

'Hear Our Prayer'
Lent Course 2025 Session 4
Esther – Communal Prayer

Welcome to the fourth session of our Lent Course, Hear our Prayer. Today our Old Testament companion is the courageous Esther who saved her people from persecution and death at the hands of the wicked Haman. And as we reflect on Esther's life, our theme today is communal prayer. How can we grow by praying in the company of others?

Imagine you wanted to learn German. What would you do? You would go out and find someone who spoke German. Imagine you wanted to become a plumber. What would you do? You would find someone who knew how to fit boilers and lay drains and learn from them. Imagine you wanted to get fit? You would be unlikely to seek the advice of a couch potato who spent their time watching Netflix and eating pizza. You would find a fit person to be your trainer.

And you would think the same rule should apply to prayer. If you want to grow in your life of prayer, find someone who does a lot of praying, who brings the wisdom of experience, who has lived through some of the pitfalls and setbacks. Which may seem to make Esther an odd choice of person for a course on prayer.

Because there seem to be very few occasions in which Esther actually prays. I'm sure she did. It is just that, apart from some fasting, her own praying life is not actually recorded in the scripture. How can we learn about prayer from Esther when we have so little evidence of her prayer life?

The answer lies in Chapter 4. Let me remind you of where we are in the story. Esther, a Jewish woman, has become queen to the mighty Persian King Ahasuerus and a beautiful, popular and well-favoured wife and queen at that. Haman, a powerful official, has paid a massive wad of cash to the king in return for the right to destroy the Jews across the empire, so furious is he that Mordecai, Esther's adoptive father, would not bow to him. So it's looking really bad for the Jews. And their only hope is the influence of Esther.

But she has a problem. She can't just stroll up to Ahasuerus and say, 'Hey how's it going? What about sparing my people from destruction?' If she does that, she risks death. The law is that she must wait for Ahasuerus to summon her, by which time it may be too late. So Mordecai challenges Esther to act. 'Who knows?' he asks. 'Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this?' And so Esther urges the people to pray. They mourn and weep and fast. There is a mighty wave of prayer for their rescue. And when Esther plucks up the courage to go to the king, she is well received and through her actions the people are saved.

Whatever Esther's own prayer life may be, the important thing is that the community gets behind her. It is the prayer of the community that protects her and saves the people. And this brings us to a critical truth about the life of prayer which is that it is a communal activity. We pray not as individuals but as a Church. Even when you pray alone you are not praying on your own. You are part of a mighty army of prayer which is God's people in every time and place.

In Chapter 11 of Luke's Gospel, Jesus has once again been off praying by himself. But the disciples come after him and say, 'Lord, teach us to pray.' And so he teaches them, 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.' He teaches them what today we know as the Lord's prayer, a communal prayer that all can say together. Jesus builds a praying community.

And we know that they continued to pray together, because after the Resurrection the community Jesus built was united by its common life of prayer. They pray together in the Upper Room as they await the Spirit's gift at Pentecost. In the Book of Acts, the new community devotes itself, 'To the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' In moments of crisis, in prison or under

persecution, they turn to each other and pray together. The Church that Jesus institutes is a praying community.

We live in an increasingly individualistic culture. Many presume faith to be a personal and private matter and so prayer something that happens purely between God and the individual believer. But whenever you pray, what you are doing is uniting yourself with the unceasing prayers of the heavenly host. When you pray, you are in the company of thousands of millions of saints, alive and dead, and through your prayer you become one family with them. And that communal dimension to prayer brings such rich joy.

For me, that is demonstrated most clearly in times of pain and suffering. Esther was living in the most terrible danger so she needed the prayer of the whole community. There are times when all of us are going to be in a situation like that. I have been through times in my life when I have felt so overwhelmed that I have barely been able to pray - I just can't concentrate or find the words. At times like that I have been reassured that my prayer life is being held by others who are praying with me and on my behalf. Prayers that have been prayed down the years also have power because in prayer we enter into a timeless place which is God's kingdom. So when I pray, I pray with Mary, with Cuthbert, with Francis and with countless Christians who have gone before me. And when I find it hard to pray, their prayer sustains me.

There will doubtless be times in your life when prayer is hard, even impossible: perhaps in grief or acute sickness or in the last days of your life. Well, even when you cannot find the words, the prayers of the Church will be there to hold you and sustain you.

