we come to Mass, just before communion. As we say the “Our Father” this evening, may we do so in a truly prayerful spirit. This is a prayer that says a lot in a few words.