

PRAYING THROUGH THE HYMN BOOK

How intelligently do our people sing in church? Do the words matter to many of them? Do these words express what they want to say to God? Do they ever stop and ask themselves just what this or that verse really means?

As the language and imagery of hymns become more and more detached from everyday life, there is a danger that this rich part of our Christian heritage will cease to have any relevance for people's lives. Aware of this danger, I have been trying to compose opening prayers and prayers of intercession each based upon or inspired by a well-known hymn. It is not necessary that most worshippers should spot the connection between the prayers and the hymns. It is more important that the contents of the hymns should be reflected elsewhere in the service in the hope that people will find them more accessible when they stand up to sing them.

Here are some of the results. I do not claim any originality of content, form or expression - that is not what I am striving for. But if my efforts can help to breathe fresh life into the praises of God's people they will have fulfilled an important function. I should add that they reflect a situation where the Lord's Prayer has been said at the close of the first prayer while the whole Christian family is still together in the service, and my own dislike of inserting "through Jesus Christ our Lord" at the end of each collect as a cue for an "Amen" which no one is going in any case to offer as a response!

OPENING PRAYER

HYMN 1 (PSALM 100)

"All people that on earth do dwell"

Merciful God, we come before you today, joining with all your people in joyful praise, and offering to you the glad service of our hearts and lives. Cast out of our minds every dark thought, and help us, with cheerful voice, to worship you, and to spread the good news of your grace freely offered in Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.

You are the only God, but we confess with shame that we worship false gods. Lord, deliver us from our enslavement to those things which we have put in your place, and help us to serve and adore you alone.

You are the one who made us, and to whom we belong, but we confess with shame that we have refused to place ourselves entirely at your disposal. Lord, deliver us from our sinful denial of your authority over our lives, and help us, in all that we do and in all that we are, to be obedient to your commands.

You have called us to be the sheep of your pasture, and provided us with spiritual food, but we confess with shame that we have left these good things untasted, and so grown weak and ineffectual in your service. Lord, deliver us from our stubborn refusal to be full and true members of your flock.

These and all our sins we humbly confess before you, seeking your assurance of pardon and cleansing, for the sake of Jesus our Saviour and Friend.

Lord, let the doors of our church be for us the gateway into your gracious presence, and so let us come here week by week with thanksgiving and praise, rejoicing that you are good, and that your love endures for ever. Let us remember your faithfulness in every past generation, and rest in the confident knowledge that your truth is firmly established, and shall endure in every future generation and to all eternity. Hear this our prayer, which we offer in Jesus' name, as we say together the words he taught us, Our Father.....

OPENING PRAYER

HYMN 4 (PSALM 84)

"How lovely is thy dwelling-place"

Lord God Almighty, implant deep within us the longing to enter into your presence this day. We rejoice that in your unfathomable grace you have chosen to let this church be for us your dwelling-place, and so we come before you yearning, even fainting, for the privilege and joy of fellowship with you, the living God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house! Let them ever praise you; let them find in you all their strength; let them keep your holy ways firmly planted in their hearts.

Gracious Father, our Saviour has taught us that not even a single sparrow is forgotten by you. Help us to remember that the whole creation is of your making, that it is ever sustained in being by your mighty power, and that it continually proclaims your praise and glory. Help us to hear in the song of the birds the very voice of nature itself adoring its Maker, and help us to see, in the nests built for the protection of their young, a picture of the secure home provided for us in the Church of your dear Son. Lord Almighty, how lovely is your dwelling-place!

But, Lord, we confess with shame that sometimes we come to church with no longing to meet you, with no awareness of your boundless grace, with no joyful anticipation of fellowship with you, with no reliance upon your strength, with no desire to live according to your ways, with no will to participate in the worship offered up by all creation, and with no yearning for the security that is found in you alone. Lord, we your ungrateful children acknowledge our sinful refusal to glory and trust in you alone, and so we pray your forgiveness for the sake of Christ our Saviour, who died for us and our sins upon the Cross.

Let us know that one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. Blessed are those who trust in you, for you withhold no good thing from those who walk in your ways. Hear our prayer, offered in Jesus name, as we say together his words, Our Father.....

