

Over the Sundays of lent, in the sermon we will be reflecting on, perhaps even being introduced or reminded of, particular prayers from the Christian tradition.

This Morning I've picked a prayer, that despite its long history and use within in the Anglican tradition, is one that until a couple of years ago was quite new to me.

The General Thanksgiving, which can be found in the Book of Common Prayer, was written by a Edward Reynolds, a Puritan who was made Bishop of Norwich following the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. Previous editions of the prayer book had been criticised by Puritans for not containing enough prayers of thanksgiving, so Reynold's prayer made it into the 1662 edition that we maintain today. Traditionally it would have been said at Morning prayer also know as Mattins, but of course it is a prayer, as the name suggests, that can be used much more generally than that.

The general thanksgiving asks that God might "give us such an awareness of God's mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth God's praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to God's service, and by walking before God in holiness and righteousness all our days". It is both an acknowledgment and thanksgiving of God's redemptive and salvific work in the world through the cross and resurrection, but calls us to respond to God's "inestimable", or as the modern version rather tepidly puts it "immeasurable" love.

It is a long prayer and much can be said about it.

As with most studies of the Book of Common Prayer we could think at length about the theology or historical context of the prayer; all of these are important things for the church to consider, but I would suggest not in a sermon. Rather it is important to reflect on this prayer as a spiritual tool that might guide us and sustain us through the wilderness and temptations of lent, perhaps this is best seen in the language.

First a note on the opening of the prayer. 'We thine unworthy servants', like other phrases in the prayerbook feels somewhat condemnatory and off putting for the modern reader or worshiper used to the language of Common Worship. Certainly penance is a good thing, and during this season of Lent we are called to penitence and reflection. In the context of this prayer though I consider unworthy to be a way of expressing the shear holiness and perfection of God by comparing it with the fallenness and brokenness of humanity - so in many ways it should create a sense of humility within us as we approach God and give thanks for all that is good and godly in our lives.

Another thing that stands out in the general thanksgiving is the beautiful phrase 'most humble and hearty thanks'. Humble and hearty seem to stand at odds, quietly and loudly; peacefully and boisterously. The two words suggest that there should be a constancy to our thanksgiving. Yes, in times of joy and celebration, but also in time of fasting, temptation and trial.

More than this though the sounds of the words humble and hearty when said slowly create slight reverberation and resonance in our throats and chest. Slowing down to say these words is a reminder of how we are asked to slow down during lent, and how during the session of lent we are called to connect with our hearts and to open our hearts in service to others but also in thanksgiving to God. The reverberation is that of God slowing us down, and making us aware of the God's presence, but also as St Augustine might suggest it is God connecting us to the thing God created us to do, worship, praise and give thanks.

The word hearty conjures up many images, mostly of food - so perhaps somewhat tempting us away from our lenten disciplines of fasting. This image is picked up by the writer, priest and poet Malcolm Guite, who reflecting on the general thanksgiving compares the the prayer with a hearty breakfast.

He says that the general thanksgiving is not a little bowl of muesli, but "The Full English!" It manages to get generous helpings of almost everything on to the plate; for it is the least stingy, the most inclusive of prayers."

Like him I love its use of the word all: "all mercies", "all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men", "all the blessings of this life", "all honour and glory". The use of all reminds us again and again as we pray about the all-encompassing nature of God's love, and actually how all-encompassing our thanksgiving should be.

Continuing the metaphor Guite also suggests it is a prayer of double helpings, the both/and approach to thanksgiving: 'for the means of grace and the hope of glory', 'not only with our lips, but in our lives'.

He says: this prayer's main ingredient is a thanksgiving for eternal salvation, but it also contains generous side servings of creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life, which is just what you need to work up an appetite and prepare the palate for "the inestimable love" and the "redemption" that are waiting for you when you've finished the blessings of this life.

Malcolm Guite concludes his analysis of the prayer by suggesting what breakfast other prayers might be: the Scottish grace "some hae meat but cannae eat", might be porridge; or a latin college grace, "Benedictus benedictat", might be Eggs Benedict. All good, but not as filling and sustaining as the full thanksgiving!

Why do I like this prayer and why do I commend it to you?

Well it roots us in our primary calling to worship and give thanks.

It is a prayer for all seasons and moods when our praise is humble or hearty, it is one that I turn to again and again when I have no words left to pray. Like all good prayers it provokes us to action, what we say and what we do should be a response to the loving-kindness of God.

Even through the penitential language of the BCP, the general thanks giving reminds of the nature of God, the generosity, inestimable love and goodness of God, something which we often need reminding of, especially through the wilderness of lent and in the darkness of the world.

And finally it reminds us that there is always something to give thanks for, the blessings of this life and that of the life to come.

ALMIGHTY God, Father of all mercies,

we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men;

[*particularly to those who desire now to offer up their praises and thanksgivings for thy late mercies vouchsafed unto them.]

We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life;

but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

And we beseech thee,

give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we shew forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives;

by giving up ourselves to thy service,

and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days;

through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.