

## CHAPTER SEVEN: THE LIFE OF PRAYER

### The Incarnation and Behavior

THE sacramental approach to Christian faith is rooted in the Incarnation. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” Therefore, what we do in our bodies matters. Faith cannot be separated from activities of daily life. The word must become flesh in our lives so that our behavior reflects our faith.

The call to discipleship teaches us this. Jesus said to Matthew, “Follow me” (Matt. 9:9). When Matthew arose and followed him, he began a new way of life. Following Jesus meant much more than simply adopting certain points of doctrine.

This same point is made by the New Testament word frequently used to describe the Christian life. Colossians says, “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him” (2:6). A quick check of the concordance reveals more than two dozen references to one’s “walk.” One can “walk in darkness” or one can “walk in light” (1 John 6-7). Our walk is our manner of life. It is the way we go about living from day to day.

### The Christian Life Begins with Prayer

The beginning of the Christian walk is a commitment to a life of prayer. It is only by grace that we are able to rise above the limitations of our fallen nature and do the will of God. The grace of God comes to us chiefly through the sacraments and prayer. If we neglect the life of prayer, the Christian life is reduced to a merely human attempt to obey moral rules. This is a source of frustration in the Christian life. People try, by mere human effort and will power, to obey the moral commandments. They fail, try harder, and fail again. They end up being frustrated rather than making progress in the faith.

Many people think that to be a Christian means to “try to be good.” This is wrong. To be a Christian is to live in communion with the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. This living relationship begins in baptism and is renewed and experienced through Holy Communion and prayer. Changed or holy behavior is the fruit of this relationship (cf. Galatians 5:22f.).

This is why we begin the week in prayer with the Eucharist on Sunday, the first day of the week. We begin by remembering who we are in Christ, by confessing sins and receiving grace. Then, and only then, are we prepared to “do all such good works as [God] has prepared for us to walk in” (BCP 83, Ephesians 2:10). This is the pattern for life “in Christ.” Behavior follows prayer. As we integrate patterns of prayer into the very fabric of daily life, our behavior is changed as a consequence.

## Daily Prayer in the Bible and the Church

The Jewish tradition observed fixed hours of prayer morning, noon and night. These hours of prayer corresponded to the times when sacrifice was supposed to be offered in the temple. This pattern of prayer is seen in the Old Testament Book of Daniel. The reason Daniel was arrested and thrown into the lions' den was that he refused to stop his practice of praying toward Jerusalem "three times a day" (Daniel 6:10).

In the New Testament, in The Acts of the Apostles, St. Peter and the centurion Cornelius both bear witness to this tradition. God spoke to both of them during their fixed times of prayer so as to bring about the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church (Acts 10:3, 9, 30).

The Christians of the next generation continued the practice of praying at fixed hours. An early Christian writing called *The Didache* ("The Teaching of the Twelve") instructs Christians to pray the Lord's prayer three times a day (Chapter 8). Over time, these hours of prayer came to include Scripture reading, praying of the Psalms and hymns of praise.

The monastic movement in the early church expanded the hours of prayer by establishing seven daily times of prayer. This was based on the teaching of Psalm 119:64, "Seven times a day do I praise thee." The monastics eventually developed fixed forms and names for each of the seven hours.

The average person was not able to participate fully in the seven monastic hours of prayer. This is why the Book of Common Prayer reduced the seven monastic hours of prayer to two, Morning and Evening Prayer. The goal was to make the prayer life of the church accessible to all the members of the church.

During the Middle Ages, people did not typically read the Bible. The liturgy and the Bible were both written in Latin, which most people did not understand. One foundation of the English Reformation was the translation of the Bible into the language of the people. It was the goal of the great English Bible translator, William Tyndale, that the ploughman would know more Bible than was standard for the clerics of his day. One way this goal is achieved is through the lectionary for daily Bible reading that is integrated into Morning and Evening Prayer.

### The Prayer Book Offices

The foundation for daily prayer in the Anglican tradition is the practice of praying Morning and Evening Prayer (BCP 3 & 21). These "daily offices" of prayer include several key elements.