OPENING PRAYER

HYMN 9

"Praise to the Lord, the Almighty"

Lord God Almighty, let our church be for us the temple in which we gather week by week, joining in glad adoration of you, the King of creation, the God in whom is found the fulness of life and of salvation. Hear and accept the praises we offer today in your house. We give thanks that you reign supremely and wisely over the whole of creation; that your gentle hand shields your children from harm; that your strong arm sustains them when they grow faint. We praise you that your holy will has ordained for us good things for which we long and in which we delight; that you crown with success the work we undertake in your service; and that all the days of our life we are followed by your goodness and mercy.

Almighty Lord, as we ponder anew your wondrous love and friendship towards us, we look at our own lives and see how little we have responded to your goodness. We have questioned whether you are in control of the world, and whether your purposes are wise and good; we have presumed upon your fatherly protection by exposing our bodies, minds and spirits to unnecessary dangers; we have failed to find delight in holy things, and have found it instead in things which were impure and untrue; we have taken as due to ourselves the credit for success, rather than let the praise be yours; we have failed to treat our fellow men and women in the good and merciful way you have dealt with us. Lord, we confess that in your sight we are sinners, and pray that we might be forgiven,

for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour who, by his cross, offered himself to be condemned in our place, and who, by his resurrection, ever lives that we might live in him.

Lord God, let us adore you, not with our lips alone, but with our whole beings; not for this hour of worship only, but for the whole of time and eternity. All this we pray in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son, our Saviour, who taught us, when we pray together, to say, Our Father.....

OPENING PRAYER

HYMN 19

"O come, and let us to the Lord"

Our Lord and our God, we bow in worship before you today, our hearts filled with praise and thanksgiving for all your greatness and all your goodness. You are the mighty King of all creation. The whole world, from the depths of the earth to the highest hills, is secure in your hands. The vast expanses of ocean and continent are of your making, and all the riches of sea and land are placed in our hands to be used wisely for the good of all and for your glory. Lord, as we marvel at your wisdom and power, revealed in the splendours of creation, we offer to you our songs of joy and gratitude.

But we confess that often we are neglectful of you, our God. We look around us and see how science and technology have harnessed the earth's resources, and we praise ourselves, forgetting that the wisdom and skill that shape our modern world are your gift. We acknowledge with sorrow our failure, as one human family, to share with one another the good things you have provided for our nourishment and comfort. We confess that we seek security in walls of separation, and in the threat of mutual destruction, rather than in the breaking down of barriers, and in loving our neighbour as ourself. Lord, have mercy upon us. Make us truly penitent of all our sins, and assure us of your forgiveness in Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour.

Lord, if our hearts are cold within us, warm them in the fires of your love; if our eyes are blind to your glory, let your healing power restore our sight; if our ears are deaf to your voice, let us hear your word of truth and obey it; if our hands are quick to grasp, let them be quicker still to give and share; if our feet are slow to walk in your ways, direct our steps along the path of joyful

service. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name and words we further pray, saying, Our Father.....

INTERCESSIONS

HYMN 571

"Jesus, thou Joy of loving hearts"

Lord Jesus Christ, we bring before you the need of our world, remembering the emptiness in the lives of so many people. We pray for those who, like ourselves, enjoy many material comforts, but who feel a spiritual hunger because they do not enjoy your living presence in their hearts. Lord, show them that life is nothing without you, and give them grace to receive you as their Saviour and Friend.

We remember the many millions for whom physical hunger is a daily reality. Lord, give to the nations who have plenty the political will to break down the barriers which frustrate the effective sharing of the earth's harvest, and help the poorer nations to conquer the instability and corruption which frustrate economic and agricultural growth. Bless and prosper the work of all the relief agencies, and let their appeals meet a generous response from those who are in a position to help.

We remember the Church, as it proclaims the eternal truths of the Gospel. Let the Spirit of Truth fill and move all to whom is entrusted the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. Let all Church members radiate your holy light amidst the darkness and confusion of our times, and let them grow strong in faith and service as they feast upon you, the Living Bread.

Hear our prayers for the sick, the lonely and the bereaved. Come to them in their distress of body, mind or spirit, save them from their troubles, and be to them their all in all.

Hear now our silent prayers for our loved ones and friends.....

Lord Jesus, we praise you for those who walked in your light during their lives here on earth, and who now rest in your nearer presence. In due time unite us with them in the joy of eternity. These and all our prayers we offer in your name, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be praise and glory for ever. Amen.

