



The Face From The Cross
By Martin Earle and Jim Blackstone

Jesus the Lord



2024
Year of the
New Testament

A welcome from the Bishop of Chichester



Learning how to read and write is a complex and exciting process. In the very early stages of life, we need lots of help from others. The same is true, even when we become older, and innovation speeds up the pace of change.

When the Church assembles for worship, especially for the Eucharist, we become a school of learning.

This is a shared experience, expertly tailored by the Holy Spirit for the needs of each person. The Spirit draws from the authoritative instruments of the Bible, the prayers and the breaking of the bread, overseen by the facilitation of the ordained members of the people of God.

This year's Lent course helps us to set our learning from the New Testament in the context of worship. This is the school of learning that uniquely connects the assembly on earth with the assembly of saints and angels in heaven.

Fresh attention to the Bible as it shapes our worship helps us to see how proclaiming the mystery of faith in the Eucharistic assembly

re-evangelises us and gives us the material with which to fulfil our missionary discipleship.

Introduction

from
The Reverend Dr Earl Collins

Continuing Ministerial Development Officer
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Under the general heading of
Proclaiming the Mystery of Faith,
our diocesan **Year of the Old Testament**
entered its final phase in autumn 2023,
shifting in Advent to the
Year of the New Testament.

The focus in 2024 falls on the full revelation of God's Word in Jesus Christ (the Word-made-flesh), in his saving death and resurrection and on the Holy Spirit (the gift of the Father and the Son), attested in the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament – thus the fuller unfolding of the Old Testament (2 Timothy 3.16-17).

This year's **Lent Course** invites us to consider the vital question of who Jesus is and helps us to answer in faith: Jesus is the Christ, the Lord's anointed Saviour, the light and hope of all the world (Matthew 16.13-20).

Each section of this specially commissioned Lent course has biblical references on some facet of this theme for our personal and communal reading. These are followed by a selection of much-loved prayers from the **Book of Common Prayer**, with a short commentary to help us understand them better.

A profound reflection on the theme, written by a priest of this diocese then follows. You are also invited to **reflect on Martin Earle's depiction of the cross of Jesus** and, as the weeks go by, to ponder individual aspects of the cross as they interpret key moments in the life of Our Lord.

In this way, God's Word in Scripture is unpacked through prayer and worship, to lead us deeper into the mystery of faith (1 Timothy 3.9) - into closer relationship with Christ our Lord, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2.3).



Week I: Jesus the Lord, Giving Himself

Scripture References

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3.16-20; Romans 8.32); Jesus offered himself for the life of the world, obedient to his mission from the Father (Hebrews 10.5; John 10.18); Paul speaking about the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11.23 – 29) shows how Jesus offers himself in our worship.

From the Book of Common Prayer

Prayer of Consecration

ALMIGHTY God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world; and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death, until his coming again: Hear us, O merciful Father, we most humbly beseech thee; and grant that we receiving these thy creatures of bread and wine, according to thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ's holy institution, in remembrance of his death and passion, may be partakers of his most blessed Body and Blood: who, in the same night that he was betrayed, took Bread; and, when he had given thanks, he brake it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take, eat; this is my Body which is given for you: Do this in remembrance of me". Likewise after supper he took the Cup; and, when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink ye all of this; for this is my Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins: Do this, as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me."

Amen.

From the Book of Common Prayer (contd)

Prayer of Thanksgiving

ALMIGHTY and everliving God, we most heartily thank thee, for that thou dost vouchsafe to feed us, who have duly received these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ; and dost assure us thereby of thy favour and goodness towards us; and that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom, by the merits of the most precious death and passion of thy dear Son. And we most humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

Commentary on BCP Prayers

These prayers demonstrate that Holy Communion is all about God's self-giving. God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, Jesus Christ, who in turn gave his life for all on the cross (John 3.16; John 10.18).

As the risen Lord he is given to us in the Holy Communion service. Filled with Christ's presence, we give our lives back to God through Jesus Christ and implore him to make us fruitful in works of love.

