

Prayers for the People

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Introduction

Those who pray in public have an unique opportunity, an opportunity that is similar in some respects to preaching. Indeed, there are some pastors who spend almost as much time preparing their prayers as they do the sermon. The intent of this article is to show how such prayers can contain the same basic ingredients that are found in biblical exposition. Using the season of Advent I will note the dominant biblical themes common to those times. Then with the use of metaphors found in the Scripture I will cite examples of how prayers can be written around those themes. The result will be prayers for the people that proclaim God's word, reveal God's faithfulness, call on God through Christ to intercede with compassion, and guide the people to greater commitment, similar in some respects to what happens when God's word is proclaimed. The scriptures used will be those suggested by the *Common Lectionary* and the prayers taken from my books, *When We Gather*.

Themes for Advent

The dominant themes for the season of Advent are watchfulness, promise, preparation, fulfillment and celebration. The people are told to watch at all times for the day that is forecast. It will be a day of great glory; the valley shall be filled, mountains and hills made low; the crooked shall be made straight, the rough places smooth. Using the metaphor for God as a refining fire and purifying agent, one hears:

O God, you cleanse our tarnished souls and purify our thoughts by the refining fire of judgment; we wait for the day of your messenger's coming, and give thanks for his righteousness by which we are saved from wrath. He walks with us in the valley. He levels the barriers we raise to evade his will. His paths are straight, we need only follow. We can endure the day of his coming, thanks to your mercy; our prayer can be pleasing to you because of his sacrifice for us (Year C. p. 17).

The promise is of Emmanuel, God with us. What a glorious gift! The words of the prophet are fulfilled in the birth of a child. What is conceived of the Holy Spirit and carried in Mary's womb is the promise of eternal life to all who believe. Jesus will save God's people from their sins; God will dwell in their midst. The Spirit makes God's presence known now and forevermore.

There is probably no greater metaphor for promise than the birth of a child.

Eternal God of the covenant, whose faithfulness endures from age to age,

we pray knowing that you will not forsake us. You have come to us as a child born of Mary, full of promise and grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, this Holy One, Emmanuel, reveals forevermore the depth of your wisdom and the wonder of your salvation. As we commit our lives to him and learn of his will, we give you thanks for your manifold gifts, which embrace all of life (Year B. p. 23).

In preparing prayers for the people, it is well always to begin with an affirming sentence or two. Rehearse what God has done throughout history and thereby set the context for what will follow. To give God thanks immediately in prayer has a way of putting everything else in perspective. As the prayer above illustrates, the God whose faithfulness has endured through the ages will surely not forsake those presently gathered in prayful reverence.

The Season of Advent is also a time for preparation; the people are to be ready. John comes, crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mark 1:3). There shall be baptism with water; Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. There shall be confession of sins; Jesus will be the means of repentance.

The theme of preparation is evident in the following words of supplication:

When we are tempted to waver, help us to step out with confidence. Advent marks a new beginning; we hear anew of the redemption the Messiah brings. Help us to embark on faith's journey in spite of risks. When we are alone, comfort us by your Spirit's presence. When we hurt, ease our pain with the healing touch of the great physician. When we are confused because the way is uncertain, speak once more those words of reassurance: "Behold, the days are coming when you shall cause a branch to spring forth who shall execute justice and righteousness in all the land" (Jer. 33:14f). For we pray in the name of the one who reveals that righteousness, even Jesus the Christ (Year C. p. 15).

Note how the prayer lists needs in a general way. I do that purposely in order to provide the framework for Sunday's worship. Then specific situations can be inserted during the service, making the prayer relevant and timely. Again, prayers like preaching, should provide ample opportunities to highlight particular needs and occasions in which the people are involved. The general framework provides the order for such freedom.

A fourth theme of Advent is fulfillment. John sends his disciples to find out if Jesus is the awaited Messiah. They are told by Jesus to report what they have seen and heard: the blind see, the deaf hear, lepers are cleansed, the poor hear good news, the dead are raised up. When John's disciples leave, Jesus tells the crowd John's identity: he is "more than a prophet," and one divinely sent to prepare the way for God's reign. The signs of that reign are already present in the midst of God's people.