**1. Opening sentences of Scripture that highlight the seasonal themes of the church year.**

**2. Daily reading of the Psalms.** More accurately, the Psalms are prayed. The praying of the Psalms has always been the heart and soul of the daily office. The Psalms are prayed in the light of their fulfillment in Christ, and the light of our membership in the body of Christ. Our spiritual battle is

experienced and prayed through in the light of Christ's triumph. The constant petitions against our enemies are applied to the enemies of the soul—the world, the flesh and the devil. The Psalms contain depths of meaning that continue to unfold over a lifetime of prayer.

**3. Two Bible lessons at each office, one from the Old Testament and one from the New**

**Testament.** The daily lessons are tied into the themes of the church year and, so, highlight the church calendar and the experience of the church year. The lessons for each day are listed in the lectionary in the beginning of the prayer book. Following the lectionary will cause one to read through the Bible each year, with a few exceptions. The lectionary skips some sections in order to provide lessons from the Old Testament that are not unduly long. One can note where sections are skipped and read the skipped sections as well. Nonetheless, if one reads the lectionary “as is” one will still cover the major points and themes of the Bible and will read much more Scripture than one would otherwise read.

**4. Canticles of praise that provide a lofty and beautiful language with which to pray to God.**

The canticles each express biblical themes that can be applied to the life of each Christian. For example, Benedictus es at Morning Prayer is from the Song of the Three Children. It is a hymn attributed to Daniel's three friends who were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. They sang praise to God in the midst of their fiery trial. So we can sing Benedictus es mindful of how God delivers us from our various afflictions.

**5. A General Confession of a General Thanksgiving.** These remind us, and give us opportunity daily, to confess our sins and give thanks to God.

**6. The Creed and the Lord's Prayer.**

**7. Collects or prayers that highlight the feast day or season or provide a reflection on a significant theological theme.**

**8. An opportunity to pray for our own needs and the needs of others.** Each Christian should maintain a prayer list: a list of people for whom you are praying. This is part of your work as a member of the body. The daily offices provide a regular time to offer up names and causes to God in prayer. Your list should not be too long and you should renew the names weekly or monthly.

**9. A form of common prayer.** Each Christian can participate in the common prayer life of the church. We read common lessons and experience in common themes of the church year which creates a basis for fellowship and reflects the communion of the saints. This highlights the truth that even when we pray alone, we pray as members of the church. Thus, the language of liturgy is corporate. Jesus taught us to pray “Our” Father. In the office we pray using the words “Our” and “We.” Each of us adds our individual contribution to the corporate prayer of the church.

## Benefits of the Daily Offices

**We begin to pray habitually.** Many Christians have not been taught to develop habits of prayer. Consequently, prayer is offered only when some need arises or when one feels like praying. As the desire to pray diminishes, so does the practice of prayer. The discipline of the offices gives us a form, like a routine of exercise, that we can follow whether we feel like it or not. The daily offices make prayer a normal and natural part of the day, like getting up and getting dressed. Prayer ought to be this normal and natural in the Christian life.

**We develop a language of prayer and praise.** As one habitually prays the Psalms and says the canticles, they become fixed in one's memory. One can use them for prayer at any time.

**We establish a regular pattern for Bible reading.** The only way to learn what the Bible teaches is to read it. The only way to read it is to read it regularly and habitually. Habitual reading provides an opportunity for God to speak to us through his Word each day.

**We achieve greater balance in the life of prayer.** A common mnemonic for prayer is ACTS: A for adoration and praise, C for confession, T for thanksgiving and S for supplication. A healthy life of prayer will continually cover all of this ground. It is not necessary that we pray in each category every time we pray. But our life of prayer should be characterized all these aspects.

**Morning and Evening Prayer provide forms for each of these aspects of prayer.** If, for example, one uses the General Confession, the Prayer for all Conditions of Men and the Thanksgiving each day, one will cover the basic themes of prayer: Adoration (in the Psalms and Canticles), Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication (or intercession).

## Other Issues

**The point of liturgical prayer is not "mere" recitation.** The goal is to make the prayers of the daily offices one's own. The church's liturgy provides us with a language of prayer to learn so that we can cease thinking about praying and actually pray. As we learn the prayers of the daily offices, they will become prayers of the heart. The words of the confession will express our penitence. Te Deum, Benedictus es, Benedictus, Magnificat and Nunc dimittis will become our own hymns of praise. The fixed prayers are aids to true devotion.

