

Prayer in Worship - Speaking and Listening To God

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church on Sunday, 2nd May 2010, by the Rev'd Pauline Main, based on the

Bible readings: Matthew 6: 5 – 15, 1 Timothy 2: 1 – 4, Thessalonians 5: 16 – 28

At our Holy Communion services, with the Vision4Life Prayer Year in mind, I've tried to speak about Prayer.

We looked first at the Lord's Prayer, we've thought about listening to God, and Viv Bridges spoke about being "fed by prayer" when she led the service in March.

Today I thought I'd link with the theme of worship which we looked at last time I was here.

Prayer in Worship is about speaking - and listening - to God **together**. This is, I think, a practical rather than a theological sermon!

SCRIPTURE ENCOURAGES US

But we'll start with the scriptures, for **they encourage God's people to pray together**.

In Acts we read that the first converts -

devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2: 42)

In our reading from Thessalonians, Paul says to the community of Christians there -

pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; (1 Thess 5: 17-18)

In his letter to Timothy and his community, he urges that

supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone (1 Timothy 2: 1)

These words seem to me to be speaking of the Christian community, rather than just of individuals at prayer. They are written to **churches**.

What about Jesus words - *whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. (Matthew 6: 5)*

As if prayer should be something we do alone, and not in public.

I don't think Jesus is saying that we should never pray **together**.

I think Jesus is warning his followers **not to misuse prayer** to show off to others about how pious they are. He is condemning hypocrites who pray *so that they may be seen by others (v5)*

There is no contradiction - after all, we read that Jesus faithfully attended the synagogue for public worship.

PATTERN OF PRAYER IN WORSHIP

So – let’s think about prayer in worship. I said in a recent sermon, our worship “looks” three ways – towards God, to ourselves, and towards those outside our walls.

The prayers in our services mirror this pattern.

Towards God - we worship God because he is worthy of our praise.

So, early in our worship we usually have a prayer of praise, of adoration ...

We express something of God’s nature. For example, earlier in this service we used the words -

*Loving God,
in silence and in speaking,
our hearts lift to offer worship,
for you are the light of creation;
you are the very breath of our lives;
you offer us forgiveness and renewal;
you challenge and inspire us.*

Sometimes as we also did today we use the ancient words of the psalmists ...to express what we perhaps find difficult to find words for.

We offer our thankfulness to God for his mercies to us.

Our worship is also **for ourselves**, enriching us, building us up as a community.

We may offer prayers of **petition** – asking God for things. Together - we ask God to guide us as a church.

Early in the service we usually say a prayer of **confession** - recognising our own failings, and often the wider sins of the world, which we share in as part of that world.

There is both a personal and a community aspect to our prayers.

Forgive our sins AS WE FORGIVE, we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, remembering what can seem rather harsh words of Jesus -

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6: 14 -15)

Our prayers acknowledge that what we do, how we are, affects others.

We look beyond our doors, to the community around, to the wider world.

Intercessions. Important in EVERY act of worship.

Return again to the words of Paul -

I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, ² for kings and all who are in high positions ... (1 Timothy 2: 1,2)

There are other kinds of prayer, but these are the main ones in our services.

HOW DO THE PRAYERS BELONG TO US ALL?

When we worship together, I - or whoever is leading the service - have created the prayers. Whoever is leading the worship generally says the prayers. So how are we praying together as a congregation?

- the worship leader acts as a **representative**, on behalf of the whole congregation. I try to offer prayers which are meaningful to me, in language that feels right for me to say. I'm sure others who lead worship will echo this. If I'm looking at prayers in a book of prayers, there are many where I think - "I can't say it like that". So - I use another one, or adapt it, express it differently.
So - worship leader speaks on behalf of all, but is true to herself or himself.
- **the worship leaders tries to get the congregation involved in prayer**, to help everyone say "AMEN" - so be it - and to mean it, to feel that the prayer is their prayer as well.
 - we try to be **inclusive**. Inclusive *language* is one aspect - we are not all brothers - or indeed all sisters. Being inclusive is also about remembering when preparing prayers that not everyone is like me, that others have different concerns, but also different ways of responding.

So, we try and vary the way we do things in prayer, trying to give people ways of being involved -

- Sometimes there are responses - said (eg Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer) or perhaps sung.
 - Or we share in the words of a psalm.
 - We say TOGETHER the Lord's Prayer.
 - Sometimes - especially at family services - I've asked the congregation for concerns for prayer, or asked people to write them down. We could do that more often - some churches do that every week.
 - One or two of our members lead intercessions occasionally. It's again one person speaking on behalf of all, but it brings a different perspective, because of that person's experience and outlook
- **Prayer box** - for people from the community to ask for prayer, but we could use the box also.
 - Involving everyone is not just about intercessions. Perhaps you have a **favourite prayer** which you would like used in worship – let me know.
 - Perhaps at our **church away day**, or at a **church meeting** we can think further about prayer in worship, and what people find helpful - though it will of course vary with each of us.

LISTENING TO GOD?

All that is about our speaking to God.

One writer, speaking of prayer in worship - "Prayer is like a dialogue between God and his people ..."

The point being made is that prayer is not a magic formula through which we influence God and change his mind, but is the lifeblood of our relationship with him. This is true for congregations as well as individuals. We praise God **together**; we express our concerns for our corporate life as well as for the individuals who are part of it, as well as for our world.

Conversations are two way - or are supposed to be. We can all think of people with whom we have a "conversation", but actually we can't get a word in edgeways! I suspect our "conversations" with God are in danger of being like that.

I don't want to suggest that we can expect immediate responses from God to our prayers - I'm always suspicious of people who list "answers" to prayer, keeping a kind of checklist and presumably reminding God if there are some items he seems to have forgotten!

But I do think that in worship is an important time when we can **listen for God**.

Silence - something I haven't mentioned. We always have a brief period of reflection after the sermon, but perhaps more silence in our prayers would be helpful, and allow God to speak to us.

Recognising God's voice - I'm sure we've all had the experience in worship when something has been particularly meaningful, highlighting something in our own life, or in the life of our church.

Just occasionally it's something in the sermon! (Not as often as we preachers might wish!). More often perhaps, it's as we sing a hymn, listen to the scriptures, or dare I say it as our thoughts wander, prompted by something we've heard. Our prayer becomes a "conversation" as we reflect.

Through the elements of our worship, God speaks to each of us, and to us his gathered people -

CONCLUSION

We are encouraged by the scriptures to pray together.

In worship, our prayers focus on God, but also we acknowledge our failings, we pray for ourselves and others.

We try to discern God's voice in the different aspects of worship.

During this year of prayer, let's think not just about personal prayer, but about how we pray together, especially in our worship.

I welcome suggestions about how we might make our prayers EVERYONE'S prayers.