

INTERCESSIONS AND MORE

By Peter Donald

I. The placing of the intercessions in the service of Word and Sacrament expresses the participation of the people of God in the merciful compassion of Christ. As we have been shown mercy, so we are called to be merciful. As Christ has come to bring healing and hope, so the church his body carries that commitment as a fundamental part of her mission. Our prayers to God for others, and for ourselves, join our Spirit-led embrace of all that is hurting and in decay with the faith, hope and love that endures for ever.

In the ancient liturgies of the church, litanies of prayers for others recur throughout the order of worship and it is notable that a particular set of intercessions followed closely on the *epiclesis* in the anaphora or Eucharistic prayers. This, however, seems to have been departed from notably in the second Prayer Book of Edward VI in England (1552) and in all the liturgical work of the young reformed church in Scotland. The intercessions were moved forward in the service so as to come either before or after the preaching of the Word. Thus prayers for church and world, by their location, were apparently tied to the verbal proclamation of the saving gospel via the sermon – in effect as a broadening out of the power of that gospel, as if not only the hearers are addressed by the living Word; the Word goes out to the ends of the earth. We see broadly the same pattern being recommended in the three books of Common Order which have issued in the twentieth century, both in services of the Word and when the Lord's Supper is celebrated. However, notably in the services without Communion, thanksgiving prayers precede the intercessions, with some tacit acknowledgement thus that this is a deeply Scriptural pattern. The question arises as to whether something may be lost by the disjunction of thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) and intercession when the Lord's Supper is celebrated.¹

II. In overview, the divine service of Word and Sacrament is constitutive of the church. That is to say that there is no church where there is no proclamation of and response to the gospel of Jesus Christ and also that there is no church where there is no sharing in the life of Christ as opened up us in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (*cf.* Scots Confession, Westminster Confession). Paired together, Word and Sacrament mediate to us, as human beings, all that is needful to take us into the kingdom of God, both being anchored in the revelation of God's saving grace through Jesus Christ. Because the spoken word is supported by the sacramental gifts, and the sacramental gifts likewise are indissolubly in need of the spoken word, both ancient Christian practice and our forebears who were Reformers, in their dreams, have sought to have Word *and* Sacrament whenever the people of God come together, and not least on a Sunday, the day of Resurrection. Christians do not practise their faith only when they gather together for worship, but the gathering for worship is not incidental or in any sense unnecessary. Therefore, whenever it is possible and agreed to come together for the full diet, i.e. Word and Sacrament, our participation in the merciful purposes of God comes to its climax around the sharing of bread and wine where we sing that Christ died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again. The gospel of Jesus Christ has to be shaped ultimately around the Passion narrative; the worship of the church on earth is taken into the worship of heaven as we come around the table. The intercessions to which we are helped by Christ's Holy Spirit flow most wonderfully as he is present with us at that high point of communion – regularly to be repeated until he comes again.

Without necessarily committing to leaning only on texts and forms from past generations, it is helpful then to look at how the historic liturgies have worked with intercessions.² In the anaphora of St Basil (4th century), the *epiclesis* comes first and is a prayer both upon the offerings, the bread and the wine, and upon the ones who are to receive communion; thus the understanding of the body of Christ comprehends both gifts and communicants. Then, it is argued, the prayers expand to include all the others parts of the Church

¹ I note that the disjunction has some exceptions – see the “Shorter Order” of the 1940 book intercessions included within the Eucharistic prayers; the second order of the 1979 book, with its option for inserting intercessions in the eucharistic prayer; and the third order of the 1994 book, having intercessions included as part of the eucharistic prayers.

² At various times in history, the church has wrestled with the tension between keeping a well-ordered form of worship and freedom in the Spirit, which takes us through and beyond definitions and prescriptions. Some would argue that the dangers of liturgical experiment are greater than those induced by keeping to agreed forms; but the “re-formed” Church of Scotland found its identity in an era when fixed order was felt too liable to be stifling, oppressive and even untrue, and because there was a prolonged battle for the reformation of the church, given the various views most especially on polity, the settlement, such as it was, was to resist fixed forms. Whereas in the first phase of the Reformation it had apparently been expected that agreement would be found on particular forms of worship to be used, the tenor of the Westminster Directory of 1645, in historical circumstances near the end of the intense Reformation battles, laid down a benchmark for freedom and discretion amongst the ordained ministers. That does not of course resolve all the tensions!

who are not physically present but who are of course are part of the ongoing transformation into the mystical body. Throughout the prayers there is not only then a reference to the present time, but to the time to come (eschatological). The prayers mention first the “holy, one, catholic Church”, followed by a specification of those who compose the church on earth – in liturgies adopted by particular churches, making naturally particular reference to their appointed leaders – and thirdly there is a review of the various circumstances of the human condition.³ In the original context, the attention to the fragilities of life dependent upon the change of the seasons is conspicuous, and for all that in “modern” society this has almost some quaintness about it, we are learning nowadays afresh our need to treat with great respect the natural environment in which we live and move and have our being. Moving on from there, Basil’s liturgy then names the saints and the dead, praying for them in the supposition that they too, in anticipation of the eschaton, might yet be prayed for. Reformation tradition frowned most severely on prayers for the dead, since by the sixteenth century the developed purgatory doctrines were far from edifying; Basil’s text comes from a different era in church tradition. As the prayers make mention not only of the public heroes of faith but of “every just spirit who through faith in Christ has arrived at perfection”, there is a most lovely vision here, of the unity of the faithful at the end of time, and a recognition there of common belonging, togetherness, which is a counter-balance to any assumptions that we live and die alone. The conclusion of the prayers is to come back to those who are still “pilgrims below”, with the petition that they may be preserved in faith and guided to the kingdom.

