



WEEK 5 - WRITING AND READING PRAYERS AND INTERCESSIONS

The Prayers of the People (the intercessions)

The health of a congregation may be directly linked to the prayer life of its members. Biblical texts like Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:23-31; 6:3-4; 9:40 express the importance of prayer in the early church. There are many instances recorded in the gospels where we hear of Jesus active in prayer and communication with God.

Intercession means “to plead with one person on behalf of another”. In the context of what we do during our services, we, the congregation in church, are bringing the needs of other people, whether near to us or far away, to God. The intercession writer may have composed the prayers for us, but they do it on behalf of everyone in church. Good intercessions ensure that everyone present can feel they are able to make the prayers their own.

There is no single "right" way to write the prayers.

- The usual ‘order’ is to pray for the world, the church, the community, the sick and give thanks for those who have died.
- Several of those who write us week by week like to follow one of the forms in A Prayer Book for Australia (p 172-3 and 184-5). These are good and enable the individual prayers to be expanded and adapted to address local or topical subjects.
- The Prayer Book also contains several useful specific prayers (p 202-220) which can be read direct or adapted from the book.
- There are several books to assist the leading of intercessions which link in with the readings of the day (see resources at the end of these notes).
- Many of the Psalms are easily adapted to form the basis of a prayer or a whole set of intercessions. (e.g., Psalm 8 is a joyous shout of praise as well as a basis for prayers for our care of the Earth; Psalm 46 is a great help in times of trouble).
- Many hymns are also readily adapted for prayer (see Together in Song 690 or 650 and lots of Taize chants in the back of TiS) and can be used to offer something a little different.

A few other ideas...

- *Be sensitive to who is in church.* If a lot of visitors are present one might want to phrase prayers differently so that the visitors understand what you are praying about (ie avoid jargon). Likewise, if you know that someone recently bereaved is present you might think how best to help them as you pray.

- *Thanksgiving.* Paul in his letters in the New Testament is emphatic that the giving of thanks is an important part of our prayer life. Do not hesitate to give thanks for good things we as a church or our neighbours, our state, nation or planet have received from God.
- *Language.* We should pray in everyday language. The temptation to use 'spiritual clichés' is best avoided. Variety is a good thing. Use words and forms you are happy with. There is no need for all our intercessors to sound just like each other!
- *Avoid Giving the Notices.* If you want to refer to something which may not be widely known, it is best to give a note to the presiding priest so they can include it in the welcome to the service – or include a very brief statement of facts before starting the intercessions.
- *Topicality is important.* It is very useful to pray about what is likely to be on the minds of those present. For the same reason it is desirable where possible to listen to the morning radio news before coming to church to read the prayers!
- *Subjects.* Be aware that when contentious issues are in the minds of people (eg prior to an election or when someone has been arrested) it is helpful to pray for both sides and pray for one particular outcome or to choose one side in a debate – one never knows the opinions of those in the congregation on any matter. In general though we need to remember that our people's minds may not be able to grapple with more than 3 or 4 topics for prayer successively.
- *Length.* You will recall that Jesus had no time for lengthy, wordy prayers (see Luke 18:9-11)! We too may find that the congregation's attention span is limited. There is no maximum time for the intercessions, but watch giving a second sermon – four to five minutes is a good general rule!
- *When we have on our list 'those who've died',* it is helpful to the congregation to "Thank God for their life and ministry amongst God's people" We are thanking God for who they were and remembering their family and friends who mourn (not praying that they are to be released from purgatory or forgiven their sins).

There is no single "right" way to read the prayers.

- If you know there are visitors present (or expect them for major festivals), you may like to refer people to the page in the prayer book ("Our intercessions are printed on page xxx of the prayer book) or let them know the response ("The response to, *Lord in your mercy*, is **hear our prayer**. You can then get the congregation to practice – a good idea if the response is unusual)
- It is important to read clearly and so it is best if you stand and use a microphone (if it's available) and try to look up when you read.
- There may be additions on the day. It's good to check if the Priest is aware of something urgent that has arisen that week (perhaps someone has died overnight)
- Sometimes too the Preacher may have a specific theme they'd like you to include.
- Read slowly and pause often. This is not a race but an act of worship and prayer.

Some hints about reading aloud

The reader helps the whole congregation to connect with God in prayer and prayer on behalf of the community gathered.

Remember there are multiple tasks involved:- scanning the written words then reading aloud; coordinating respiration with speech; projecting your voice; making the reading interesting and communicating the message clearly and loudly. Various emotions may be involved:- anticipation, anxiety, nervousness, fear, reservation, embarrassment, self-doubt, preoccupation with other issues.

Some Simple Steps:-

- Project, don't shout.
- Before you leave your seat pray that this will be God speaking through you. It's not about you; the purpose of this reading is to clearly communicate God's Word or the Intercessions to everyone present.
- Walk confidently. If you cross in front of the sanctuary, you may like to stop facing the altar (not the clergy) and bow your head, acknowledging God's presence.
- If you are nervous, you can ask the Holy Spirit to calm your nerves and give you confidence.
- There is NO hurry:- Once at the lectern, clear your mind, take a deep breath, pause to focus and only then, begin to read.
- Stand tall, shoulders back, chest, neck and head stretched towards the ceiling. Posture is essential to maintain a steady rhythm of breathing and speaking.
- Use all your articulators with energy and enthusiasm ie. Lips, tongue, jaw and resonating cavity (mouth). These are the parts that make the words you speak sound crisp, clear and interesting or muffled, flat and dull.
- Your mouth is like a cave---keep the stone rolled away.... open, wide and vibrant.
- Express yourself using your whole face. Light up the room with your energy.
- Try to throw your voice up and out, instead of talking down in your throat. Although you are reading, use your energy and enthusiasm to lift your voice (above the microphone) and send it to the back row of the church.
- Read SLOWLY, pause for effect, breathe; if you stumble, that's OK, just put the brakes on until you re-establish your rhythm.
- Look up as much as you are able, scan the room, make it personal, notice the person in the back row. You are reading to them.
- Expressive reading and speaking are subjective activities in the end, so there is always a certain amount of acting involved ie. in debating you are trying to convince; in poetry reading you are trying to engage emotionally; in reading from the bible or reading the intercessions you are trying to help people connect with their God.
- YOU are the conduit. You are trying to ignite interest and attention from those listening so that the words read are truly heard. Be expressive, energetic and enthusiastic and your voice will carry.
- It takes courage to read aloud to a large audience. This is your gift to your fellow worshippers. Help them engage with God through your reading.

RESOURCES

- Let us Pray, Janet Nelson, HarperOne 1999
- Celtic Prayers – Radiance of His Glory, David Adams, SPCK Publishing, 2009
- Intercessions For The Christian People, Cycles A, B, C, Gail Ramshaw, Liturgical Press, 1999