**Liturgical prayer also teaches us how we ought to feel.** Our natural feelings toward God may be defective. The liturgy trains our hearts and minds to approach and respond to God in the right ways. The liturgy scripts for us the role of perfect worshiper and invites us to learn the part.

**The daily offices are not meant to replace extemporaneous and conversational prayer.** However, extemporaneous prayer is best built on the foundation of the church's liturgical prayer. When prayer consists only of extemporaneous prayer, one's life of prayer tends to be less consistent and to drift towards intercession at the expense of praise, confession and thanksgiving. The daily offices

provide a structural balance. One can use the fixed forms of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication as points of departure for extemporaneous prayers in each category.

**Silence, Meditation and Contemplation.** In this discussion we have just scratched the surface of the topic of prayer. We have not talked about meditation, in which we reflect deeply and prayerfully on a passage of Scripture. We have not talked about contemplation, in which we are still and silent before God. It is important to have times of silence in which we turn off the TV and radio—the noise of the world—and listen to God. These higher forms of prayer will develop out of good daily disciplines of prayer. The more time we spend with God in prayer, the more at home we become in God's presence and the more we advance in our ability to pray.

**Time.** If we are to pray, we must set aside time for it. This is the most important point of this session. If Jesus is our Lord and Savior (BCP 297), if we are depending upon him for daily bread, guidance, protection, forgiveness and peace, we must make time for prayer. This challenges our priorities. We can usually find time for things we consider to be important. Many people can easily spend thirty minutes with the morning paper or on the internet but can't find fifteen minutes for prayer.

We live in a busy world, and in our “busy-ness” the essentials of the spiritual life get crowded out. This is a demonic element of the modern world that we must be militant and diligent to combat. If we will not pray, we cannot do what Christ asks of us and we will tend to drift in our faith. Therefore, if we are serious about our faith, we must establish certain times during the day when we will pray and plan the rest of our activities around this commitment. We must continue to fight the spiritual battle to make prayer a priority.

**When?** Different people have different schedules. Each person should schedule prayer in a manner that will work. There are morning people and evening people. There are parents with many children and there are others who live alone. There is not one rule that will work for everyone. But there are some principles that should govern the enterprise.

**Number One: Pray first.** Have a time for morning prayer first thing. If it is necessary to have a cup of coffee or a shower first, then do so. But make time for prayer before the activities of the day begin. Once they begin, there will be no time for prayer. Evenings can be trickier, especially in a family setting. However, make every effort to have a time for prayer in the transition between the activities of the day and the night. The main peril of saying the office at bed time is that it is hard to stay awake.

**Number Two: Establish reasonable patterns of prayer.** In beginning to pray the daily offices, avoid the error of the overly enthusiastic person who begins a far too ambitious exercise program and burns out within a month. It is better to have two very brief fixed times of prayer each day, with abbreviated forms of the offices, and actually pray this way for a year or two, than it is to attempt all of Morning and Evening Prayer each day, get overwhelmed and quit in two weeks.

**Number Three: Include the family in the habits of prayer.** Even if the rest of the family is not ready for all of Morning and/or Evening Prayer, establish some daily family habit. Perhaps a short Bible reading, followed by the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, one of the two fixed collects from one of the offices and the grace. Or see the short forms on BCP 592 and 593.

**Number Four: When you fall, get up and start again.** The key word is when, not if. Once you establish habits of prayer, there will be times when all things conspire against you so that you begin to neglect prayer. The point of establishing times for prayer is to aid in your spiritual growth, not to make you feel guilty when you don't pray. When you fail to pray as you planned, simply begin again with your pattern of prayer the next day. Don't make the next day's prayers longer and harder to try to make up for lost time. Accept God's grace and start anew.

**Number Five: Persevere.** If there is one overriding biblical message concerning prayer, it is that we should continue to pray (cf. Luke 11:1-13, 18:1-8). However meager your efforts at prayer seem to be, keep working at the life of prayer. It will bear much fruit.