Reflection by Revd. Dr. Jonathan Jong

Rector of Cocking with West Lavington, Bepton and Heyshott

The word "love"—like most words—is used in a variety of ways. Very often, it connotes a desire to consume or possess. This is for example the "love" of "I love ice cream" or "I love those shoes". But this understanding of love is also commonly applied to the love between persons.

Whenever we love someone for what they do for us, or how they make us feel, or even how they make us better people, we are participating in this kind of love, which treats the beloved at least partly as a means to some end. There is nothing inherently wrong with this kind of love, though people ought not be treated solely as a means to some other end.

Furthermore, it is a very natural—a very human—way to love someone or something. All the same, Christians understand love differently. The distinctively Christian understanding of love comes from the distinctively Christian understanding of God, which is the doctrine of the Trinity.

There are many ways to talk about the Trinity (all of them inadequate), but one way is to say that it is an account of what it means that God is love. Christians do not just say that God loves; nor only that God is loving; we insist that God is love (1 John 4.8, 16).

What this means is that love is inherent to the nature of God: and that even before there is anything external to God to love, there is already love within the life of God. This life is the Trinitarian life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are three yet one.

Again, there are many ways to talk about the three-yet-oneness of God (again, all of them inadequate), but one is to say that the identity and existence of each Person is absolutely and inextricably bound up in the others, such that they exist only in relation to one another.

The Father is nothing except what is given to the Son and the Holy Spirit and received from them; and the Son is nothing except what is given to the Father and the Holy Spirit and received from them; and the Holy Spirit is nothing except what is given to the Father and the Son and received from them.

In other words, the Triune God is the perfect mutual self-giving of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Yet this account of the Trinity may seem rather abstract.

But Christians also believe that the nature of God has been revealed in the very concrete life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation is the Trinity translated into human and historical terms. There are many ways to describe the life of Jesus, but it is above all a self-sacrificial life, culminating of course in his own death for the sake and good of the world. As the New Testament underlines: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3.16-20; Romans 8.32).

In Christ, God offered (and indeed still offers) Godself as a gift for our sake and our good, even while we were (and are) still sinners (Romans 5.8). And this act is entirely "within character" for God, whose very being is a life of self-giving.

As the Incarnation is the translation into human and historical terms of the Triune life, so the Eucharist is the Incarnation made present for us here and now, not only in theory but in physical reality, as real as bread and wine, flesh and blood. This Sacrament of his Body and Blood—given for us (Luke 22.19, 1 Corinthians 11.24)—is the same gift as Christ's "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice" on the cross, which—as we have just seen—is the manifestation in time and space of the eternal self-giving of the Son in the divine life of the Trinity.

Our participation in the Eucharist is therefore not only a participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ into which we were baptised, but also in the divine life itself, which is—to return to the point with which we began—a life of love, understood from a Christian perspective.

Of course, we are called to be eucharistic people not only in church on Sundays (or at weekday Eucharists!), but throughout our lives. Our faith—in the Triune God, in the Incarnation, in the Holy Communion—must shape and inform our lives, not least by shaping and informing our understanding of love.

Christians and non-Christians alike talk about loving others, whether it is our children or parents or spouses or family members, friends, and neighbours, or even our enemies. But for Christians, this—self-giving for the sake and good of the beloved—is what we must mean.

This understanding of love is what marital promises are based on, for example, in which we pledge our bodies, our worldly goods and indeed all that we are to one another. Marriage is a sign of love between two individuals, to be sure: but it is also a sign of love itself, the self-giving love of God.

The Christian life of love obviously extends beyond marriage. And so, this understanding of love is also what underpins the moral injunctions we find in the gospels: to love our neighbours and enemies as we love ourselves, which is to value their lives and well-being as we value our own, and no less.

This is no small thing: the calling to the Christian way of life is a high calling, which we will inevitably fail to answer in full. But thanks be to God that love covers a multitude of sins

(1 Peter 4.8), and is offered to us continuously, as we are reminded each time we approach the altar, to be given nothing other than Love Incarnate.

Martin Earle writes

The crucifix is double sided with an identical design painted on each side. It has been designed to hang from Aberdeen Cathedral's chancel arch directly above a large altar.

