Today’s gospel begins by telling us that Jesus has been praying and that, having completed his prayer, he has now rejoined his disciples.

More than the other evangelists, Luke insists on the central role that prayer played throughout the public life of Jesus. A reference to him praying precedes almost all the important moments in his life, from his baptism to the transfiguration, from the agony in the garden to his death on the cross. He prayed as well before choosing the twelve apostles and again when he probed their faith with the question, “Who do you say that I am?”

In returning so often and so explicitly to the image of Jesus praying, Luke underlines how central it was in his life. Although we know very little of the nature and content of Jesus’ prayer, the “Our Father” offers us an insight into what it involved.

The version of the Our Father, which we all know so well, comes from the Gospel of Matthew. Luke’s version, which we just heard, is both shorter and somewhat different in some of its formulations. In spite, however, of the differences between them, both take us to the heart of Jesus’s own prayer and of the kind of prayer into which he invites us to enter as his disciples.

The prayer begins by evoking God. Whether we are seeking forgiveness or peace, help of one kind or another or discernment about our own life, the simple word “Father” reminds us that prayer begins by placing ourselves in the presence of God or rather of becoming aware of God’s presence to us and of ours to him.

Many years ago when I was a student at De La Salle high school, the Christian brothers had the tradition of marking every half hour during the day by having a student stand and say, “Let us remember that we are in the Holy presence of God.” It is a practice about which, over the years, I have often thought.

What Jesus taught the disciples was not only a prayer that they could use themselves; it was also a model for other prayers, which they might be inspired to write. Like biblical prayer in general, the prayer should begin with God. With the word “Father,” Jesus invites us to think of our prayer as a sharing in his prayer. The addition of the word “our” to Father makes this more explicit. In inviting us to address God as “Our Father,” Jesus is encouraging us to think of ourselves as his sisters and brothers.

For some people, the word “Father” is difficult to apply to God or to use in prayer. Our image of God and of his relation to us is deeply influenced by the relationship we have with our own father. In my case, my father’s fundamental goodness was the greatest gift he left to me.

In asking that God’s name be hallowed, we are praying that God might be recognized, celebrated and given thanks for all that he has given us beginning with life itself.

To pray that God’s kingdom will come is to pray, among other things, that he will be active in our life and in the life of the world and that he will inspire us to collaborate with him in making the world more what God intended it to be.

In the second part of the Our Father, we pray for ourselves, for one another and for our needs. The bread stands for all the things necessary for life from food and housing, family and friends, a job or profession, to good health and a sense of purpose and meaning in our life.

Jesus once said that we should not multiply words for themselves. A favorite prayer of mine is 9 words long: “Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.” It is brief but full of meaning.

Some time ago, Pope Francis, in response to an interviewer, spoke of prayer in his life. He mentioned the Mass, the Prayer of the Hours, the rosary and an hour of prayer in the evening before the Blessed Sacrament. During that hour, he is not always praying to God or even thinking explicitly of him. Most of the time, Francis said, is spent reflecting on his own life, on his responsibilities and on how he is dealing with them. What makes what he is doing a prayer is that he does it with an awareness of God’s presence to him and of his to God.

When I think of prayer, I often come back to a verse in St Paul’s letter to the Romans, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness,” Paul says, “for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” (Rom 8:26)

For me, Paul’s words are enormously consoling. They recognize that prayer is sometimes difficult but even then, the Spirit of God is with us, inviting us to entrust ourselves and our prayer to him.