### **Conclusion: A Rule of Life**

The church refers to one's habits of prayer and worship as a "Rule of Life." One's rule states how often and according to what form or pattern one will pray each day. It states one's commitment to worship God in his church each week, one's frequency of confession, one's habits of fasting (cf. BCP pp. 1-li).

Developing your Rule of Life is a central part of becoming a disciple of Jesus. Take some time to establish one. Write your rule down on a piece of paper and put it inside the prayer book or Bible that you use each day. Please note that a rule is a guideline and not a legal document. When you fall short of fulfilling your rule, simply begin again the next day. One's rule of life may need to be adjusted from time to time as life circumstances change.

## Addendum: How to Pray the Daily Offices

### Morning Prayer

**1. Pages 3-5. The Sentences of Scripture.** These are read according to the season. The seasonal sentences begin on page 4 with Advent and end on page 5 with Trinity Sunday. In the long season of Trinity (The weeks following Trinity Sunday until Advent) and during the season of Pre-Lent (Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima), Morning Prayer begins with one or more of the general verses on page 3 or the first sentence on page 4.

**2. Page 5 (bottom) through page 7. The General Confession.** When Morning Prayer is read alone, the introduction “Dearly beloved...” (page 5) is not said. One may say, “Let us humbly confess...” (page 6) before the confession. The absolution “Almighty God...” (page 7) is skipped unless a priest is present to give absolution. If one desires a substitute for the absolution, the Collect for Trinity 21 (page 218) can be used. **The Lord’s Prayer** is recited immediately after the General Confession. Thus, when praying alone, one would go from the opening sentences directly to the confession (middle of page 6) and then directly to the Lord’s Prayer (bottom of page 7) and skip everything else.

**The General Confession may be skipped.** It is a good practice to recite the confession at least once a day. If one is going to use the Book of Common Prayer for Evening Prayer, one may skip the confession at the morning office and say it in the evening. If the General Confession is skipped, the Lord’s Prayer on BCP 7 is also skipped. The Lord’s Prayer is then recited before the Preces on page 16.

**3. Page 7 (bottom) to page 8 (top). The Versicles.** When reading the office alone, the verses are all recited by the one reading.

**4. Page 8. Invitatory Antiphons.** These verses provide an introduction to the Venite and are said as noted during certain seasons and on certain feast days.

**5. Page 9. The Venite is then recited followed by the Psalm(s) appointed for the day.** The Psalms for the day will be found in the lectionary. Alternatively, the prayer book divides the entire Psalter into a thirty day reading cycle so that it can be prayed through each month.

**Note: The Gloria Patri (Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen) is said after the Psalms and after all the canticles except Te Deum.** The Gloria Patri gives the Psalms and canticles a distinctly Trinitarian reference. It is not necessary for the Te Deum because it is Trinitarian in its very wording.

**6. Page 10 through page 14. The lessons and canticles.** The sequence is 1<sup>st</sup> lesson, canticle, 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson, canticle. The lessons for Morning Prayer are listed in the lectionary (BCP x-xlv) on the left page. First find out what week it is on the calendar. Then find the lesson for the appropriate day of that week.

**A. Pages 10-13. Read the first lesson, then say either *Te Deum laudamus* or *Benedictus es, Domine*** (BCP 10-11). The *Te Deum* is, in general, recited on feast days and on saints days (when the color of the day is white or red). The *Benedictus es* is recited on ordinary days when the color is green or in the penitential seasons, when the color is purple. The third canticle given as an option after the first lesson, *Benedicite, omnia, opera Domini*, is not frequently used, but may be used as well.

**B. Pages 14-15. Read the second lesson, then say either *Benedictus* or *Jubilate Deo*.** The standard canticle is *Benedictus*. The *Benedictus* may be ended at the break after the fourth line, except on the Sundays in Advent. The *Jubilate* is appointed especially for the one day each year when the *Benedictus* is part of the reading in the second lesson, but it may be used whenever, at the discretion of the reader.

**Note:** If one desires to shorten the office, the easiest way to do this is to eliminate one lesson along with the canticle that follows it.

**7. Page 15-16. Say the Apostles' Creed, followed by the verses on BCP 16 (called the Preces).** The Apostles' Creed is the standard creed for the daily offices. The Nicene Creed is the standard for the Eucharist. The Nicene Creed is listed here for use on Sunday in settings where there will be no Eucharist. Of course, it is always okay to say the Nicene Creed instead.