In this position, visible both to servers and priests in the sanctuary and the faithful in the nave, the crucifix is intended to be an image which draws and unites the attention of everyone present. Christ is represented as the Living One, the Lord of history and true Oriens of prayer.

Each week when you reflect on part of the crucifix ask yourself or discuss in a group how the image enhances our theme this week.

Reflection on this week's image

The wound in the side of Christ crucified reveals God's total self-giving for us: how can we respond by giving ourselves to God in love?

Questions for Discussion

- What difference does it make to you to think of God as love per se, rather than just as loving?
- In what ways, in the gospels, do we see the life of Jesus as a life of self-giving?
- Are there parts of the eucharistic liturgy that speak especially of our participation in the sacrificial life of Christ?
- How does thinking of the Christian moral life as being about self-giving change the way you think about ethical questions you face in your life?



Week 2: Jesus the Lord, Forgiving Sins

Scripture References

Jesus is the eternal Word and Image of God made flesh (John 1.14; Colossians 1.15). Through him the Father creates everything (1 Corinthians 8.6; Colossians 1.16) and saves the world from sin. As the Word-Incarnate, Jesus shows his command over nature (Matthew 14.28-33) and even over life and death (Mark 5.21-43). He bears our sicknesses and carries our infirmities (Isaiah 53.4; Matthew 8.17). Jesus is the divine-human doctor who cures all ills, bodily and spiritual, and feeds us with his very life, to heal us from sin and death (Matthew 15.21; John 4.46-54; John 6.51-59).

From the Book of Common Prayer

A General Confession (from Morning and Evening Prayer)

ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father, We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, We have offended against thy holy laws, We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, And we have done those things which we ought not to have done, And there is no health in us: But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders; Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults, Restore thou them that are penitent, According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord: And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name.

Amen.

Comment on BCP Prayers

The General Confession teaches us to declare honestly before God the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do. But it also teaches us to cast ourselves on the Father's mercy, like the prodigal son (Luke 15.11-32). **Honest confession of sin and a real resolve to amend one's life are an essential part of Christian conversion** and the ongoing work of sanctification (i.e., being made holy by God's grace).

Reflection, by Revd. Arwen Folkes

Rector of East Blatchington & Bishopstone

You may have noticed a tendency among some people, when talking about their illness, to downplay their symptoms. It can cause all sorts of problems because minimising or neglecting to give all details to a doctor or nurse can lead to treatment that is only partially effective or partially informed.

The full benefit of any treatment is frustrated because not all symptoms have been brought to light and the process of healing and recovery is lengthened and made far more complicated. This analogy of illness is a helpful one when considering what it means to reflect on 'Jesus the Lord, forgiving sins' because the human condition of sinfulness is a spiritual sickness, a sickness which we all, without exception, struggle with to various degrees throughout our lives.

When we come before our Lord, whether privately or corporately to confess, we can often try to downplay our symptoms before Him and inevitably find ourselves not knowing the full benefit of the forgiving grace we have been given in Him.

I have been rather interested, for a long time, in the experience of prisoners who come to faith during or after their incarceration. 'Into the Silent Land' by Martin Laird OSA describes the experience of one young prisoner, who having entered into communion with God through the practice of silent prayer, found deep within himself 'something of value for the very first time' in his life. Having had the diagnosis of his sinfulness confirmed in full fact by his imprisonment, his heart was able to open up to the full treatment that divine forgiveness brings - worth, value, and restorative love.

I too have had the profound privilege of quietly baptising an adult after they had lived a life of crime. In that baptism those words, that can often make others feel awkward, were laden with real meaning and transformative power - turning away from sin, rejecting evil, receiving forgiveness, being clothed in Christ. Each one resonated around the church, punching both the air and the heart.

The General Confession in the Book of Common Prayer is a beautiful and weighty prayer. But it can trouble people, especially those who spend their time downplaying their symptoms.

Yet, it reads very differently when we have acknowledged the full and complicated difficulty of living under the sin that corrupts the whole of our world. Under this light it reads more like a statement of fact rather than a damning indictment. We do err and stray like lost sheep, we do engage in daily battle with the devices and desires of our own hearts, and we do indeed leave undone many things and do things we ought not to have done. It acknowledges the truth that when our lives are held up against the greatest commandment, love of God and love of neighbour, our spiritual health is rightly and humbly called into question.

