

PRAYER

One of the central ways we identify as Episcopalian The Book of Common Prayer (BCP)

According to the catechism in the back of our BCP, “*prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.*” That probably says both more and less than you may have expected. It says more than we usually mean since it includes actions as well as thoughts; it says less than we usually mean since it invites us to think of prayer as not requiring words at all. The BCP also teaches us that there are seven kinds of prayer: *adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession and petition.*

Most of us think of prayer as only, or at least mainly, asking for something in time of need, either by way of **petition** or **intercession**. The BCP doesn’t discourage us from bringing our own needs and those of others to God in prayer; yet the way we do so goes a long way towards shaping our prayer life. The BCP reminds us that the real point of such prayer is “*that God’s will may be done.*” If we’re honest, how often do we pray for God’s will in our lives and those of our neighbors instead of “*the devices and desires of our own hearts*”? Our intercessors (who listen in confidence) are located at the side chapel during all three services. It is a “good and right thing” to utter your prayers to another, who listen with intercession and love for you in their hearts.

If we truly desire God’s “*will be done*” we can be led to the third form of prayer that the BCP speaks about, **penitence**, where “*we confess our sins*”, the chief one of which is often the desire to take God’s place and be in charge. Again both more and less is said than we expect. The BCP says less than we might expect because it doesn’t mention any desire on God’s part for vengeance or that we be utterly humiliated by our penitence. However, it says more than we often mean by confession because the BCP says that in penitence we not only confess our sins but also, “*make restitution when possible, with the intention to amend our lives.*” Penitence among all the types of prayer demands both words and deeds that we pray with our hearts and follow up with our actions.

Prayers of **thanksgiving** in response to “*all the blessings of this life*” remind us of God’s abundance. In the Great Thanksgiving at the center of the Eucharist, for example, we focus on thanksgiving “*for our redemption.*” We give thanks for whatever draws us closer to God.

Prayers of thanksgiving are intimately linked with prayers of oblation—“*an offering of ourselves, our lives and labors, in union with Christ, for the purposes of God.*” This is why the Great Thanksgiving is sandwiched between the Offertory that precedes it and the bidding of the post-communion prayer: “*Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart.*”

The final two kinds of prayer mentioned in the catechism of the BCP are **praise** and **adoration**. Praise, which the BCP defines as prayer “*not to obtain anything, but because God’s Being draws praise from us.*” It isn’t something we do; it can’t be contrived or coerced. It’s something God draws from us, if we are available to utter it. Being available is the key.

Adoration, “*the lifting up our hearts and minds to God, asking nothing but to enjoy God’s presence.*” To lift heart and mind to God for no other reason than to enjoy God’s presence (for me) is the purest form of prayer, and the one I’d like to learn without ceasing; especially when stuck in traffic, withstanding a very long meeting or listening to exquisite music during worship.
NLJ+