"Let us with a gladsome mind"

God of gods and Lord of lords, fill our minds with gladness as we remember your kindness to us and to all your children. Your mercies endure for ever, and your faithfulness is sure. And so we bring before you our prayers for others.

You have created a universe of light, but we remember all who shrink away from your light and prefer to walk in the darkness of ignorance, fear and unbelief. Let them catch a glimpse of your glory, so that they flee the darkness and turn towards the light of your presence

You have chosen for yourself a people, and showered upon them countless blessings. But we remember that as Israel of old rebelled against you and refused to heed your voice, so your Church repeatedly turns its back upon you. We therefore pray: for all who preach and teach, that they may seek only to speak your word of truth; for all who lead your people along new ways, that they may choose only the paths that Christ has already trod before them; for all who take decisions in the courts of your Church, that they may have a clear knowledge of your will; and for all who devote their time, talents and money to the work of the Church, that they may do so for your glory and for the advancement of your purposes.

You are the great provider for all living beings. We pray for the leaders of our own and every nation, that they may see themselves as your ministers with responsibility for meeting the welfare and need of their peoples. Let them use their power for good, that our world may be a place of justice, peace and prosperity for all.

We offer now, in the silence of your house, our special prayers for dear ones....

Lord, we praise you for the blessed remembrance of those, now safe in your nearer presence, whom we knew and loved during their life here on earth. We join with them in offering to you, One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, praise and adoration now and for ever. Amen.

"God is love: his the care"

God of Love, we praise you for the care you show to your children, and for the way that care has been expressed in the life that Jesus lived among us.

We give thanks that through knowing Jesus we know you, our heavenly Father. We pray, therefore, for the mission of the Church to the world. Let Christ be seen and heard in all who acknowledge him as their Saviour and Lord, that the world, in knowing him, might come to know you, the God of all goodness, truth and beauty.

We remember that Jesus came to be the friend of all, and so we pray for all who feel that they have no friends. Let them find a friend in Jesus through being loved and accepted by the people of his Church. Bless the outreach of the Church among those whose lives have been damaged through no fault of their own or through their own folly. We pray for those who cannot trust others because they were abused in childhood. Help them to trust Jesus and those in whom they see him. We pray for those who have damaged their bodies and minds through the misuse of drink or drugs. Help them to find healing through Christ.

We remember the sacrificial love which led Jesus even to die for us and for our sins. Let there be a willingness among the people of his Church to take up their own cross and follow him. Where the Church is silent in the face of evil, let it speak your word of judgement. Where it is complacent in the face of injustice, let it act with courage in the defence of the poor and outcast.

Hear our prayers, heavenly Father, for our own dear ones, especially those in need of any kind.....

Lord God, we praise you for being our light and life, our friend and king, and together with the saints in glory we offer to you, One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our worship and adoration, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"Holy Spirit, Truth Divine"

Almighty God, we offer to you our prayers of intercession, remembering the needs of your people and of the whole world.

We pray for your Church as it seeks to proclaim and defend your divine truth. Let the Holy Spirit enlighten those to whom is entrusted the ministry of your Word, and let all who hear that ministry gain a clear understanding of what they should believe and do.

We remember the self-centredness and self-seeking which poison human relationships and undermine our society. Let the fire of your Spirit consume all that is selfish in the hearts of men and women, and let them be filled instead with high and pure desires.

We pray for all people who fear that they lack the physical, moral or spiritual strength to withstand the pressures of life. Let the power of your Spirit bring healing to the sick in body, courage to those who have grown faint-hearted, and renewal of faith to those who have lost the sense of your presence. Let all doctors, counsellors and pastors respond with love and wisdom to those who seek their help.

We pray for all who influence the future of our society and our world: for our Queen and her family, for all who serve in national and local government, for those who control what is seen, heard and written in the media, for all who teach and lead our young people and for the public figures whom they admire and imitate. Let your Spirit produce in all these the desire to honour your laws and to commend them to others, and may all people, young and old, find their perfect freedom in your service.

We remember all our own dear ones and friends, especially those in need..... Let the divine peace of your Spirit calm their restless hearts.

We give thanks for the joyful fellowship in the Spirit of all your faithful people, and for the blessed memory of those whom we have known and loved, and who are now gathered into your nearer presence. All these prayers we offer in Jesus' name, to whom with you, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, be glory and praise for ever and ever. Amen.

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