

Rediscovering the Prayers of the People¹

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Jesus' teaching about prayer is paradoxical, to say the least: "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (*Matthew 6: 7-8*) So why pray at all, if God already knows what we need, and even knows what's on our minds? And do we really think we can persuade God to do something God would not have been inclined to do?

Part of the answer can be found in our inherited forms of prayer — what might be called 'common prayer', the pattern of communal prayer that has come down to us in our liturgical tradition.

The Root and Flower of Intercessory Prayer

Imagine appealing to a court of law for something that is actually contrary to the law, or appealing to a friend to do something that would violate your friend's principles, or asking God for something that is contrary to God's ways. What would it sound like if we actually asked God for the things that accord with God's ways?

The 'root' of common prayer — the source and motivation for all forms of congregational prayer — is the desire to know and cooperate with 'the ways of God'. "Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths" (*Psalm 25: 4; cf. Psalm 95: 8-11 / Hebrews 3: 10*). The earliest Christian movement was called 'the Way' (*Acts 9: 2; 19: 23; 24: 14*); Jesus' followers believed that the ways of God had been made clear once for all through Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

An appeal to the story of God's ways is a phenomenon we can see, if we look for it, in almost all our liturgical forms of prayer:

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, our Lord and King,	grant that the peoples of the earth, now divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his gentle and loving rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. (<i>BAS, 394</i>)
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We can see this pattern in most of the brief prayers we refer to as 'collects', for they collect our distracted desires, drawing us together into a shared longing for God's promised mercies. The pattern is even clearer in more complex prayers like the Prayer over the Water in Holy Baptism (*BAS 156-158*), and the Great Thanksgiving in the Eucharist (*BAS, 193-210*). This pattern might be called 'invoking the story of God's ways', for it recalls some aspect of God's redeeming work.

¹Examples are provided from the (Canadian Anglican) *Book of Alternative Services*, 1985 (*hereafter, BAS*).

When we pray in this way, we seek to place ourselves 'in sync' with God's ways with the world, and in particular, the ways of God as revealed in Jesus. For it is supremely in the gospel story that we see how God is healing the world, perfecting God's good creation. When we pray in Jesus' name, it is not as if we are pitting the mercy of Jesus against the justice of God. Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity; Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.

This is not to suggest that there is only one format for intercessory prayer, or that invoking the story of God's ways will always be explicit. But invoking the story is the *root* of Christian prayer, the source of our confidence in praying. Learning to pray entails cultivating an imagination shaped by that story.

Thus it is intriguing to hear, in some expressions of spontaneous intercessory prayer, a peculiar use of the word 'just', almost like a verbal tic: "Lord, we *just* pray that you will..." It sounds apologetic, humble, perhaps even fawning or wheedling — *just in case* we might be asking too much! Does this perhaps reveal a loss of confidence in the prayer of intercession? Is this what happens when we forget the great tradition of 'invoking the story' — when we forget the *root* of common prayer?

Therefore, one of the ways to prepare for leading the intercessions is to ponder the readings for the day, letting them fire our imagination, seizing upon telling phrases which can be used to sharpen communal awareness of the story of God's ways.

But if that is the *root* of common prayer, what is the *flower*? One of the glories of the tradition of common prayer is the seductive power and beauty of so many of our inherited forms of prayer. I am not referring to Cranmer's graceful prose, magnificent though it is; the Book of Alternative Services reminds us that "Cranmer's elegance...is not characteristic of the English language now. The poetry of our own day tends to be spare, oblique, incisive, relying more on the sharpness of imagery than the flow of cadence" (*BAS*, 12). The seductive power and beauty is not to be measured by our nostalgia for Elizabethan language; as C. S. Lewis pointed out,

"[the things] in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was *longing*. These things — the beauty, the memory of the past — are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not yet visited."²

If the *root* of common prayer is *invoking the story*, the *flower* of common prayer is *longing*; Lewis called it "that inconsolable longing".