This shaping of the liturgy, with its recurring word “Remember, Lord” has clearly had its influence on subsequent liturgical forms in the Church of Scotland, but it may be asked whether there has been a narrowing down of horizons in such reductions of scale and comprehensiveness as have taken place in relation to the originals. In our Reformed tradition, we may no doubt consider it a gain to be able, without a fixed form, to add in further people and circumstances in need of our prayer, but it is possible to do this all too randomly, and without taking seriously the eschatological dimension so strongly present in the ancient liturgies. Inclusion, for example, of prayer which makes reference to the communion of the saints – before we get into any debates as to how or whether we might pray *for* the dead – is well attested to be sporadic in Church of Scotland worship. The issue then is whether we are sufficiently conscious of our communion both in time and in space with all God’s people, or whether our horizons of God’s saving purposes too readily reduce to the people we see and we worship with. Another obvious attestation of our likelihood to sin in this regard might be drawn from the beginnings of the modern ecumenical movement, when in the early twentieth century, it appeared something of a novelty amongst Protestants to learn to pray for others in the church universal; the Orthodox, and the Roman Catholics close behind them, were much more sure of the salient theological issues which compelled such prayer. A rule of prayer, as Vincent of Lerins famously commented, feeds and is fed by the rule of believing; the freest forms of prayer are the most vulnerable then to a lack of definition on what is to be believed.

In the early church, as well as prayers taking seriously the plight of widows and orphans, i.e. those in need of material support, there was a developed tradition of the so-called “liturgy after the liturgy”, namely the channelling of material help to where it was needed. The role of the ordained leaders of the church would include definition of their calling to visit and to bring material relief, and offerings have been taken at Eucharistic services specifically to support such work. In recent times the literature in support of the so-called

³ “Remember, Lord, the salvation of this our city, and of those who live in it. Remember, Lord, the climate and fruits of the earth. Remember, Lord, the rains and the seeds of the earth. Remember, Lord, the orderly swelling and diminishing of the river waters. Gladden and renew the face of the earth; bathe its furrows, multiply its seedlings; give what is needed for the planting and the harvest. Govern our life; bless the cycle of the year with your benevolence, for the sake of the poor of your people, for the sake of the widow and the orphan, for the sake of the stranger in our midst, for the sake of all who hope in you and who invoke your holy name: that all eyes may hope in you, that you may give them their food in due time. Fill our hearts with joy and rejoicing, so that, having always and everywhere everything we need, we may abound in every good work to do your holy will.” (*Church of Alexandria*)

OR, “Remember, Lord, the people around here; fill the larders and cupboards with every good thing; preserve marriages in peace and harmony; raise the children, educate the youth, fortify the old; console the fainthearted, gather the scattered, lead the stray back to your holy, catholic and apostolic church; free those affected by impure spirits; sail with the sailors, walk with those who are walking; care for the widows, protect the orphans, free the prisoners, heal the sick; remember those who are in the courts, in the mines, in exile, in hard slavery and in any need, trouble or tribulation; remember, O God, all who need your great compassion, those who love and those who hate, and all who have asked us to pray for them, unworthy as we are. Remember too those whom we have neglected to mention, whether out of ignorance or forgetfulness or the abundance of names: remember, O God, that you yourself know each person by name, and their ages, and that you have known them from their mothers’ wombs. Truly, O Lord, you are attention for the neglected, hope for the desperate, rescuer of the disturbed, safe haven for sailors, physician to the sick: be everything to all of them you who know each one and their prayer, their home, their need. And Lord, free this flock, the city and the entire region from famine, plague, earthquake, drowning, fire and swords, from foreign invasion and from civil war.” (*Byzantine Rite*)

bias to the poor found a great deal of source material in the writings of early church fathers, such as Justin Martyr or John Chrysostom. The point is that as well as *lex orandi and lex credendi*, one might argue for a *lex agendi*, in terms of saying that true liturgy demands true ethical commitment, and vice versa. A scholar who writes about such things draws from his experience in Madagascar, where there is a proverb clearly needing to be heeded: beware of “Sunday Christians who steal chickens on Mondays”.⁴ To have one’s prayers in order during the solemnity and joy of the Lord’s Supper is one thing, but there needs to be follow-on – a sharing of the bread of life in every sense.

- III. “The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is therefore a celebration of the fullness of the drama of salvation in Christ, an expression of the identity of the community (and of how the community understands itself and the society it seeks to save), a confession to the world of God’s intention and vision for humankind, and a charter for engagement with issues of humanisation and dehumanisation”.⁵ When the people are gathered around the table, and also in what is understood as following on the back of celebration, there is every reason to delight in the time at hand, time for prayer and communion, time for God’s work in God’s world. If in the Church of Scotland we have tended to have strength in the latter part of that previous sentence, we would serve God and ourselves well to draw deeply from the well which is more strictly speaking liturgical. It is for the sake of Christian integrity (faithfulness).

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⁴ C. Giraudo, The Eucharist as *diakonia*: from the service of cult to the service of charity”, p.132, in K. Pecklers (ed.), *Liturgy in a postmodern world* (London: Continuum, 2003).

⁵ A. Falconer, p.157 in L. Vischer (ed.), *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches past and present* (Eerdmans, 2003).