

## ON PUBLIC PRAYER TODAY

Perhaps the most difficult task of the working minister today is to produce meaningful prayers for public use.

Sermons, traditionally regarded as the minister's biggest headache, remain a challenging art-form: like paintings, they are never complete, only abandoned.<sup>1</sup> But congregations today, at least in Scotland, include very few people who are there to gain respectability or, as in a golf club or Rotary, for business and social reasons. In fact, the direct opposite of Rabbie Burns' experience is now the case, for today regular church attendance is a minority activity ridiculed by the unco' guid.<sup>2</sup> Such a reversal of circumstances has brought an unexpected spin-off to preachers, for those who do attend are, in higher proportion than previously, people who have freely and deliberately come to worship and are therefore personally interested in what the minister has to say. After all, at one time the beadle used to be equipped with a long stick to enable him to prod awake women – it says women and not men in the record I've seen – who tried to sleep 'during sermon', and to pour tar on the shawl of anyone who fell asleep for a second time!

Public prayers, however, are harder to prepare than they used to be, and there must be many like myself who seize with relief on whatever cream of their colleagues' production comes to the surface in print. Increasingly as the years pass, fresh interpretations given to old words by our rapidly changing world make the cherished language of our heritage dangerously misleading if employed in public. 'Redemption' in my community today has to do with turning green stamps into ready cash. More importantly, the time is approaching when we must call into question the continued use of the title 'Lord', which hitherto has come so readily to our lips and has proved so acceptable ecumenically. The typical lord in British society nowadays is a Life Peer, powerless and fading – the very attributes commonly assigned to Jesus that we are most anxious to counter.

If we are to be as effective evangelists as our predecessors, we must discard the words they took from secular society to highlight the realities of the faith, words which have now changed their meaning. Fresh analogies and images are needed on exactly the same principle, to strike chords in the mind of contemporary man. Such 'fresh' images may well be biblical, of course – like the *celebrate*, *share* and *learn* of the first prayer below: they will only be fresh in the sense that earlier Christians either took them for granted or passed over

them as being not worth particular emphasis in their day and age.

The challenge to lead meaningful public prayer is at its greatest, of course, on occasions when people outwith the fellowship of the church are gathered. A few years ago, as parish minister of a housing scheme being built on a hill, I turned up at the new concrete water tower for the official ceremony of switching on the pumps: after his speech, and apparently on the spur of the moment, the Convener of the Water Committee asked me to offer a prayer of dedication. Maybe the day for such thoughts to arise in the minds of civic dignitaries has already passed, but I was taken completely by surprise *then* – praise be for ‘From Thee all skill and science flow’! The kind of occasions I have in mind are those still very common in secular society today, within secondary schools, for example, or at gatherings of other well intentioned bodies which have a chaplain, though most of the adults present consciously ignore or deliberately reject the worship of the Church.

The problem – and the point of opportunity – is not just that the people are non-church. It is that educated people today are more ignorant than ever before of what is in the Bible and have a grossly distorted view of the nature and composition of the Church.

Christians are partly responsible for this state of affairs. On the one hand we have recoiled so far from the former practice of ramming the Bible down people’s throats that we have conveyed the notion that it is a difficult book only specialists dare open – like *Das Kapital*. On the other hand, we have so objected to the one-time widespread study of the Bible ‘as literature’, that we have begun ourselves to cherish it only as a library for private and congregational devotion. The result is that few people outwith the fellowship of the Church realize that the great problems of life all humanity must face are treated within its covers – in academic circles, *The Republic*, even, may have fared better.

The public’s increasing reliance on television for information about what’s going on in the world has not helped. News bulletins, judging their success by viewing figures, seek out titillating trivia and personal clashes with the result that, even more than in politics, day-to-day sustaining work and sometimes major projects of mainstream Christianity are passed over in case they bore the mass of viewers. In Scotland, a certain ‘Pastor’, not long in the field and with only a tiny congregation but highly publicized because of his demonstrations, is more a household name than the recently retired and deservedly honoured Minister of St. Cuthbert’s, ex-Moderator, ex-Chairman of the Parole Board, etc., etc. The way events in Northern Ireland and the Lebanon have been treated, with ‘coverage’ being confined to the dramatic, has distorted beyond correction

public understanding of the normal relationship among Christians and with those of other faiths.

Thus the point of opportunity in public prayer today is that the good if alienated man, should he choose to listen when he bows his head with the rest, may learn to his own surprise and interest that the actual concerns of the Christian before God include some at least that trouble him and other ordinary mortals.

#### NOTES

1. An image I owe to the Editor of this Journal. (Said of a poem by W. H. Auden – Ed.)
2. How often is one told, in personal conversations, that people who go to church are ‘just hypocrites’, attending ‘only because they are in a rut’!

### **First Prayer for a Morning Service including Baptism**

*Call:* John 3, vv. 16, 17 (NEB)

GLORIOUS GOD, Heavenly Father –

You know we’ve come here to this baptismal service to celebrate . . .

We want to celebrate our life together in this community of (Wherever), with all its variety of people, rejoicing that so many seek to be good neighbours one to another;

We want to celebrate all the marriage vows that are being kept, whose keeping has brought Jesus’ joy among us as He promised;

We want to celebrate the birth of babies, the sense of wonder engendered with them, and all those dreams of a better world that have been reborn;

We want to celebrate the presence among us of unmarried people, those who sustain the world and find their work and service and friendship bringing rewards that can only be theirs;

We want to celebrate the health we have, how much or how little, all that makes us free to give ourselves in worthwhile relationships, and find our salvation;

ABOVE ALL, we want to celebrate that You have not abandoned our foolish and sinful humanity, we want to celebrate Your shout of YES to the world in Jesus, that You have acted not to condemn but to save.