Mature Christianity consciously accepts that we labour under these things (as opposed to the chaos of struggling with them unconsciously) and this awareness is the cross that we are called to bear in our Christian life. Acknowledging our sins entails not so much writing a scrupulous list of every single misdemeanour, but acknowledging the great, cross-shaped, shadow of sin throughout our lives.

Yet, knowing that we bear such a Cross is not where the Christian life leaves us. Having fully diagnosed and named the real state of things, the full prescription and treatment for healing is promised to us. And what hope there is in this!

I feel compelled to share a personal lightbulb moment in my own faith that completely changed my understanding of everything. When exploring the idea of 'atonement' (which can be helpfully broken into 'at-one-ment'), I was made aware of a subtle but transformative difference between two different theories, whose technical names are 'propitiation' and 'expiation'. One of the traditional and classical understandings of atonement in western Christianity has been dominated by the idea of 'propitiation' - the idea that God paid for our sins upon the cross because our transgressions were so awful, and God so mad with love, that he gave up his own son as the ransom for our liberation.

However, there is another understanding, which is perhaps more liberating - that of 'expiation' which suggests a deeper rescue operation. Under this theory, God saw the full extent of the sinful state that we labour under and was so moved by the difficulty and problem of this that he sent his son as an 'expiation'; a divine rescue mission to make amends.

He came not to condemn us (John 3.17) but to rescue us and help us through it, to let us know that he reclaims all that he has created - the good, the bad, and the ugly.

This second understanding is truly revolutionary - it still acknowledges that we labour under our sinfulness, but that a merciful and loving God is so moved by our condition that he sends the finest possible physician to our aid - his own beloved Son. To return to my opening analogy, it is as if the patient has laid bare their symptoms and the very finest surgeon with the best medicine is given in response.

Which brings us to the second half of the General Confession in the Book of Common Prayer. Having laid out the full difficulties of the condition, we are then enabled to be open to the best treatment there possibly can be, from the hands of a loving Father who seeks to treat and heal us in the very finest way.

He has mercy upon us, spares us, restores us – and we beseech him to fulfil the promises made to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. God empowers us by his grace, helping us live the 'Godly, righteous and sober life' that we all want to live but struggle daily to do so.

Reflection on this week's image

Christ gazes at us from the cross, challenging our sin but revealing God's forgiveness: how can I so receive his gaze that forgiveness may flow through me and transform my relationships with others?

Questions for Discussion

- Thinking of the 'at-one-ment' as a divine rescue mission, can you bring to mind a time in your life where you have been involved in, or have witnessed, a rescue mission by God?
- What is there in your life that is 'left undone' that you can bring to the Lord, for whom nothing is impossible?
- Why do you think we struggle to accept the paradox of our honest humility being met with God's divine love?
- Consider the bold certainty of 'Thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord'. How does this confidence bear fruit in our own lives or church community?



Week 3: Jesus the Lord, Healing the Sick

Scripture References

Throughout Scripture, Jesus' healing power is demonstrated (Luke 4.40; John 5.1-18). He brings salvation in the fullest sense, not only from sin-of which our Lord was free-(Hebrews 4.15) but from all that afflicts our human condition which he fully shared (Hebrews 2.17). He brings what today is called 'wellbeing.' The word 'salvation' means health of spirit, soul, and body. Christ offers us life in all its fulness (John 10.10) but the surrender of faith is needed on our part if his power is to have its full effect in us (Mark 6.5).

From the Book of Common Prayer

The Prayer of Humble Access

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. **Amen.**

Act of Faith in Jesus

THE Almighty Lord, who is a most strong tower to all them that put their trust in him, to whom all things in heaven, in earth, and under the earth, do bow and obey, be now and evermore thy defence; and make thee know and feel, that there is none other Name under heaven given to man, in whom, and through whom, thou mayest receive health and salvation, but only the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Collect for Purity

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name: through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Comment on BCP Prayers

Sin is no barrier to God's mercy, rather, because we confess our sin God raises us up! In the first prayer, reaching out empty hands like the Canaanite woman (Luke 18.1-8) we beg for scraps from the Lord's table. God both cleanses us (Psalm 51.7) and comes to live within us (John 14.23). In the second prayer (for the Visitation of the Sick), we confess our need for Jesus the only Saviour and healer. The third prayer asks God that his Holy Spirit would work within us, enlightening the darkness of our hearts, filling us with love and the praise of his name.

