

Faith and Society Files: Real Life Worship Files - Prayer

Does what happens at Sunday worship connect with life in the real world? For many people the answer to that question is often 'no'. This leaflet introduces a series of worship files published by our Union to help churches relate their worship to the realities of contemporary living. This File looks at Prayer.

Picture the scene...

On a Sunday morning the worship-leader begins to pray:

*Dear Lord,
Help us now to set aside the concerns of this week and the affairs of the world.
Help us to forget about ourselves and concentrate on you.*

No matter how sincere, such prayer suggests that God isn't interested in the rest of the week. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth, but how often do the prayers offered in our worship actually engage with real life? Anecdotal evidence from Baptists in Britain suggests that even if we do offer prayer in public worship we do not connect with the realities of our contemporary world.

Keeping prayers relevant to the concerns of a church and the issues of the wider world presents a challenge to anyone. It's not something to be undertaken lightly, but neither is it the sole preserve of pastors or worship leaders. This short guide is designed to help those involved in leading public prayer. Just as the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, this worship-file suggests that what we do in public worship should help people nurture their own life of prayer, particularly keeping it true to real-life.

Public and Private Prayer

Public prayer is not the same as private prayer. They are, of course, closely related, but what is done in the privacy of your home or even in church prayer meetings, is not the same as public worship. There is a tension here for Baptist worship. The gathered community of a congregation is not always perceived as a 'public meeting' as such, but more akin to a family gathering to which others are invited. But public prayer has a distinctly different character to private gatherings. While it may take a number of forms and have a variety of content, it should

always represent the life of the whole worshipping community in their communication with God, i.e. it is more than the personal thoughts of any individual. This does not preclude people having time and space for personal prayer to be offered in the service, but it is to suggest that such opportunities happen within a wider framework that is aware of its public character as a disciplined community who know how to listen and respond to God.

The Who of our Prayers

Real life prayer begins with the reality of God. Prayer is, above all, our response to God and so it begins with God rather than us. We dare not presume to address God first, for true prayer is not concerned with revealing or attaining our human desires, no matter how admirable they may be. It's about us learning to participate in all God wishes for the church and the world.

As such prayer should begin with God and with what God has first spoken to us. Preparation for public prayer should therefore begin in reflection on the bible readings for the day. What has God said to us through the scriptures is important: so we begin with the reality of God and in an attitude that says: 'Master, speak! Your servant's listening' ... rather than 'O Lord hear our prayer.'

But God is not revealed through the scriptures alone. We should reflect also on where God has also been made known in the life of the church and the affairs of the world. So, what God might wish to say on the day of a Baptism may be very different to that following a civil disaster. Only when we have allowed ourselves to be addressed by God in all these ways may we then approach God in public with words and actions of our own.

The What and When of our Prayers

Any act of worship will lead the worshippers through an encounter with God, a journey

that deepens their relationship with God, and perhaps takes people in a new direction with God. In their most simple form these prayers will be words spoken by one person, on behalf of everyone, but there are also endless opportunities to explore how prayer may be more creative and engaging.

The beginning of worship needs to draw people into the reality of God. For whatever realities people come bearing, worship is where everything is placed in proper relationship with God. Thus it is common to begin worship with a prayer of **Praise or Adoration**. This is not the time to focus on the needs or desires that those present have brought with them to worship, although it is worth affirming to people that a time for that will come in due course. Rather, we begin with our attention fixed on God. Often such prayers will arise out of the text or the theme of the day, drawing the congregation's attention to the God they have come to worship. It may be offered as responsive prayer in which the congregation play an active part in proclaiming their worship.

As we move through the Christian Year, or as the reality of world events impact upon our lives, varying facets of God's character may be brought to the fore in these prayers. At Christmas we may focus on the humanity of God; on Good Friday we might consider the suffering of God; at Pentecost the emphasis might be on the Power of the Spirit. In the midst of national tragedy it might be concerned with the faithfulness of God. The importance of this prayer is to start the worshippers on the journey they are about to take with God.

As we remember who God is, so we become aware of the chasm between divine holiness and human frailty. In worship we realise how as individuals and as a fellowship we have fallen short of God's desires for us and so we are led to a time of **Confession**. We do this not because God likes to see us grovel, but because the need to acknowledge our sin is a basic reality of life for the Christian as is the need for each person to regularly receive forgiveness. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge how, as a church we bear a

responsibility to support each other and to challenge the systemic sinfulness of the world. Thus confession need not be an 'airing of everyone's dirty washing' in public, but such prayer does well if it leaves some time and space for worshippers to actually reflect upon the reality of their lives and say sorry to God. This may be done in silence or perhaps through some form of symbolic action. (It might even acknowledge the need for worshippers to say sorry to one another.)