Yes, Lord, this day we want to celebrate.

GLORIOUS GOD, Heavenly Father—

You know we’ve come here to share . . .

We’ve come here to share our time and our concerns. Six days we’ll have to work, and this day we respond to Your invitation

to give our time and share our love for one another and our compassion for all Your little ones everywhere.

We've come to share our money. Some we don't need. Some we had thought of using for ourselves. Here we are ready to share, wanting to maintain this church building and our work as the Body of Your Son, and trusting our brethren to use our money and express our love for people we cannot help directly on our own.

Yes, Lord, this day we want to share.

**AND GLORIOUS GOD, Heavenly Father –**

You know we've come here to learn . . .

There is much that still mystifies us about Your ways and upsets us about our life.

There is much we do know but have not yet learned to obey.

Times there are when we are fearful, and we forget how much You love the world, and to what lengths You have gone to convince us.

Yes, Lord, this day we want to learn.

**GLORIOUS GOD, Heavenly Father . . .** May the Spirit that flows from You and Your Son Jesus Christ be among us now, and make real our celebration, our sharing, and our learning, that all who know us may this week see the difference You make – and seek, and knock, and ask for themselves.

Through Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory forever.

**A First Prayer for Evening Service, with Younger Adults Present**

*Almighty God, ever alive, Father of all – we're almost scared to put these words on our lips – or maybe we should be. God. Father. Jesus tells His friends to call You that. Father – we confess the kind of friends of Jesus that we are.*

We're not sure how to live – so we come.

We're not sure what to think – so we come.

We're not sure about other people – we're not sure about ourselves – so we come.

We come to You – together and before each other we come to You – looking, asking, confessing. (We are not as we like others to think we are. And we acknowledge this solemnly before You and each other.)

In this time of worship help us to give You Your place. Help us to be

confident of You – confident of each other – confident of ourselves as Your children in all things.

May Your peace, and purposefulness, and gaiety be with us all, this night and always, through Jesus Christ.

### **Intercessory Prayer for Evening**

WATCH, Dear God – keep Your Watch –

On all humanity's victims, who weep this night at the continuing tragedy of their lot – seeking a Saviour;

On all the poor of the world, who know about the wealth You've given – and long for justice;

On all who give birth this night, in distressing circumstances – but with hope;

On all who have seen a son or daughter die this day – mystified;

AND MAY Your Spirit continue to be—

A shield for children who can sleep in peace;

A stimulus for strong adults, who have so much to give;

A support for the frail whose own power will never return;

A standard for the dying to grasp in hope and jubilation.

### **Concluding Prayer and Benediction**

Your KINGDOM come on earth, O God, as it is in heaven. Send forth more servants to tend the sick, to rest the weary, to bless the dying, to soothe the suffering, to have compassion on the oppressed and to provide vision for the short-sightedness of us all.

AND MAY THE GOD OF HOPE fill you all with joy and peace as you live out your lives, trusting in His ways and abounding in hope, forever.

### **A Christmas Blessing**

May the true spirit of Christmas be with you all this Christmastide . . .

the spirit of joy that overflows from the heart and makes neighbours rejoice;

the spirit of peace that harmonises differences and makes music of our common life;

the spirit of love that sings the mind of God to the world . . . this Christmastide, and forever.

### **Grace for a Public Occasion**

Glad thanks to You, God our Father, for all the rich blessings of this planet in Your universe! You support us all our years long with food and drink, friends and colleagues, the sense of achievements being completed and the challenge of great dreams to be fulfilled. Grant that this sharing together of the bread and wine of life may be a blessing for us today and a pattern for Your whole world tomorrow.

### **A Remembrance Day Prayer for Use in Secondary Schools**

*Let us give thanks*, each one of us, for the peace we enjoy in our part of the world . . . (for homes this day that are not being bombed); for families whose fathers and sons are not killing and being killed; for the freedom to choose the kind of life we want to live.

*Let us give thanks* for the sacrifice of life and loved ones by so many to win this peace. . . . Let us remember the scars on the personalities of the living. . . . Let us pray for men and women in prison today in many lands because of the human values they hold dear. . . . Let us pray for the extension of peace and freedom in all God's world. . . .

*Teach us, Good Lord*, to rejoice in the peace we have, to be peace-makers ourselves in places of conflict, to replace violence as an instrument of policy in human relations, and so to understand our fellows that we may feel their hurt and act for our mutual joy . . . even as did Jesus Christ Himself, the Prince of Peace, to Whom be glory forever.

### **A Commemoration** / *Founder's Day Prayer for Use in Secondary School* (after a hymn of praise)

Ever-living God! Yes, we do offer our praise and thanksgiving, especially for all the saints of (wherever) – in song and in silence, in sincerity and in truth. We bless You, the Fount of all that is good, for the Christian insight of (? those unknown men) who founded this school, for their costly commitment to youth and the future in an age of bewilderment and change. We bless You for Your Providence through the centuries (? years), graciously overlooking ingratitude for opportunities generously afforded, withholding ultimate penalties for time wasted and chances squandered, ever renewing and beckoning onwards, unfolding fresh days of promise. In our praise of You, help us each to be freed from our passing troubles, and to see visions of Your community of (wherever) as it is meant to be. And give us the power, amid both the gloom and the slick optimism of our own day and age, to shed the lights of realism, and

hope, and encouragement, on the pathway of our school and our community.

And these things we ask through Him who is the Light of the World, who passed from despair into victory, from death into resurrection, even Jesus Christ.

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