05 Prayer in worship

Readings: Jeremiah 20:7-13; I Timothy 2:1-7; St Luke 11:1-13
Psalm 130 – Gelineau, at Hymn 67

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Last week we were thinking of the Bible as the basis and the regulator of all worship: the main channel through which we derive our knowledge of God and of his saving acts of history, and at the same time the yardstick by which everything we do here must be measured.

This morning we turn to the other indispensable component of Church worship, which is prayer. Prayer is closely linked to that great faculty of worship, which we saw at the beginning of this series is a vital and distinctive privilege of being human. To us, and us alone, belongs the gift of communicating with the Creator of all things, enjoying him for what he is, praising his glory and his holiness, thanking him for his great love and mercy, seeking a continually deeper knowledge of his mind and will, holding up to him the needs of others and the needs of the world, asking his help on our own pilgrimage, rejoicing in the hope and vision we've received so far. Prayer is not in itself the total expression of Christian living. Like our study of the Scriptures, it must spill over into action, into weekday lives that really are made new and may be radically changed. There is a sacramental principle embedded at the very heart of Christianity, whereby spiritual power and insight must become incarnate and must find expression in the deeds and the decisions and the attitudes which effect the renewal of society and the redemption of creation. But these things cannot happen without prayer, and neither can worship.

The normal sequence of our prayers in church follows a regular pattern. We come first into the presence of God and lift up our eyes to his light. Looking on his purity, we are inevitably conscious of our imperfection and our need of grace. Each of us will have fallen short in different ways, so prayers of Confession must be fairly general as each of us brings what we need to lay down at the foot of the Cross. The note of Absolution is important here, though. We are here to seek, and to accept, forgiveness – not to grovel; this corporate deliverance is our equivalent of the Confessional in other branches of the Church. Having been assured of God's forgiveness, we then ask his help, in Supplications, help to do better in the future and not fall into the same traps as before. These prayers usually finish with the Collect for the Day – a prayer being used on that same Sunday in churches of various denominations throughout Britain, gathering – collecting – themes in the lectionary readings for that day.

Having been set right with God, we are then ready to address ourselves to Scripture and to be addressed by Scripture – so the service moves on to our readings from both Testaments, separated by what's called a "gradual" Psalm, marking the gradation or progression from the Old to the New. [Or 'named after the steps, gradus, of the ambo [small platform] on or near which it was sung' *New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (ed.)] Then, being cleansed and re-charged as it were by the Word of God (the Word read and then interpreted by means of the sermon) we are ready to make our response. We profess the Church's faith in the words of the Creed. We are led in reflection on the readings for the day by the Anthem – which is best not regarded as a party piece by the musically gifted, but as something in which all of us participate, praying or meditating on the words being sung, allowing them and the music to introduce a different angle on our understanding of the truths of Scripture. Then we make our Offering, whose placing at this point in our worship is important – for it is not an

entrance payment, nor is it just what's due from us towards the upkeep of the church. It represents the giving of ourselves: our gifts material and spiritual, our time, talents, energy, our wills, our goals, our motives – all being offered and re-dedicated to the service of God in the week to come.

And part of our response to God's Word is to pray: more outward-looking prayer this time, and less focussed on ourselves and our own needs. We thank God for his great goodness and his love revealed supremely in Christ. We vocalise the offering that we have just enacted. And then we turn our minds outward to the needs of the Church and the world – which is the task of the Church as a priestly community. The Protestant Communions have traditionally laid great emphasis on what is called the priesthood of all believers, but too often it has been a negative reaction against priestly power in the mediaeval Church – "I don't need any priest to put me right with God". Whereas it surely is a very positive and very humbling role to be part of the priesthood which belongs to the whole Church, to have responsibility for mediating God to his world and in turn the world to its God.