Reflection, by Revd. Anita Colpus

Rector, Trinity in Lewes

Half-way through our reflections on 'Jesus the Lord', this week we consider 'healing the sick' and I find this to be the one proclamation about Jesus which does not have certainty in its outcome. But please bear with me before you suspect that I don't believe in healing! I do, and am certain and confident that Jesus can heal and still heals today. We believe in, and worship a God who heals, yet as we journey through life, we have all known loved ones who have not been healed and even find across the gospels, examples that Jesus did not heal everyone.

There were those who were not brought to Jesus and therefore were not healed and there are those who, because of their lack of faith were not healed. When I was reading the story of the lame man by the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-18), I wondered about the crowds of sick people, disabled, blind, lame and paralysed, who were lying by the pool. Did Jesus heal them or not? The text does not tell us.

Jesus asked the sick man (John 5:6), 'Do you want to get well?' - not such a silly question, as we are told the man had been sick and lying there for thirty-eight years. If Jesus were to heal this man, it would bring an incredible change to his life. It would be literally life-changing

The man would have to re-engage with society, get a job, be responsible for his family; he would have to work every day - no more lying around by the pool depending on others. Jesus gives us all that invitation - do you want to get well? Do you want your life to be transformed in all its fullness?

The man at the pool does want Jesus to heal him, to transform his life and so Jesus tells him to 'stand up, pick up his mat, and walk.' Jesus' words resonate with the healing of the paralysed man, as does the continuation of this healing, as the Evangelist then discloses in the story that it is the Sabbath. Now the man is sinning (the legalists claimed!) because he is working, i.e., carrying his mat on the Sabbath.

The leaders begin harassing Jesus for breaking the Sabbath rules, but Jesus' reply shows that transformation of the man's whole life - healing in all its fullness - is more important than the details of the law.

God is in the business of renewal and transformation: forgiveness and healing, in the full sense of salvation. The Lord wants to bring us to full health - health for our souls, our minds, our spirits, not just physical healing. Jesus tells the man to stop sinning or something worse may happen to him. Jesus is bothered about all sin that afflicts our human condition and wants this man, and us as well, to experience wholeness, well-being, indeed life in all its fullness.

From the beginning of Holy Scripture, we see that God gives life abundantly. Jesus declares that he has come to give that life to us (John 10:10). Yet when we look at life today - our lives, stories of people in our community, our country, our world, our family, our friends - we can be forgiven for believing that the first half of this verse is truer than the second half. The enemy has come and taken away joy and hope, health and happiness - has literally stolen it from our grasp physically, destroying hope and banishing peace from our minds. This is his nature and Jesus warns us about him.

Yet Jesus goes on to say... 'I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.' The words 'that they may have' are translated from the Greek tense that means not only to have but to possess continually. The life Jesus offers is one filled with vitality, above and beyond what is regular - the life Jesus gives is extraordinary and excessive. Jesus gives us life overflowing, rich beyond compare, life to the ultimate maximum.

We will have trials, we will face struggles, we will experience pain and suffering, loss and hurt. Yet Jesus gives life. He will give you all you need to receive that life along with hope for the eternal life that will be the completion of God's purpose of transformation and renewal for everyone who believes in Jesus and is obedient to him.

Jesus gives forgiveness and physical healing to this man at the pool, as he does to us when we turn to him and ask. He is God incarnate, who always has mercy and cleanses and restores us through his body and blood given for us on the cross and to us in the holy sacrament. It is in and through Jesus, and him alone, that health and salvation are given: there is power and healing in his name.

Reflection on this week's image

Through the saving incarnation of his Son God took to himself the whole of our wounded human nature: how might his saving grace heal us from our wounds of sin and death?