²*The Weight of Glory.*

When I hear a collect like the one cited above, I find that I am stirred by the powerful and alluring images; then I find myself invited to concur with a petition I wouldn't have thought of, but one that my heart leaps to affirm with a joy that surprises me. That's what Lewis calls *the inconsolable longing*: longing for the coming of God's just and peaceable kingdom, longing for a world I hardly dared to imagine, longing to see that face of infinite love, longing with a desire that has begun to transform me. "A proper engagement in prayer involves significant emotional engagement, and not merely a speaking of the correct words."³

When Pope Francis visited Mexico, one of the prayers he offered was that Mexico would be "a land of opportunity where there will be no need to emigrate in order to dream." I don't know how that engaged local people emotionally, but it evoked in me a pang of empathy.

So where do we get the language for such evocative petitions? I think it arises from our inner life of prayer when we make room in our hearts for the sorrows of this world and the labour pains of God's people (*Romans 8: 22-27*). If prayers of intercession only stay on the level of abstract generalities, they may simply become a way of relieving our own social conscience while avoiding any true engagement.

We who lead the Prayers of the People may not be poets, but we must seek and expect the help of the Spirit to *invoke* the story of God's ways and *evoke* the longing for God's kingdom. Then our intercessions will grow out of our trust in God's purposes (the *root* of common prayer) and blossom into yearning and hope (the *flower* of common prayer).

Not Heaping Up Empty Phrases

Two basic methods of leading the people's intercessions are provided in the sample litanies (*BAS, 110-128*), and both methods are intended to ensure that the intercessions are the prayers of the *people*.

The first method employs a series of *biddings*, summoning people to pray for particular concerns:

For our deliverance from all affliction, strife, and need,
let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy. (*BAS, 111*)

For those drawing near to the light of faith,
that the Lord will bring them to true knowledge of himself,
let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy. (*BAS, 115*)

³Mark Stamm, *Devoting Ourselves to the Prayers*.

Bidding prayer is actually a form of instruction, *inviting* prayer for particular needs or concerns. Instruction is not prayer at all; it is a way of prompting the prayers of the people. It is commonly followed by a space of silence so they can do it. In the two examples above, the leader can pause briefly before saying “let us pray to the Lord”. Bidding is the only kind of instruction that should ever occur in the prayers of the people; instruction in doctrine (or politics or ethics), masquerading as prayer to God, is always out of place.

The second method employs a series of petitions addressed to God, each of which is framed within the context of ‘the story of God’s ways’ and the attempt to ‘evoke the longing’ — longing that the story will come to its fulfilling culmination. Each petition attempts to do this as succinctly as possible, imitating the form, language and length of the sample litanies. Such discipline is important in ensuring that the leader is actually *awakening* the prayers of the people, not *flooding* them in verbiage:

Deliver us from war and violence,
from hardness of heart and contempt of your love and your promises;
O Lord, hear our prayer;
Kyrie eleison.

Enlighten our lives with your word,
that in it we may find our way and our hope;
O Lord, hear our prayer;
Kyrie eleison. (BAS, 117)

These two methods are sometimes combined, but must never be confused. If I am the leader, I must decide whom I am addressing: either I am addressing God (with a petition), or I am addressing the congregation (with a bidding). If I lose track of which I am doing, I confuse people and discourage participation.

An example of alternating bidding and petition:

I ask your prayers for the mission of the Church.
Pray for the coming of God’s Kingdom among all nations and people.

Silence.

O Lord our God,
you have made all races and nations to be one family,
and you sent your Son Jesus Christ
to proclaim the good news of salvation to all people.
Pour out your Spirit on the whole creation,
bring the nations of the world into your fellowship,
and hasten the coming of your kingdom.
We ask this through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.** (BAS, 125)

The silence provides maximum opportunity for the people's prayers. The biddings can be made by one voice and the petitions by another.

An example of merging a bidding with a petition:

Let us pray for children and young people:
the Lord guide their growth and development."