So I want to talk about three ways in which we can grow in our communal life of prayer. The first is praying as part of a small group. Many Christians have found benefit in gathering together as part of a small group to pray, and many churches have benefited from a small group of people who want to go deeper in prayer.

It is important that a small group is an inclusive one and it needs to be set up under the authority of the local church and advertised regularly. I think a degree of churn in a prayer group is a really healthy thing as it stops a group getting over-familiar and new people bring in new insights and gifts.

In terms of what a group does, it is up to you. It is important to have some time to share, listen to each other's news and build each other up. Some groups root their time together in the Daily Office or in a passage of scripture. You may use silence, or words, or both to pray. You will certainly want to have times of extempore prayer. You may want to experiment with apps or new approaches to prayer. Perhaps the formation of a small prayer group or the revitalisation of an old one might be a legacy of following this course.

A second place to grow in communal prayer is the family, though this may not be of so much relevance to those of you who are single. In the Jewish and Christian traditions the family is the place where prayer begins, where children are taught to pray and where God is placed at the centre of family life. So are there ways your family can become more a place of prayer? Saying grace before a meal and praying together at the end of the day are simple ways of doing that. There are also beautiful traditions such as the crib, the epiphany cake, Shrine Tuesday and the big festivals of the Christian year which can be a place to bring prayer right into the heart of your home.

But the third and the key way in which we pray communally is in public worship. When Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer, he introduced the prayer that now lies at the heart of Christian liturgy. Jesus would have been formed in a liturgical tradition of communal prayer in the Temple and the synagogue, and that is how his family would continue to pray.

Public worship should be the fountain from which personal prayer and other forms of prayer flow. It is the time when the community gathers together to be with Jesus and is then sent out by Jesus to live out the Gospel. It needs to be the first priority in our lives and the first thing in the diary.

However I sometimes wonder how many people go to church but never really do much by way of praying. There is a risk that the words wash over us, that we enjoy the familiarity of the surroundings and the company of friends, but never really confront the Lord. So on Sunday, try really praying through the worship.

The best way to think of an act of worship is as a journey in which you are given plenty of opportunities to pray in different ways. Let me illustrate what I mean by talking through the shape of a typical Eucharist.

So first we gather. Try and make sure you have prepared for worship in advance. Some people fast for an hour or so before worship, some read the readings in advance or decide their particular intention of prayer that day, most try and get there in good time so they can have a time of prayer before worship begins. What is your habit?

Then as the worship begins, we prepare our hearts to meet with Jesus and that is done through a penitential rite. Make sure, in the silence before the words of the confession, that you are actually looking into your heart and examining your conscience. Call to mind the sins from the previous week you are going to confess as the prayer is offered. Then rejoice to hear words of forgiveness spoken over you. This part of worship really matters because we are acknowledging our dependence on Jesus and seeking to cleanse our hearts before we meet him.

Then we meet with Jesus in the scriptures. Sometimes this can feel like a bit of an overload as we are bombarded with long passages of scripture, some of which can be hard to understand. But when you are in a gallery overwhelmed with loads of art, it can be best to look at the one picture that strikes you. Likewise, somewhere in the midst of the readings, Jesus has a message for you. So listen out for the phrase or passage or expression that hits you. And then pray that through, asking Jesus to speak to you as you listen to him.

The intercessions are a key moment for prayer. The person leading should not be doing all the praying – in fact they should use as few words as possible. Their task is to outline topics and themes for you, the people, to do the actual praying. So this is the time to do some bold and ambitious asking.

Then the Peace is shared. Remember that this is not just a chance to say 'hi' to our friends. We are acknowledging the presence of Christ in each other as we pass amongst us that peace which is his gift. So as you pass the peace, pray for the people you are passing it to. And pray especially for any people you find difficult to get on with or whose lives are hard.

Then our focus is the altar table as bread and wine is laid upon it. As we saw in our last session, prayer associates us with the dying and rising of Jesus. At the altar, we are carried to Calvary and in our remembrance are changed and forgiven through the power of the cross. The priest may do the praying, but it is the prayer of all the people, so as the priest speaks, make their words your own prayer. And be ready to receive the gift of his body and blood, the gift that sets you free to share in his eternity.

And finally we leave. As you go, think of the ways you can bear witness to Christ in the coming seven days and pray for the strength to be a prophet of hope as you share with the world the Christ you have met.

It is impossible to pray alone. All prayer draws us into the body of Christ. What a joy it is to pray as part of a vast family of Christians. This week as you pray, draw strength from that family so that like Esther, God's will may be done in you.