My Homily for Mothers’ Day

A number of people have asked for a copy of the homily that I delivered on Mothers’ Day, so here it is:

Throughout the Easter season, the readings chosen from Saint John’s Gospel are at pains to emphasize that Jesus and the Father are one, and it is through Jesus that we have access to His Father in heaven, God the Creator. In the light of Mothers’ Day, I’d like to explore the nature of that same Father who is one with Jesus. Rather than concentrate on John’s Gospel, I’ll focus on the words to the Lord’s Prayer. On the day we honor mothers this may seem like an odd choice. How can fatherhood in this prayer and motherhood which we celebrate be equated?

Our recitation of the Lord’s Prayer can become rote until we’re confronted with new insight into its meaning. A colleague shared with me a reinterpretation of the prayer that allows us to hear it afresh. A scholar of Semitic languages, Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz may employ a good dose of artistic license, but his version brings new meaning to its words:

O cosmic Birther, from whom the breath of life comes, Who fills all realms of sound, light and vibration. May Your light be experienced in my utmost holiest. Your Heavenly Domain approaches. Let Your will come true in the universe just as on earth. Give us wisdom for our daily need. Detach the fetters of faults that bind us, like we let go the guilt of others. Let us not be lost in superficial things but let us be freed from that which keeps us off from our true purpose. From You comes the all-working will, the lively strength to act, the song that beautifies all and renews itself from age to age. Amén. Sealed in trust, faith and truth.

This reinterpretation through the Aramaic point of view opens us to broader, more creative, meanings of the prayer. It opens up the word Father as understood by the people of Jesus’ time, with a more inclusive appreciation of the nature of the Godhead.

What about Motherhood and the Lord’s Prayer? The Hebrew notion of God is more fluid than we may think. Elohim, one of the most frequently used names for God in the Old Testament, is actually the feminine plural for God. This is hard to square with the Jewish sense of the radical oneness of God, but that may be our imposing our own thought patterns on Judaism and the Hebrew language.

The opening line in this ‘Aramaic version’ of the Lord’s Prayer is far less clear in meaning than the Our Father, yet it reveals the feminine side of the Godhead. Further down, the prayer to “let us not be lost in superficial things, but let us be freed from that which keeps us off from our true purpose” suggests either a mother or father gently pushing us to lose that which keeps us from maturing into adulthood. The conclusion is a far cry from “lead us not into temptation”—a phrase, by the way, that Pope Francis would like to see reformulated in English.

Is our traditional English version of the Lord’s Prayer bad? I think not. It gives us a succinct account of how we are to pray, and its commonness allows us to recite it at will. But hearing a different translation often renders the beauty of a prayer we’ve taken for granted more vividly. It exposes us to other ways of saying the same thing, but with fresh insight.

As we celebrate Mother’s Day, we are aware of the true nature of the Godhead that Saint John tries to explain in his Gospel: The Father and Jesus are one. Our access to God the Creator is through Jesus. If we know Jesus, we know God. This different rendering of the Lord’s Prayer enables us to see deeper into God — one in which our ‘parent in heaven’ is more dynamic than can be contained in the word ‘Father’, one in which the Creator is the pattern for womanhood as well as man. We thus give thanks to God our Mother who nurtures, as do our own mothers, and is the ideal of motherhood.