

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Feb 19th 2013

Reputation is critically important in the cultures of the Middle East – then as well as now. It merges into values we call “face” and “honor”. It seemed that the Israelites thought they could talk God into acting on their behalf by appealing to His ego! His honor! Over and over again! Moreover, it seemed to work both ways: in the Hebrew view God Himself actually was concerned about His good name. The prophet Ezekiel relates a dialog with God (Ezek 36:23–28) in which God complains that the Hebrews have profaned His/Her name among the nations – that, by their behavior, they have made God look bad! And then God says, I will rescue you anyway. I’ll honor (i.e., “hallow”) my name by the way I save you despite your infidelities.

This background is helpful as we bump into the very first of the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer: “Hallowed be Your name.” Perhaps we tend to take that as a kind of throwaway line – a polite way of opening a prayer to God. It’s helpful to recognize that the expression is in the passive voice – what’s called the divine passive. Perhaps we think of that as a pious hope that people would revere the divine name. On the contrary, the Jews of Jesus’ time would have understood that God is the one who has been asked to do the hallowing: “God, vindicate your name”, “Show everyone what kind of God you are!”

How was God to do that? In this case, by inaugurating God’s reign on earth. “Thy Kingdom come”, the very next petition in the Lord’s Prayer, is another divine passive – not a hope that God’s reign will “happen” somehow, but a prayer that God would directly and actively bring it about – and not some day in the hereafter but soon, and here on earth (as in heaven).

The Lord’s Prayer is such a central part of the Christian liturgy that it is recited three times a day, every day – at morning and evening prayer and at Mass. But it’s so familiar that perhaps we go on autopilot when we start to recite those words – those daring words. And when we think of hallowing God’s name, perhaps we should ask ourselves whether, by our actions as Christians, we, like the Israelites, have tarnished God’s reputation . . .