Questions for Discussion

- Who have you known who has not been healed physically this side of heaven? How does that impact your belief in Jesus who heals?
- Jesus asks that man, 'Do you want to be well?' - not a silly question. I wonder if some people don't want to be completely healed because of the change in lifestyle that would demand. What do you think and feel about that?
- Who are you praying for who is sick? What would it look like to pray for wholeness and salvation in its fullest sense?
- What does 'life in all its fullness' look like?



Week 4: Jesus the Lord, Hearing Prayer

Scripture References

Jesus was the supreme teacher of prayer (Luke 3.21; 5.15-16; 9.29; 22.40). Jesus alone, as God's only-begotten Son, can truly call God 'Abba' or 'My Father', (John 20.17). But he shares his unique relationship with the Father with us through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 4.6). Jesus also promises that our prayers will be heard. Because he is the Mediator who has entered heaven on our behalf (John 16.23), Christ's priestly intercession can never fail us (Hebrews 7.25).

From the Book of Common Prayer

Prayer of St John Chrysostom

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplications unto thee; and dost promise that when two or three are gathered together in thy Name thou wilt grant their requests: Fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants, as may be most expedient for them; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting.

Amen.

Collect for the First Sunday after Epiphany

O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Comment on BCP Prayers

These prayers (especially that of St John Chrysostom, originally an Eastern Orthodox prayer and addressed directly to Christ) **remind us of Jesus' promise that he will be among his people when we gather** (Matthew 18.20) and that we will be heard when we pray in his name (John 14.14). The Collect for the First Sunday after Epiphany asks God's guidance for what we need to pray about and gives us a lively sense that grace alone empowers our prayer.

Reflection, by Revd. Tom Robson

Vicar of Southborne with West Thorney

When you picture Jesus, how often do you picture him in prayer? Occasionally, perhaps, when the Gospel reading leads us into accounts of Christ praying. And yet, to read through a Gospel is to encounter the Son of God in constant prayer to the Father. He prays at crucial moments, such as his baptism (Luke 3:21), transfiguration (Luke 9.29) and in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14.32). He prays in quiet moments, and busy moments, throughout his ministry (Luke 5.16). Jesus models not only a prayer life, but a life of prayer.

And yet, Christ offers even more than a pattern to follow. The Scriptures reveal, and the prayers of the Church explore, the wonderful gift it is that Jesus himself who enables our prayer. He helps us pray, he mediates our prayers, and he receives our prayers. Let's reflect on those encouragements to prayer, through the Scriptures and the prayers given for us.

Jesus helps us by teaching and modelling prayer for those who follow him. Matthew and Luke give us the heavenly wisdom of the Lord's prayer. Jesus also teaches us how to pray without pride or self-presentation: 'Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you' (Matthew 6.6).

He shows us how to pray for an audience of God alone, and reminds us that as we pray we are in fact never alone. The words of St John Chrysostom's prayer remind us that as we gather to pray, Jesus is in the midst of us. Christ helps us to pray.

Christ is also the mediator of our prayers. As Jesus prepared his disciples on the eve of his death, he encouraged them with these words: 'Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.' (John 16.23) Our prayers come to the Father in the name of the Son because the Holy Spirit of both Father and Son has been given to us (Romans 8.26-27).

I can picture a successful business leader, in the age of handwritten communication. Every day their assistant brings in a huge stack of correspondence. But which letter is placed on top? It is the one in the handwriting of their son, writing home from their travels abroad. That letter is opened and read first, because of the name in which it arrives.

Our prayers come to the Father in the name of the Son. That promise is claimed through this Collect for the First Sunday after Epiphany, and in so many of our prayers. May we never lose the wonder that our prayer to God is 'through Jesus Christ our Lord.' By his grace, the Father receives our prayers with the same joy as he did those of his Son. 'because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' (Galatians 4.6). Christ mediates our prayers.

But ought we also to pray to Christ? This reflection is headed 'Jesus the Lord, Hearing Prayer' but so far we've seen that Jesus models and mediates prayer that is often addressed to the Father. Should we pray only to the Father, or does this create a false division within the Trinity?

