

EXPLORING OUR FAITH

A Walk Through the Sunday Service Session 14 – The Prayers of the People

This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.

The Prayers of the People as response to the Word of God. We have seen how our Sunday worship has a “proclamation and response” form. In the first “Word of God” half, we listen to the proclamation of God’s word in Holy Scripture and then respond with sermon, creed, prayers and confession. Today in this note we explore the prayers of the people.

Intercessory prayer. The Book of Common Prayer (p. 359) states that after the sermon and creed, “prayer is offered with intercession for the Universal Church, its members, and its mission; the Nation and all in authority; the welfare of the world; the concerns of the local community; those who suffer and those in trouble; and the departed (with commemoration of a saint where appropriate).” As one liturgical authority states, these “are not prayers *about* the assembled people or their personal concerns, but instead are prayers *by* the assembled people for the entire created order. They are an exercise of the baptismal priesthood.” In other words, having our hearts and minds opened by the proclamation of the Word, seeing now with the perspective of Christ, we join our prayers with his for the world and the Church – for what is beyond our selves.

Forms of intercession. Intercessory prayer (prayer for others) has been part of the Eucharistic liturgy as far back as we have any record. Over the centuries it has taken many forms, and the Prayer Book encourages diversity and flexibility today. The six forms (seven if you count the Prayer for the Whole State of Christ’s Church in Rite I) are intended as models or suggestions rather than prescribed texts, though they are often used as such. It is desirable, when the form permits, for the intercessor to allow ample silence during which people may offer, silently or aloud, their own requests for prayer. The form used should be general enough to avoid praying for particular “results” or advancing points of view that suggest that the intercessor knows better than God. Nor are the Prayers of the People an opportunity to preach a second sermon. Intercession involves an opening of the heart and mind to – as noted above – see life as Christ sees it; to make his perspective ours. That is why, although prayer is almost always addressed to God the Father, we pray “through Jesus Christ his Son.”

Some details on forms of intercession. The various “model forms” of intercessory prayer in the Book of Common Prayer have traditional names. Forms I and II are bidding prayers in which the leader bids or asks the congregation for its prayers on various matters. In the early Church, this was the most common form, with a deacon leading the prayers. Deacons were charged with serving the needs of the world on behalf of the Church so they would have had the fullest knowledge of what needed to be prayed for. In our usual worship at St. Andrew’s a Eucharistic Minister takes the role of deacon. Form III is responsive in form, alternating between the leader and the congregation; it is generally not used on Sundays because it is so abbreviated, but it works well for weekday or other less formal celebrations. Form IV is a series of brief intercessory petitions. Like Forms I and V, each is followed by a

congregational response. The Greek response, *Kyrie eleison*, means Lord have mercy. The word mercy translates a Hebrew word, *hesed*, which means “loving kindness” or “favor.” So these forms ask God to respond to needs with his saving grace. Form V is in litany form, again reflecting a long tradition in the Church. The Great Litany (BCP p. 148) was the first part of the medieval liturgies translated into English. In various forms it was regularly used in Sunday worship, often chanted in procession, until the twentieth century. Form VI is another responsive reading which can be concluded with its own form of Confession or with a collect. So, much variety from which to draw.

Intercession leads to confession. In their context, in the overall structure of the Eucharistic liturgy, the Prayers of the People serves not only as another form of response to the Word of God, but also as preparation for the Confession. Reminded of the way Christ looks at the world, we are moved to acknowledge and confess our own sinful selfish perspective.