Lord, hear our prayer. (BAS, 115)

In this example, the only way people offer prayer is by assenting to the petition offered by the leader.

These sample litanies also provide a number of different congregational responses, all of them short and easily remembered. They usually require a cue or prompt, unless the litany is sung and the music itself provides the cue. Occasionally the refrain used in the psalm may be appropriate as the response in the prayers as well. The use of responses is one of the great strengths of litanies, for they sustain our awareness that these are the prayers of the *people*. But if the response is too novel or too long, people will be distracted from praying by the effort of remembering what to say.

There is, however, another method sometimes used in the Prayers of the People which might be called the 'shopping list' method. The order of the liturgy does list the kind of subject matter that leaders of the prayers should consider: "the Church, the Queen and all in authority, the world, the local community, those in need, the departed" (BAS, 190). But if this is treated as a shopping list (reminding God of the responsibilities of a deity), intercession can become a manipulative endeavour instead of an evocative one, an appeal to "the divine butler, the cosmic therapist".⁴ Few of the sample litanies adhere to this list; they honour the list simply as an indication of the large-hearted scope our intercessions should have.

"*Not heaping up empty phrases*" means offering our prayer in the confidence that we are cooperating with the creative and redemptive work of God in Christ, through the power of the Spirit. There is a reason why the intercessions take place in the part of the liturgy we call 'the proclamation of the word': this is the primary way the congregation affirms what is being proclaimed. Through our intercessions we offer ourselves to God to be transformed in heart and will, united to Christ in his work of redemption. We become what we proclaim.

⁴Christian Smith, Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.

The Audacity of Intercession

What then is ‘intercession’? According to the dictionary, interceding means “interposing or intervening on behalf of another”.⁵ That could be done by inquiring into someone’s needs, or giving a helping hand, or advocating on their behalf. But in what sense is *praying* for others an intervention on their behalf (in view of the fact that God already knows about their need, and cares a lot more than we do)? What do we think we are doing in intercessory prayer?

Whatever the answer, intercession, as defined by the dictionary, would seem to entail taking some kind of responsibility for others in their need — what I would describe as ‘*the audacity of intercession*’. That is precisely what we recognize in Jesus: he boldly intervened in the lives of all sorts of people, especially those who were ignored by everyone else, and he changed their lives. He advocated for them, insisting that God cares for losers just as much as for good people. He stood his ground on that, even when he knew it infuriated the good people of Jerusalem. And his courage inspired audacity in others, as we see in that little group who persevered in their efforts to bring a stricken friend to Jesus — by lowering him through a hole in the roof (*Mark 2: 1-12*)!

The Letter to the Hebrews, identifies Jesus as a “great high priest” who sacrificed himself for us, and now for ever lives to intercede on our behalf (*Hebrews 7: 25; 9: 36*). This seems at first a curious claim, since no one ever recognized Jesus as a cultic figure during his lifetime (he had no role in slaughtering sheep in the temple)! His so-called ‘sacrifice’ was of his *own* life, not the life of someone or something else, and it looked more like a state lynching than a ritual act. If Jesus was a priest, he certainly turned upside down the meaning of both priesthood and sacrifice! But intercession — that is, intervening on behalf of us sinners — was clearly something he did. And now that he is risen and alive beyond the limits of time and space, his intercession and his ‘sacrifice’ are no longer just acts of the distant past, but an eternal reality for us all.

Thus, in baptism we call on new Christians to “share with us in Christ’s eternal priesthood” (*BAS, 161*). But we need to be clear that this is intended in the New Testament sense of priesthood, not the current sense — not the so-called ‘priesthood’ that comes with ordination, but the priesthood belonging to all the baptized (*1 Peter 2: 9; cf. Exodus 19: 6*).⁶

Intercession, therefore, has two complementary meanings. First of all it means going out of our way, in a self-sacrificial fashion, to interpose ourselves in the lives of others, especially those who are abused or forgotten in our society. And then it means

