

Sermon for September 26, 2021
Proper 21
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Los Alamos, New Mexico

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22
Psalm 124
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

Pray!

That's the admonition from the Epistle of James:

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.”

I beg your indulgence when I ask: So what is Prayer?

If you look in the back of the Book of Common Prayer at the Outline of Faith, also known as the Catechism, we get a Q & A format

Q. What is prayer?

A. Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.

Q. What is Christian Prayer?

A. Christian prayer is response to God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Q. What prayer did Christ teach us?

A. Our Lord gave us the example of prayer known as the Lord's Prayer.

Which we will pray during the Eucharist.

Q. What are the principal kinds of prayer?

A. The principal kinds of prayer are adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition.

Q. What is adoration?

A. Adoration is the lifting up of the heart and mind to God, asking nothing but to enjoy God's presence.

Q. Why do we praise God?

A. We praise God, not to obtain anything, but because God's Being draws praise from us.

Q. For what do we offer thanksgiving?

A. Thanksgiving is offered to God for all the blessings of this life, for our redemption, and for whatever draws us closer to God.

Q. What is penitence?

A. In penitence, we confess our sins and make restitution where possible, with the intention to amend our lives.

Q. What is prayer of oblation?

A. Oblation is an offering of ourselves, our lives and labors, in union with Christ, for the purposes of God.

Q. What are intercession and petition?

A. Intercession brings before God the needs of others; in petition, we present our own needs, that God's will may be done.

Q. What is corporate worship?

A. In corporate worship, we unite ourselves with others to acknowledge the holiness of God, to hear God's Word, to offer prayer, and to celebrate the sacraments.

The whole book by which we come together to worship God is a prayer.

As a priest, I've spent a lot of time with people who cried out to God for healing – either for themselves or for those they loved. I've been with any number of persons who complained their prayers were not answered.

All I could do was nod and offer reassurances and comfort. Sometimes, when the question is a tearful “Why?” I have maintained: that will be a question I'll ask when I stand before the Creator.

And sometimes there are those folks who later, of course, perhaps much later, with whom we can talk about prayers being answered – just not in the way we wanted them to be answered.

Then there are prayers that just take patience because the answers will be a long time coming – if ever – just look at the Prayers of the People – national and international leaders, world peace, reconciliation, an end of the pandemic. And we pray for God to use us as He did Mordecai and the Jews in the story of Esther: being in the right place at a pivotal moment.

Today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is an excerpt from the climax of the story when Esther confronts Haman before King Xerxes, and the man who would have hanged Mordecai and killed off the Jews is hanged on his own gallows.

I'd urge you to read the whole book of Esther, which comes from the time of exile from Israel. It's only ten chapters long, takes about fifteen minutes, and is filled with twists and turns and comedic irony.

To make a long story short, Esther becomes queen after her predecessor refuses the order of King Xerxes to expose her beauty before his drunken guests.

Unbeknownst to Xerxes and his court, Esther is a Jew, raised by her cousin Mordecai, who tells her: “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Mordecai knows of what he speaks. He saved the king from assassination, but goes unrewarded. He also has greatly offended the king's high advisor, Haman, which results in the psychotic Haman plot to kill Mordecai and all his people – the Jews.

Mordecai learns of the plot and implores Esther to intercede. She initially refuses, not wishing to risk death by breaking royal protocol. Mordecai reminds Esther of her duty to her people, and she relents, but implores Mordecai:

¹⁶ “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

That’s where we pick up the story shortly before the reading today. The people are saved and the king actually warrants the slaying of those who would have slain the Jews. The events from the Book of Esther continue to be celebrated in the Feast of Purim.

The people were delivered. As the Psalm says today:

- 1 If the Lord had not been on our side, *
let Israel now say;
- 2 If the Lord had not been on our side, *
when enemies rose up against us;
- 3 Then would they have swallowed us up alive *
in their fierce anger toward us;
- 4 Then would the waters have overwhelmed us *
and the torrent gone over us;
- 5 Then would the raging waters *
have gone right over us.
- 6 Blessed be the Lord! *
he has not given us over to be a prey for their teeth.
- 7 We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler; *
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.
- 8 Our help is in the Name of the Lord, *
the maker of heaven and earth.

So, please stand as you are able, and let us affirm our faith in the maker of heaven and earth in the words of the Nicene Creed.