As with Confession, we move forward from the all-too-real horrors of the world to a positive affirmation of our hope in the Kingdom that is coming. This is also retrospective, as we look back on the faithful who have done great things and little things to bring that Kingdom closer – saints throughout the history of the Church, and people who've been precious to ourselves. As we advance in years the Communion of Saints becomes increasingly important to us. Every congregation has some members who have reached the stage where they have more loved ones in the next world than in this one, and our service should express this overlap. Then, as the climax to our fumbling spoken prayers, our worship is all gathered into the perpetual prayer of Christ himself; and this is not a matter simply of repeating words that he once used. It brings us into union with the prayer that Christ still offers. For our Lord is not retired. However we may picture that seat which the Creed says he occupies at God's right hand, it certainly will not be a recliner or a poolside lounger. He's extremely active as our High Priest; and he told us that his business was going to be prayer.

There is a difference – I believe a necessary and helpful difference – between prayers in church and private prayer. When we are praying as individuals there's no need for any shape or structure, and no need for special language. Private prayer is conversation with God. It can be as natural and unforced as our conversation in the family. Jeremiah gave us a splendid example of an individual's prayer in the OT passage we read. When he found that his integrity and faithfulness had led him into a position of total ostracism in the community, he rounded on God saying "You've conned me". St Theresa, two thousand years later, was heard saying much the same thing: "God, it is no wonder you have so few friends: look at the way you treat them". This frankness is more natural and healthy than suppressing what we feel. And we saw Jeremiah work his way, as the Psalmist also did so often, through his pain and his bewilderment until he felt less jaundiced and was able to find joy in God again. I am sure he doesn't mind us venting our bewilderment and hurt on him. We can talk to God the Father any way, anywhere, any time. When people feel they need a specialised vocabulary for it, they get into difficulties and the Lord seems thoroughly remote. There is no language that he does not understand. The examples Christ chose in our gospel reading to illustrate the need for perseverance in prayer aren't exactly lofty.

But Church prayer shouldn't feel as if we were all listening in to what one individual has to say. The more idiosyncratic it becomes, the more attention's likely to be diverted from God to the minister or leader. Prayers for large numbers of people have to be fairly general and unspecific, for we each have different failings to confess, we are conscious of a lot of

different needs. The gifts we specially want to offer thanks for will be very diverse; so will the concerns which prompt our intercessions. If a congregation is really to engage in prayer, rather than just listen to a ritual being performed, the leader's task must be to open up the channels and the trains of thought which can be filled with everybody's different input and be real for happy people, sad people, struggling people and complacent people, young and old, guilt-ridden and self-satisfied. This generality may sometimes lead to church prayers sounding somewhat bland; but pegs on which we each can hang our needs and hopes and longings are more helpful than one eloquent cadenza, unless it is extraordinarily charismatic. In a church like ours, with no set prayer book, there is always going to be an element of individuality, and members will find some ministers easier than others to identify and pray along with. This can work both ways. It is a helpful thing if we are able to relate easily to the language and the thought forms of the leader; it is very jarring if they're uncongenial; and because we are so diverse in temperament and outlook, different ministers help different people.

It was common practice in the early Church for some prayers in the liturgy – especially intercessions – to be led by someone from the congregation. It's a practice we might usefully recover, once we have a building that is easier to speak in. Prayer has come to be associated too much with the ordained ministry – as though it needed special training, special language and a set of special formulas. It doesn't. Prayer is the prerogative of every Christian. There is no single "right" way to address our Maker; there are only helpful and unhelpful ways, ways that open things up and ways that confine our thinking, prayers that point us towards God and prayers that distract us or stay firmly earthbound in their cleverness or dreariness. One of the misapprehensions that we suffer from within the Kirk is the notion that worship is some sort of transaction between minister and people. These are not the two parties involved. In our prayers, our praise, and even in our preaching, worship is communication between all of us, and God. The leader of our prayers is just a mouthpiece for the rest. As every worshipper supplies his or her individual input to the common framework set out by the leader, private prayer and public worship come together; all our individual flickering devotions reinforce each other to become the life that is the Church's liturgy.

To the God who has given us the gift of prayer, and the Son who is praying with us and the Spirit who inspires our praying and gives it life, be glory through the Church for ever. Amen.

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