**8. Page 16 (bottom). The Apostolic Greeting and Preces. When saying the office alone, the apostolic greeting (*The Lord be with you. And with thy Spirit.* BCP 16) is not said.** One simply says, "Let us pray." We say, "Let us pray," even when we are alone because we are praying with the church. If you are praying alone, say all of the responsive verses that are called The Preces—"O Lord show thy mercy..." through "And take not thy Holy Spirit from us."

**9. Page 17. Say the Collect for the Day and "A Collect for Peace" and "A Collect for Grace."** The collect for the day is, generally, the collect for the preceding Sunday. If it is a saint's day, the prayer book collect for that saint is said. If there is no prayer book collect for the day's saint, the collect for A Saint's Day (BCP 258) may be used. Advent (90) and Lent (124) have seasonal collects which are said throughout the season. The two collects on page 17 are always said.

**10. Pages 17 (bottom) through page 20. Additional Prayers and the Grace.** After the Collect for Grace, Morning prayer may be ended with "the grace" (2 Cor. xiii. 14) on BCP 20, along with the sign of the cross. **One may add other intercessions before the grace.** Morning and Evening Prayer provide prayers for our government and nation, the clergy and people, all conditions of men and a



general thanksgiving. Also, when praying alone, the end of Morning Prayer can be used as a time for extemporaneous, conversational prayer.

**The Prayer for all Conditions of Men (BCP 18-19) is especially suitable for intercession.** It is desirable that each person maintain a prayer list. Praying for others is part of our work as Christians. This prayer provides a pause during which specific names and intentions can be mentioned.

**The General Thanksgiving (BCP 19, 33) ought also to be said daily, either at Morning or Evening Prayer.** It is a classic Anglican prayer. It provides a pause during which which one can mention the specific gifts and graces God has provided that day. Saying the thanksgiving also reminds us to be thankful and to avoid making times of prayer the occasion merely to tell God all the things we want.

## Evening Prayer

Evening Prayer follows a similar pattern to Morning Prayer and will not be discussed in detail, save to highlight a few of the differences.

- 1. Page 21. Opening Sentences.** These follow the same pattern and usage as at Morning Prayer.
- 2. Pages 23-25 (top). General Confession.** This follows the same pattern of morning prayer. When praying alone, skip the introductions and the absolution. Say the confession and the Lord's Prayer. The confession should be said once a day. If skipped in the morning, it should be said in the evening.
- 3. Page 25. The Psalms.** There is no Evening Prayer equivalent for the Venite. One passes straight from the Versicles into the Psalms. Evening Prayer provides the Gloria in excelsis as an alternative to the Gloria Patri after the Psalms (but not after the canticles).
- 4. Pages 26-29. The Lessons and Canticles.** The sequence is the same as at Morning Prayer: 1<sup>st</sup> lesson, canticle, 2<sup>nd</sup> lessons, canticle. The lessons are listed in the lectionary (BCP x-xlv) on the right page. The traditional canticle after the first lesson is Magnificat (26). The traditional canticle after the second lesson is Nunc dimittis (28). There is nothing wrong with the Psalm canticles that are provided as alternatives. However, the Psalms have already been read before the lessons. One may, on occasion, use one of the Psalm canticles as the Psalm for the day.
- 5. Evening Prayer has a slightly longer series of verses for "The Preces" (BCP 30-31).** The same usage applies here as at Morning Prayer. Say, "Let us pray," then all of the Preces.
- 6. Evening prayer also has two fixed collects after the Collect for the Day (BCP 31).** Say the collect of or collects for the day as in the morning. Evening Prayer may be ended after the two fixed collects with the grace (BCP 34). Other intercessions may be added in between, as at Morning Prayer.

## Questions for Review

1. Why must the Christian life necessarily begin with prayer?
2. How many fixed daily times of prayer were there in the monastic tradition? Why did the Book of Common Prayer reduce these to two?
3. What is meant by the acronym ACTS? How does this relate to the daily offices?
4. Is it possible for fixed, liturgical prayers to also be prayers of the heart? How?
5. What is a “rule of life” and what is its function in the life of prayer?