As we read through the New Testament, we are reassured that our God is three-in-one. From the earliest centuries of the Church, Christians have recognised that we can pray to God in Christ but can also pray directly to Jesus who waits in heaven for us, already interceding at the Father's right hand.

One powerful example of this is the first Christian martyr Stephen, at the moment of his death, crying out to Christ: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (Acts 7.59). St John Chrysostom's prayer also invites us to speak directly to Jesus, since it is His promise to be in our midst. Likewise in the Collect, we ask the Lord to 'mercifully ... receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee.' In all these ways, Jesus not only models but mediates our prayer: Christ receives our prayers and brings them to the Father.

I began by asking how often you picture Jesus in prayer. If I may, let's turn that around. When you pray, how often do you picture Jesus listening? Trust him that he turns his face toward you and hears you. If you ask him, he will help you to pray. As you pray in his name, by the power of his Holy Spirit, your prayers come before God the Father in the name of the Son; and Jesus - who loves you and gave himself for you - receives your prayer. He listens because Jesus is the Lord, hearing our prayer.

Reflection on this week's image

Jesus became a compassionate High Priest because he called on God in his suffering and was saved out of death: as his followers how can prayer become a vital source of life for us?

Questions for Discussion

- What have you found most helpful for encouraging prayer along your Christian journey?
- Can we have confidence that our prayers and supplications come before Almighty God?
- When you pray, can you picture Jesus listening?
- What would help you to not only have a 'prayer life', but a 'life of prayer'?



Week 5: Jesus the Lord, Enlightening the World

Scripture References

At his presentation in the Temple Jesus was acclaimed as, 'A light to enlighten the nations' (Luke 2.32). He called himself, 'The Light of the world' (John 8.12), a light St. John assures us no darkness can ever quench (John 1.5). In his resurrection Jesus scattered all darkness (Psalm 139.11-12) and offers us the light of eternal life.

From the Book of Common Prayer

Nunc Dimittis (Canticle of Simeon)

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace :
according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen :
thy salvation;
Which thou hast prepared :
before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles :
and to be the glory of thy people Israel.
Glory be...

Third Collect at Evensong

Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by
thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of
this night; for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour Jesus
Christ.
Amen.

Comment on BCP Prayers

The Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2.28-32), one of the most beautiful NT canticles, looks back to Jesus' origins (as the glory of his own people, Israel) and forward to the salvation he will accomplish in his death and resurrection: the overflowing of God's grace beyond Israel (though without abandoning his people!) to all the nations of the earth. The much-loved Third Collect of Evensong asks for what we most need as we fall asleep at night: the light and protection of God through his Son, Jesus Christ. **But it also speaks to the many other kinds of darkness (fear, anxiety, despair, etc.) that risk enveloping the world and us.**

Reflection, by Revd. Thomas Cotterill

Assistant Curate, St Paul and St Bartholomew, Brighton

There is something almost disconcerting when on a bright Sunday afternoon, you are at Choral Evensong in our cathedral at 3pm and you hear the officiant pray the Third Collect, beseeching God to 'lighten our darkness'. It is thanks to Thomas Cranmer, author and compiler of the first versions of The Book of Common Prayer (those published in 1549 and 1552) and the inspiration behind the subsequent editions, that this collect and the Nunc Dimittis, which also speaks of light, are recited daily at Evensong.

Originally, and to this day in some forms of the Daily Office, the Canticle of Simeon is prayed in the last office of the day, Compline, at a time when the light has been or is being displaced by literal darkness. Indeed, this Collect is the old concluding prayer of Compline that Cranmer incorporated into Evensong. Whatever the level of light outside as you pray the words of Simeon, the reality of Christ as the 'Light of the World' (John 8.12) is recalled.

The theme of light overcoming darkness has long resonated with human experience. Countless religions have festivals of light – we need only think of Diwali for Hindus and the equivalent celebrations among the Sikhs. But in Christianity, this theme is more than a cosmic one. It is centred on a living person, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Church's liturgical year speaks of the light of Christ, making real and present in our own day the mysteries of Jesus' life. Take for example Candlemas, the festival of the Presentation of the Lord. At this feast, we recall those words uttered by Simeon that are recited at Evensong each day. Luke tells us that Simeon "came into the temple" and it was there that he encountered Christ with his mother and St Joseph.

