



**A talk during the Week of Guided Prayer at Wells Cathedral, given on Thursday 4 June by the Reverend Prebendary Alan Moses, Warden of Spirituality in the Diocese of Lincoln.**

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## **Praying the Eucharist**

Today is the Feast of Corpus Christi – the day of thanksgiving for the institution of Holy Communion. In my last parish, we would have been preparing for a glorious High Mass followed by a procession of the Blessed Sacrament, with rose petals, incense and a brass band, on Oxford Street, among the Thursday night shoppers.

A huge amount can be said about the Eucharist – but my time is limited, - so I want to focus on how we pray the Eucharist, and how the elements of the liturgy relate to our personal prayer: How our common prayer feeds our personal prayer, and is in turn fed by it.

### **The Gathering**

We come to the Eucharist called by God to be formed into his people – the Body of Christ – a royal priesthood – to become what we celebrate: a holy communion. We are being drawn deeper into the priesthood of Christ. So, the president greets us in God's name – not their own. The Eucharist reminds us that our prayer is not just spiritual self-improvement or a private relationship with Jesus. In an individualist culture, this is counter-cultural, and rightly so.

We bring from our lives all sorts of concerns – we do not leave them at the church door – although we should leave the world's distraction and noise there. It is a sadness that silence is so rarely to be found in churches these days. After accompanying me to a church in Lincoln I was looking after, my daughter said: “Do they ever stop talking. I did not need to hear about the price of chicken in Tesco's when preparing to worship. I sometimes say to clergy that one of the gifts we bring to congregations at worship is a calm and prayerful attention. Our silence and attention is not just for ourselves – but a gift to other people. Our chatter is not. And what is true for clergy is equally so for lay people. And if we allow that habit of attention to grow it spills over into our private prayer and into our relations with other people.

## **Confession**

In preparation to encounter our Lord present in word and sacrament and fellowship – yes, in that odd person in the row in front at the table of the Lord and the Eucharist, we are bidden to recall and confess our sins. A reminder that self-examination should be a part of our prayer life. We do this not to beat ourselves up – but to seek liberation – what the old hymn-writer calls “the Double Cure” - not to simply wipe the slate clean – but to receive the grace and strength which enables us to overcome our besetting sins - whether of omission or commission.

## **The Collect**

The president invites us to pray – and there should a silence in which we might bring our own 'intentions' - as they are called: someone, something which we need to pray for; someone or something we want to give thanks for. The president gathers these up, collects them, in the Collect.

Many of our collects, as well as being ancient and beautiful, are also memorable. Memorised prayers, like hymns, are a blessing as I was reminded when I ended up in hospital unexpectedly.

## **The Liturgy of the Word**

We have already heard something this week about praying with Scripture. In the Liturgy – either Eucharist or Office – we listen with the Church, as a community – to readings from the Old and New Testaments; we respond in psalm or hymn; we stand to hear the reading from the Gospel, heard as Jesus addressing us. We say: “Glory be to you, O Lord,” and “Praise be to you, O Christ.”

We listen to the Scriptures not just to learn information about God and Jesus – but for transformation through words they address to us, which challenge, comfort, encourage – and sometimes judge us. Someone once said that it is not just that we read the scriptures, but that they read us: they tell us not just about God but about ourselves.

We listen to a homily/sermon in which the preachers seeks to open the scriptures to us as the risen Lord did on the road to Emmaus. More jokes have probably been cracked about preachers and sermons than any other aspect of church life – and sometimes deservedly – and those of us who are called to preach bear a heavy responsibility. However, if we look at it from the other direction: What attitude do we come to listen to a sermon with? Is it prayerful, attentive, expectant. Not just when it's someone important or famous – but when it's the Vicar or the curate or the reader.

In many Black American churches there is a group called the “Amen Corner,” whose role is to encourage the preacher by responding to his sermon with “amens” and “alleluias.” Not easy to imagine in Wells Cathedral – but you get the point.

I studied theology in Edinburgh when the majority of staff and students were Presbyterians – from the Reformed tradition. Prominent among those we studied was the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth. He spoke to the sermon as sacramental – a means of grace through which God communicates with the hearers. Just as the Sacrament of the Eucharist is to be received by faith – so, too, does the word in the sermon.

We are encouraged to keep a period of silence after the sermon, in order to reflect on and absorb what we have heard.

Hearing the scriptures in church is important – but it should not be the only time we hear and read them.

### **The Prayers of the People**

As a priestly people, we are called to share, with the whole Church in heaven and earth, in the perpetual intercession of Christ our great high priest. The rubrics of Common Worship suggest that these should include prayers for the Church, for the world and our nation and those in positions of responsibility, for local communities, families, those who serve our common life, for the sick and suffering and those who minister to them, for the departed and the bereaved. Often there is a period of silence in which we can bring our own petitions – whether great or small. And because we do not pray alone but with saints in heaven and earth, we join our intercessions with theirs, as we commend those for whom we pray to God.

These categories are not exclusive – but they give us a guide for our own prayers of intercession – one which can help both broaden and deepen them.

### **The Peace**

The Peace may not seem immediately relevant to our private prayers – but when someone says to me, well I'm often turning to give the peace to my spouse and family – I ask them who they are most likely to have had a row with. The Peace points us to the place in our prayers which belongs to those who have offended us – or whom we have offended – and even if we cannot for the moment be reconciled with them – we can at least pray for them. It often brings the blessing of release from the bonds of resentment.

## The Offertory

Bread and wine are taken to the altar to be “**taken, blessed, broken and shared**” in the sacrament as the Body of Christ, the bread of heaven, the Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.

These material things are both gifts of God and symbolic of our use and misuse of the creation from which they come. Bread which represents the earthly food on which we depend – which earth has given and human hands have made – the hands of others in the great supply chain which sustains our earthly life – but also the divisions between those of us who have enough – and more than enough – while others go hungry.

Wine which gladdens the heart, the drink of joy and celebration – as at the Wedding at Cana – but also the symbol of blood and sacrifice – the giving of life – of Christianity as the faith of life given rather than blood shed. Wine, too, is the symbol and means of human addiction and degradation and violence.

The use of material things in our worship is not a concession to those who are not spiritual enough to manage without them – but a sign of God's will and work to renew his creation which we have marred. These symbols of our life and labour placed on the altar for consecration, teach us that our whole life should be ordered towards God's will and purposes – not just some supposedly 'spiritual' bit. If we are thinking of a Rule of Life, it should encompass our resources of money and time as well as how often we say our prayers. The traditional Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving are intimately linked.

## The Eucharistic Prayer

The Church's Great Thanksgiving for God's work in creation and redemption; what the Prayer Book General Thanksgiving describes as: “**our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life, but above all for the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace and for the hope of glory.**”

We can 'count our blessings,' as the old hymn puts it: in church and at home, and anywhere, and grow in gratitude..

As we celebrate Our Lord's offering of himself to the Father for the salvation of the world, we are drawn into that great offering to play our part in that continuing work through the mission of the Church– and so after Communion we are sent out to be shared with the world, to share life renewed and transformed by the grace of the sacrament – to offer souls and bodies, taken and blessed, as a living sacrifice – and to pray how that might be worked out in our lives, families, communities, work-places, and wherever life has placed us.

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NB: The Reverend Prebendary Alan Moses recommends *Some Daily Prayers for the Church of England People* by Harry Ogden. This book contains prayers for before, during and after the Eucharist and is published by SPCK.