Inheritance is an appropriate metaphor for the fulfillment Advent heralds and it fits well into the context of a prayer:

Bringer of hope to the nations, glory be to you. We thank you that through the gift of your Son, Jesus, we can now be called heirs of your

righteousness and children of the covenant. By your grace we bear the name Christ and are members of Christ's household of faith. We thank you for his call to ministry and for the empowerment of your Spirit, which enables us to respond (Year B. p. 29).

Metaphors are useful when praying, since they themselves paint pictures. Edward Lueders has described a successful metaphor as a "mutation in the evolution of ideas" (*The Clam Lake Papers*, Harper & Row, 1977), p.49. In order for the thought to evolve, it is a good idea to stay for awhile with just one metaphor. Allow it to grow through the poetry it itself generates. The prayer above begins with the gift which evolves into being called heir; being called heirs implies becoming children and develops into bearing Christ's name as members of Christ's household of faith.

The fifth theme common to Advent is that of celebration. As shepherds watched their flocks, God's glory shone on them; they heard the angels say, "Be not afraid." A star would guide them to where a birth had occurred; full of joy, they would behold an event that promised peace on earth. Today, followers still gather to celebrate what happened: God brought forth Jesus whose cause was righteousness. The everlasting response has been to rejoice and be glad.

Gift as a metaphor almost naturally evokes celebration. In the following prayer thanksgiving is easily expressed:

Giver of every good and perfect gift, we come rejoicing at the birth of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. We give you thanks that your light shines forth in the world. You illuminate our darkness, drive away the clouds of gloom and despair; you send forth rays of hope to cheer us and warm us with the radiance of your redeeming love.

The carols we sing tell of your glory, how angels sang and shepherds watched as a star led them to behold your wonder. We give thanks for the amazement and wonder of your revelation, the many ways you surprise us, and visit us, and cause us to feel your presence. You can be found in the laughter and gaiety of noisy gatherings. On solemn occasions your majesty and strength evoke awe and praise (Year B. p. 27).

In the first paragraph above the gift is the gift of light. Light is a common scriptural metaphor and can be developed easily through the use of such concepts as "rays of hope" and the "radiance of God's love." However, since that prayer was written, I have received some criticism which raises a caution. Using light as a metaphor, we need to be sensitive to those for whom darkness is a blessing and source of pride. The natural tendency for some people is to view darkness as a phenomenon to escape from or to overcome in some way, whereas for others the exact opposite may be true. I raise the point in order to enable all people to celebrate God's gifts and not through our language eliminate others.

I wrote earlier that the result sought were prayers that proclaim God's word, reveal God's faithfulness, call on God through Christ to intercede with compassion, and guide the people to greater commitment. Does the formula work through the examples cited?

God's word is proclaimed as the people await the day of the messenger's coming. It is a day that brings righteousness that saves God's people from wrath. God has come as a child born of Mary, full of promise and grace. Through the Holy Spirit, Emmanuel reveals forevermore the depth of God's wisdom and the wonder of God's salvation. The people can now be called heirs of God's righteousness and children of the covenant.

God's faithfulness is revealed as God's people are accompanied through the valleys of life, barriers are levelled and paths become straight. It is a faithfulness that endures from age to age, is grounded in incomparable wisdom and embraces the believer in ultimate salvation. Such faithfulness will no doubt surprise us, since God has a way of interrupting humanity's agenda and revealing God in unexpected ways.

Christ is called to intercede with compassion, providing mercy to endure the day of his coming, the refining sacrifice that cleanses tarnished souls and purifies thoughts, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit which enables response.

The response is then to greater commitment, to step out with confidence in spite of risks. Such confidence will be bred of God's grace and mercy, involve learning Christ's will for our lives, submitting those lives to the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, executing justice and righteousness throughout the land, and standing before God's judgment seat in awe and eternal praise.

The commitment called for is faithfulness to the legacy inherited from those who have endured. The scriptures and confessions bear testimony to their pilgrimage and provide guidance and inspiration for those who will follow. Prayer, like preaching, provides an opportunity to stand on their shoulders, behold the wondrous deeds God has wrought through the ages, and to reaffirm by God's grace our intention to "come, labor on."

NOTES

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