It should come as no surprise, then, that at the end of his Gospel, Luke describes how after the Ascension the disciples returned to Jerusalem and "were continually in the temple blessing God" (24:53).

We today are also afforded the privilege of encountering Christ in the temples built to God's glory that are our cathedrals and churches. Moreover, Luke tells us that Simeon praised God with the song we know as the Nunc dimittis whilst holding Christ in his arms. Again, it is in those buildings set apart for the worship of God that we too can take hold of Christ, most especially when we receive Holy Communion and not only taste and see how good God is, but touch this divine goodness given to us. The sacramental life of the Church, then, affords us the same opportunity as that given to Simeon of encountering God's glory and beholding Jesus, the Light of the World.

The celebration of the light of God in Christ culminates each year with Easter, the feast of feasts, which begins on Easter Eve in many churches with the most evocative service of the year, the Easter Vigil. As the Paschal Candle, symbol of the risen Lord, is processed into a completely dark church, 'the Light of Christ' is proclaimed three times.

For those of us who have been blessed to serve as the deacon at this liturgy, the acclamation of 'the Light of Christ' is a real joy. Here at this moment the victory of God in Christ over all the forces of darkness that beset our world is audibly and visibly declared.

That is why it is so meaningful to have this light, the light of Easter, visibly present when a new Christian is received into the Church through baptism and confirmation, and when a Christian is commended to God at the end of their life at their funeral. Between our first day as a Christian and our last, the light of Christ is present, even when it seems to be just a flicker.

There is a good reason, I think, why the Church Fathers spoke of Easter as 'the Great Sunday'. Each Sunday is the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, the weekly celebration of the Resurrection, and so since the earliest days Christians have gathered Sunday by Sunday to receive afresh the light of Christ as the Scriptures are read and the bread is broken. Even in the depths of this season of Lent when we are encouraged to fast and seek forgiveness for our failures to love as we are loved, this celebration continues. Hence also on Sundays in Lent we are able to enjoy the bounty of creation, even as we practise moderation.

As it was for Simeon in the temple, so we in our day receive Christ the Light of the World in the company of others. For many Christians, the love and prayers of those who were with Christ in the temple that day, Simeon and Anna, the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Joseph, are a source of deep joy.

After all, it was Mary who made possible the saving work of God in Christ through her 'yes' to God at the Annunciation and on every day of her life after that point. Shown most awfully at the foot of the Cross on Good Friday, this faithfulness came at great cost. It was the same Simeon who acclaimed the light of Christ who also told Mary that a sword would pierce her own soul too (Luke 2.35).

For many Christians today, faithfulness to Christ comes at great cost. Even in our land, which lauds itself for being a free and tolerant place, being a Christian in the public square can bring mockery or hostility. In times of difficulty, the presence of other servants of God, whether on earth or in heaven, can be a source of great comfort and consolation. When we ask Mary or other Saints to pray for us and with us, we celebrate and demonstrate the unbroken bond of love which unites all God's servants not just across space but through time as well.

The victory of life over death is the proclamation at the heart of our faith. Though in this season of Lent we deny ourselves the opportunity to acclaim this victory with the word beginning with 'A', we are nonetheless always Easter people, people who show in word and deed that God's light in Christ is greater than any darkness (John 1.5).

Reflection on this week's image

The empty tomb shines with the light of Christ's resurrection: how can I in my turn be a light-bearing witness to the transforming power of God's love for the world?

Questions for Discussion

- Simeon spoke of the universality of Christ's salvation. How does your church community reflect this universality? How could it more fully reflect it?
- Simeon and Anna encountered Christ in the temple. How does your church building reflect the beauty of holiness?
- Is the Eucharist at the centre of your life of faith? How does your church community foster a love for Christ who is given to us in the Eucharist?
- Simeon spoke of Mary's soul being pierced. How do you experience Mary's maternal love for you as a disciple of her Son?

Thank you for taking part in this
Lent Course as part of..

2024 Year of the New Testament



Next Year, 2025, will be the Year of Faith and
our Lent Course will focus on the Nicene Creed.

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