⁵*The Concise Oxford Dictionary.*

⁶The New Testament never refers to ordained leaders of the church as priests (*hiereis*). It refers to “*episkopoi*” (bishops/overseers — *Philippians 1: 1; 1 Timothy 3: 1-2; etc.*), “*presbyteroi*” (presbyters/elders — *1 Peter 5: 1-5; Titus 1: 5, etc.*) and “*diakonoi*” (deacons/ministers — *Romans 16: 1; Philippians 1: 1; etc.*).

remembering them before God, appealing for their health and salvation until we begin to see how their lives can be part of the story of God's redeeming ways in the world, and offering ourselves to be channels of God's purposes for them. "Pray as though everything depended on God; work as though everything depended on you."⁷

With the recovery of the diaconate as a distinct and equal order within the Church, we have restored the sacramental embodiment of this two-dimensional ministry of intercession; deacons symbolically unite service of those in need with liturgical prayer on their behalf. In their ordination, they are told, "You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live and work and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world" (*BAS*, 655). In the ancient Church the biddings were uttered by a deacon; this was one of the ways deacons fulfilled their responsibility to "interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world."

Today, deacons need to have a role in shaping the biddings and ensuring that the intercessions address the most critical issues of our time. If deacons are the trainers and coaches of those who lead the prayers and keep track of the concerns for which the congregation is asked to pray, they will be better able to cultivate the Church's awareness of "the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world".⁸

But back to that image of Jesus interceding for us with God: does Jesus have to continually beg his reluctant Father to go easy on us? No, salvation has always been God's will for the whole creation; the trouble is that we who are creation's stewards have been in defiance of God's will. Only in Jesus do we see this human defiance finally being healed. In the story of Jesus, we watch our human will being reconciled with the will of the Father; "...not my will but yours be done" he prayed on his last night. Jesus himself never stood aloof from sinners, protesting his own sinlessness; he identified himself with all humanity, repenting on our behalf in his baptism, and bearing our sins in his body on the cross. "For our sake, God made him to be sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God" (*2 Corinthians* 5: 21). "By his wounds we are healed" (*1 Peter* 2: 24; cf. *Isaiah* 53: 5). And it is our disordered and defiant human will that is being healed through the mysterious ways of God in Christ. "To lose one's will in the will of God should be the true occasion of every man's time on earth."⁹ We do not pray in order to focus God's attention on what we desire, but to focus our attention on what God desires to give us.

⁷St Augustine.

⁸It is "a deacon or lay member of the community" who leads the Prayers of the People (*BAS*, 183, 190).

⁹George Mackay Brown.

And so our priestly work of intercession is a participation in Jesus' intercession. On behalf of all humanity, and for the sake of the whole creation, we struggle to reconcile our human will with the will of God. That's what is going on in the exercise of intercessory prayer.

But there is an interplay between these two meanings of intercession — interposing ourselves in the lives of others, and remembering them before God. “The embodied intercession of our hands and feet continues to shape our spoken intercessions. We notice more, and we pray. We pray, and we notice more . . . As we pray, the vision of a more just world takes root in us, converting us and making us instruments of conversion in the world.”¹⁰ We might refer to these two dimensions (spoken intercession, and embodied intercession) as ‘invoking the story’ and ‘living the story’.

I remember a lovely example of this in the life of one urban congregation whose parish neighbourhood had seen an invasion of drug-dealers with all the accompanying violence. A particular housing development had been overwhelmed by this trend, and the congregation was praying for those who were trapped in this situation. But then they decided to do a ‘blessing walk’ through that housing development. They processed into and around it, singing hymns, wafting clouds of incense, inviting residents to join them, and offering prayers to reconsecrate the place. The results of such intervention may be hard to measure, but for the residents I’m sure it was a heartening gift of grace.

Intercession has been described as “taking back the night”. That is our priestly calling as God’s people.¹¹ That is the *audacity of intercession*.

