

## **Hallowed be God's Name**

**An Address by Noel C Schultz, BA, MA, DMin**  
Highfield Road Uniting Church, Canterbury, 25 June 2006

A very religious twenty-year-old straps a vest loaded with high explosives, ball bearings and nails to his body, then walks into a coffee shop in Haifa, or an outdoor restaurant in Bali, or a busy market in Baghdad, shouts "God is great", presses the firing mechanism and blows himself and a dozen others in all directions. It happens every day, even several times a day. Surely this is the ghastliest profaning of God and God's name in our time. It is blasphemy of the worst order, especially when the devoutly religious vicious murderer professes that he is doing this in the name of God and to advance God's reputation.

When our son was professor of music at the Guildhall in London we enjoyed two marvellous holidays in France – the first in Normandy, the other in the far south, near the ancient walled city of Carcassone. That region of France, is famous not just for its vines and their quality product, but, sadly, for the slaughter of an estimated 500,000 Cathars by Simon de Mountfort and other Christian leaders in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Cathars were considered too liberal, too unorthodox, by the church and state of the time and so they were progressively and brutally exterminated. Scattered throughout this region are the remains of fortresses, high up in the mountains, which the Cathars built in a vain attempt to survive these religious purges. Many fled to the city of Beziers where they mixed with the local population. When the city was besieged, the commander asked the regional bishop whether he should proceed with his siege because he could not tell who was Cathar and who was Christian. He was told "Kill them all. God will decide who are the heretics and who are the true believers". Perhaps as many as 30,000 were thereupon were put to the sword. Seven centuries later the people in Southern France have not forgotten how God's name was invoked to justify this atrocity, this genocide. Generation after generation have questioned God's credibility because the religious leaders of the time had so profaned God by their actions.

For centuries crusaders were determined to free the holy land from the Moslems. These religious bigots professed that they were murdering and destroying in the name of their God. Again what blasphemy!

I shudder every time I hear the American president trying to justify his war on Iraq when invariably he concludes with "and God bless America". What a shocking misuse of God's name, suggesting that God is on America's side and that this is a holy war against the "evil empire" of Iraq. How many times must God holy name be blasphemed in a vain attempt to justify this man's folly! Confusing the kingdom of God with the United States of America has disastrous consequences for God's name and for Iraq.

It is a very serious business, this name of God. People were executed in the Old Testament for misusing the name of God. In the New Testament we have the warning that not everyone who uses the Lord's name will enter the kingdom of heaven. At the

momentous assembly of the Uniting Church in Brisbane in a few days' time all sides on the sexuality and leadership debate will be arguing that their position is right, and presumably, an honouring of God's name.

Clearly "Hallowed be God's name" is not the easiest of petitions to get a handle on. We have just sung a calypso song, very popular 30 or so years ago, which highlights that everything we are praying for in the Lord's Prayer is a hallowing of God's name with these words repeated after each petition. 'Hallow' is rarely used in our time. So it was not surprising that a seven year old asked his Sunday school teacher 'who was "Harold" we talk about in the Lord's Prayer'.

The linking of hallowing with God's name begins to make sense when we realise that the name really stands for the person, more specifically the person's reputation. So it is a prayer aimed at advancing and honouring God's reputation.

The gospel reading from John 17 is one of the few passages where the writer has Jesus speak at length about God's name – "I have made known your name to those whom you have given me", explaining a little further "the words you have given me I have given to them"... "Father, protect them in your name...while I was with them I protected them in your name".

When Jesus spoke about God's name he was talking about the ways through which he had disclosed God's being, his purposes and his reputation to people. An old Latin proverb says 'the name is everything' (*nomen est omen.*)

To hallow God's name is the opposite of 'taking the name of the Lord God in vain', or more correctly, 'in falsehood'. It means to keep and treat as holy, to regard with awe and humility the Being represented by the name.

When praying this prayer we might think of some of the ways by which God has disclosed his purposes and his reputation to us and the implications this has for us. For example, we might think of God as the Creator; so in praying this petition we are committing ourselves to care wisely and responsibly for the earth's limited resources of water, clean air, forests, lakes, animals and so forth. We might think of how God has revealed his commitment to justice and compassion and our responsibility to strive after a just and humane society, something which at least some of our politicians are demonstrating at the present time in the current immigration bill debate.

We might think of God's self-disclosure through the Scriptures and our responsibility to hear and heed God's word in them. We might think of God acting in grace to call an indifferent and rebellious world to himself, and our responsibility constantly to turn back to our Father in repentance and faith. So what onerous responsibility we are taking on board when praying these words "Hallowed be your name".

Prayer can be an escape from responsibility; it can be a substitute for action. We might resort to prayer, misuse prayer, when we are not willing to engage in those actions that

need to be, and can be taken, to bring about change. In Brecht's *Mother Courage* well armed soldiers advance on a group of peasants who feel powerless and helpless in the face of imminent slaughter. They are untrained in fighting and have no weapons. So they give way to fear and resign themselves to death. They resort to prayer and even the dumb Katrin is urged to pray. But instead of praying she stands up and begins to beat on a drum in order to awaken the inhabitants of the city. She is soon shot down, but the city is called to arms and is ready to resist the attack.

It is a misunderstanding of prayer when words to a higher power become a substitute for action. Bonhoeffer, awaiting death for his opposition to the Nazis, made the telling comment that prayer and action must go together. He wrote "Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants."

In saying "Hallowed be God's name" we are not evading our responsibilities, but we are expressing our readiness to be involved in causing God's kingdom to come and his will be done. We hallow God's name when our way of life is upright, truthful and faithful. We hallow God's name when we help build and preserve a more caring, compassionate, humane society. We hallow God's name when by our own life and by our actions in solidarity with others we help build peaceful and more just human relationships, in which violence and exploitation are repudiated. (L. Boff).

In conclusion let me make this point, and this applies to all petitions of the Lord's Prayer, that this is a prayer by the whole community of faith. It is not just an individual, but believers in God committing themselves in unison, to be God's people and act as God's people in the world. We are addressing not a private God, but the God of us all, who gathers us together with all his children, our brothers and sisters throughout the world, and thus unitedly we pledge ourselves to honour God's good name and to advance God's reputation throughout the world. Thus unitedly and with a keen sense of our responsibility we pray, "Hallowed be God's name".

©