



Understanding public and private prayer by The Reverend Dr James Hawkey, Canon Theologian and Almoner

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Broadly speaking there are two kinds of Christian prayer, public and private. We imagine the public liturgical worship of the church with people gathered physically in the building. However, this public liturgical worship is also offered on behalf of others (known as intercession) and as an offering to God in 'communion' with other Christians throughout time and space. The greatest Christian act of communal prayer is the Eucharist, Holy Communion, or Mass, when through the sanctification of bread and wine, Christ becomes truly present with us, and feeds his people with his body and blood. This is – literally – the great Thanksgiving, in which our prayer is offered in union with Christ who told us to “do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19) When Christians gather to pray, they are also formed as one body themselves. Public prayer reminds us that our relationship with God is not just a 'one-on-one' relationship. The life Christ offers us is offered to others, too. We share it with them through our prayer.

However, private prayer is also essential for Christians. Prayer is frequently a deeply personal thing. In fact, Jesus tells his disciples that when they pray, they should enter their own room, and shut the door. Private prayer will sometimes focus on written texts, but will also often be absolutely free or 'from the heart.' In the Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray by giving them the prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer or the Our Father (Matthew 6: 9-13). Here, he teaches us that we can know intimacy with God, so much that we called him Father. The Lord's Prayer is praise, and a longing for God's kingdom of justice and peace to come; it is a prayer of intercession and asking forgiveness, culminating in asking that we not be put to the test.

When Christians pray, they believe that they do so in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is to say prayer is participation, communion and fellowship. Our desire to pray is itself God's gift. Rather than a shopping list of things that we would like, prayer is firstly allowing our relationship with God to grow and deepen. It is given to us so that we may grow as Christians and as people who love and forgive. That is why it should be a priority for us – as fundamental as getting dressed, or brushing our teeth.

A story is told of a priest going into church, and seeing an elderly person in there day by day, simply sitting in silence. “What are you praying for?” the priest asks. The elderly person simply replies “I just look at God, and God looks at me.” It is in the power of that mutual gaze that we really begin to understand what prayer is.

Even in our most private moments, we do not pray alone. Whenever we worship, we join a great communion and fellowship with other Christians around the world, but also with the saints – the great holy ones of God – who have gone before us, and who now enjoy fullness of life in Christ. They urge us on. They inspire us. And when we feel we can't pray, because we're exhausted, fearful, afraid or

depressed, St Paul assures us that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us “with sighs deeper than words.” (Romans 8: 26)

For many Christians, contemplative prayer is an important part of their daily discipline. Before moving on to any particular images on which to focus the mind, before thinking about things for which we should be sorry, or asking for situations to change, contemplative prayer is silent. We must first still the body and observe our breath, so that the heart and mind can simply become conscious of the presence of God. When we are with someone we love, we often begin to pick up some of their mannerisms, phrases or even ways of perceiving the world. In the stillness of prayer, we become more aware of God’s love and God’s will; in short, we grow. The imagination is a powerful gift in prayer. Whilst frequently it’s important to still our minds, many Christians also find it helpful to imagine themselves within the scene in a story from the Gospels. Prayer changes us. We discover new possibilities, new hope.

Follow-up questions

After reading this article, your students could debate one of these questions verbally or provide a written response for homework.

- How would you describe the act of prayer?
- What are the fundamental differences between public and private prayer?
- Why is prayer such a central part of a Christian’s daily life?
- What is the greatest Christian act of communal prayer, and why is it so important to Christians?
- What do you think the end result of prayer is meant to be?