Where such a prayer comes in the journey of worship is often disputed. Many will place it soon after the opening prayers, arguing that it is as we declare the holiness of God that we become conscious of our need to be forgiven before we go any further with God. Others suggest that confession should come after we've been addressed by God through the scriptures (and the sermon) for it's only then that we are aware of the real-life sin we need to confess. What is certain is that any confession should always be offered alongside an **Assurance of Forgiveness** from God and the promise of the Holy Spirit's power and protection, enabling the Christian to live differently in the days that come.

The assurance of forgiveness may be one way in which worshippers are inspired to offer their **Prayers of Thanks**. Having received forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit for the coming days, the response should be thanksgiving. Such prayers may also be given as a part of the **Offering** when we remember the material blessings God has given, or they may occur after the Reading of Scripture where we are reminded of the history of salvation.

Certainly such prayers can be some of the most engaged moments in the service of worship. God has always been encountered through the real life of the fellowship and prayers of thanks for what God has done feature heavily in the scriptures. So while this is an opportunity to give general thanks for the gift of our salvation, it is also an opportunity to acknowledge the answers received to previous prayers and for people to express their thanks in extemporary words or perhaps again through symbolic action.

The fact that thanks is given for answered prayer takes us to **Prayers of Concern**, times where we have asked for God to intervene in the realities of life. Traditionally these are **petitions** – prayers for ourselves – and **intercessions** – prayer that moves beyond the circle of care in the church and addresses people and places known to be facing times of trial and trouble. These prayers arise out of Christian compassion for a broken world and the confidence that God's will is for wholeness, healing and peace.

Sometimes a number of people may lead the congregation in these prayers. They may sum up the concerns of the people in words spoken on their behalf, or they may offer **bidding prayers**, where different areas of concern are mentioned and after each one a space is given for the congregation to add aloud their own particular prayer. So we might pray for 'places of conflict' whereupon the people could add the names of countries in which war is being waged. These might form part of a litany; in effect a dialogue in which at the end of each concern, the people join in a common response, such as 'Lord hear our prayer' ... or 'may your will be done on earth as it is done in heaven.'

Part of such prayers may be the practice of **lament** so that, in contrast to those things for which we have to offer thanks to God, there can be an opportunity for the people to bring to God those things for which they grieve, a chance to offer to God the worship of hearts that are broken at the state of the world. It may be that specific **prayers for healing** are offered on such occasions, too, when people may receive specific prayer perhaps with the laying on of hands and the anointing of oil.

Often these prayers will come after the sermon, as part of our response to what God has said to us. Within them there may also be an opportunity for the fellowship to respond personally to God as they discover that in worship they have been called by God to be the agent of the very change they sought.

Left or Right Side Prayer?

These suggested patterns of spoken prayer are predominantly 'left brain' activity. This

more rational side of the human psyche tends to dominate public prayer in Baptist churches, with the possible exception of **praying in tongues** (glossolalia). Where these charismatic gifts are exercised, worshippers often feel a mental release and express a freedom of physical expression. Otherwise however, our corporate prayer life tends to ignore the more intuitive and creative side of our character. This can leave some people unengaged or feeling that part of who they really are remains untouched by prayer.

If our prayer seeks to engage with real life there needs to be more creative opportunities for prayer, perhaps expressed through the arts, the use of icons, or the walking of a labyrinth. Such activities need the conscious creation of a space that leads people into meditative encounters with God. A time for genuine **silence** in such worship is also then important if the church is serious about hearing God speak in an otherwise cacophonous world. Such silence will not be just an absence of busy words or underlying music, but an intentional provision of time when no other sound distracts us from the voice of God. None of this should not be seen as merely catering for the few 'mystical or artsy' types within the fellowship, it must be recognised as connecting a vital but often undernourished part of every humanity to the practices of prayer.

Further Reading

It's always a privilege to lead people in prayer and we hope that this worship file on prayer will prove useful if this is an area of ministry into which you are being called. If so you may be interested in these other publications:

- C. Ellis & M. Blythe, *Gathering for Worship*, BUGB/Canterbury Press, 2005.
- John Pritchard, *The Intercession Handbook*, SPCK, 1997.
- Nick Fawcett, *2000 Prayers for Public Worship*, Kevin Mayhew, 2008.
- Sue Wallace et al, *Multi-Sensory Prayer*, Scripture Union, 2000.
- The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer*, SPCK, 1995.
- The Iona Abbey Worship Book*, Wild Goose Publications, 2005.

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