A Forgotten Idiom

Jesus gave his disciples a model prayer (*Matthew 6: 9-13; Luke 11: 2-4*), but this was not their first model. The Psalter was Israel’s primary tutor in prayer, and the early church continued to find its voice of praise and supplication in the Psalms. And of all the modes of expression in the Psalter — hymns of worship, royal songs, songs of thanksgiving, wisdom poems, pilgrimage songs, liturgies for special occasions, dirges and laments — *lament* is arguably the predominant one.

Yet today, we rarely hear anything in the intercessions that resembles lamentation. Has the progress toward God’s kingdom been so deep-rooted and irreversible that we have no need of lament? Or has our liturgy just lost touch with reality?

¹⁰Mark Stamm, *ibid*.

¹¹Stamm documents other audacious practices of “taking back the night”, such as holding a prayer vigil on the street where a shooting has taken place.

Lament typically acknowledges both the root and the flower of intercessory prayer; it invokes the story of God's ways (e.g., *Psalms 22, 44, 74, 80, 85, 89*), and it expresses the sorrow, anguish, confusion, loss, anger and complaint which is simply the shadow side of yearning and hope. Lament is a highly evocative rhetorical strategy; it is also a profoundly honest and uncensored form of prayer, often expressing deep frustration, confession of failure, and a plea for mercy (e.g., *Psalms 51, 88, 106, 143*). Lament is the alternative to apathy. Almost always it takes the form of questioning or challenging God, for it arises out of the experience of finding that our trust in God is being challenged by the turn of events. According to Mark, lament was Jesus' final prayer from the cross (*Mark 15: 34*).

Are these not notes we sometimes need to strike in the Prayers of the People? How can the passions of a congregation be engaged if we fail to acknowledge the depths of our predicament? True passion knows both agony and ecstasy. And how can we pray for the troubles of the world without acknowledging our own complicity in those troubles?

One way we can use the idiom of lament to strengthen our intercessions is by shaping a petition as a progression through three stages:

Invocation → *Question or Challenge* → *Entreaty*.

I offer a couple of illustrations:

I ask your prayers for wisdom and courage in caring for this good earth.

Silence.

Giver of life, Source of all that is lovely and fruitful, how shall we answer for the ruin we have inflicted upon this fragile earth, our island home?	Deliver us from despair, and show us how to change our ways so we can truly honour and restore what you have entrusted to our care, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.
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I ask your prayers for those who suffer in the midst of civil strife [in X and Y].

Silence.

Righteous Judge of the nations, Helper of the helpless, why are the defenceless still heartlessly slaughtered, month after month, with no one to defend them?	Do not hide your face from those who cry out to you, but shield and strengthen them, and hasten the day when the kingdoms of this world will own the perfect law of love, made known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
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This venting of anger, pain, frustration or sorrow can turn to bitterness and vengefulness, of course, as those who read the Psalms are acutely aware (e.g., *Psalms 58: 6-11; 69: 22-29; 137: 7-9; 139: 19-22*)! Leading the intercessions brings a responsibility to support

the congregation in praying according to the mind of Christ (*Philippians 2: 5*). Thus, the intermediate stage of lament — the *Question or Challenge* stage — must not be used as an outlet for venting personal annoyance; it is not a form of sanctified whining, or the occasion for expressing hostility, resentment, or self-righteousness. It must articulate the horror or grief of those who are passionate about God's ways but dismayed by what looks like the triumph of evil; it must express feelings which everyone in the congregation can reasonably be expected to share.

Clearly, lament is not appropriate for all our intercessions. We are called to persevere in prayer with care and compassion for those who are forgotten and for those who suffer; for all who bear responsibility for the common good; and for the mission of the Church. And the passion we expect to hear in such intercessions is tenacious hope. Only when hope seems incongruous or unsustainable do we need to express our hope through the prayer of lament.

Today, as we are confronted with frightening new challenges — implacable civil conflicts, a growing tide of refugees, resurgent ultra-nationalism, accelerating climate change, the trashing of the planet — perhaps it is time to rediscover this other dimension of passion in the Prayers of the People by exploring the forgotten idiom of lament.