

Faith Seeking Understanding

Lent 2010

Prayer of Intercession

by Rev Dr Fred Munce (South Belfast Methodist Circuit)

Introduction

Since the Middle Ages, the days approaching the Feast of the Lord's Ascension have been kept as Rogation Days (a term not well known in Methodist or Presbyterian circles but more familiar in Church of Ireland and Catholic traditions) – days of special intercession for the land, and for the area in which the local Church ministers. It has its roots in the Latin verb *rogare*, meaning to ask. And because of this, we want to think tonight about the theme of intercessory prayer; what we might be doing when we offer intercessions.

Amidst the plethora of parables and practical wisdom in tonight's New Testament reading, in the phrase *Ask and you will receive*; Jesus comments a little later that it is "out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks."

Intercession is the praying mouth of the Church's heart. And the Church's heart is made abundant by the gifts given by the Risen

Christ in his Holy Spirit. So when the Church intercedes, we notice that this is a two pronged activity of the part of the priesthood of all believers: the Church gives voice on the one hand, to the longing of the world, that God's promises of peace, justice, love and forgiveness should be fulfilled.

We are vocalising a fundamental, overflowing hope that the world can be transformed because of the Resurrection of Jesus, and the sending of His Holy Spirit - that truth which is at the heart of Christian proclamation.

The other part of this activity by the priesthood of all believers is that the Church shares in the prayer, which is constantly offered by the Risen Christ in eternal relationship with the Father. The Church participates in Christ's mission as a result of intercessory prayer. We might even go so far as to say that through grace, the Holy Spirit empowers the Church to share in the fruits of that mission.

And so intercession is a privileged activity, because for the Christian, it is participation in that life of prayer and relationship, which has its origin in God's love for the World, and God's drawing of all creation into the God self. But particularly within the context of Rogation, praying for the world in which we live, love and work, let us consider this theme of intercession in three particular ways.

Our headings tonight are a mix of 3 consonants **R G T** among vowels *making up the word RoGaTion* (to ask) and will help us to remember what we mean in this sermon on intercession.

1. First, Intercession is the **R** of Recognition.

Intercession recognises the arena of God's activity. It proclaims that there is nothing, no one, nowhere outside the reach of God's love.

There used to be the old practice of beating the boundaries of the Methodist circuit or Church parish reminds us of this in a very physical way. Walking around the circuit or parish, singing hymns, saying prayers at the particular focal points of the

community's life was an act, which recognises that God's grace permeates all creation, and that this ground is holy ground – a place where people can expect to encounter the transforming love of God. It is recognition that all life can only find its true flourishing when it grows into participation in the life of God.

Perhaps the six churches walking around focal points in south Belfast and praying is something that Faith Seeking Understanding may consider for the future.

Intercession also prompts us to honest diagnoses of situations. Intercessory prayer recognises that within this world, with all it's potential and promise, all is not as it should be.

We do, after all, have to pray for things. Intercession honestly recognises that creation is disordered, fallen and in need of redemption. It recognises the essential need for liberation, which is all too visible in human structures and relationships, which are closed in upon themselves. This was Martin Luther's masterful definition of sin – incurvatus in se – a double turning in, a closing in on oneself.

Honest recognition prompts us to consider how the situations we intercede for can be opened up to the liberation of the Kingdom – of justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

So, as we intercede – as we place people and situations before God, and ask God to transform them – we are able to glimpse reality more clearly. Freed from delusion or idolatry, we are able to recognise creation's glory, which although fallen, is charged with promise when it recognises its ultimate dependence upon God's love.

2. The second category:
Intercession is the
G of Gathering.

A few moments ago, we saw how intercession is a task of the priesthood of all believers, the vocalising of the Church's heart.

Intercession gathers a wide variety of concerns and themes, of our own, our families, our friends and our world, and represents it all in prayer before God. When we intercede for someone or something, we stand for and with that person or situation. Intercessory prayer frees us from self-obsession, because it allows us to extend not sympathy or even empathy, but love to other people, perhaps in

radically different situations from our own.

As we bear others on our hearts, and therefore learn to love others better through this praying, we re-learn the truth that all are gathered together in Christ. Utterly disparate strands are gathered together in intercession to be woven into the pulse of prayer and worship which is the Church's vocalising of her heart's abundance.

When we consider the kind of gathering which intercession enables – ultimately a gathering of worshippers – we can see how our intercession is not really our own. It prays in union with the Risen Christ, and with the Communion of Saints, and in so doing it gathers all those situations and people for whom we pray more deeply into that relationship with Christ, in which we are implicated fully with each other.

And so, in our intercessory prayer we trust that those situations we name before God are brought into closer intimacy with Jesus Christ, and with God's purposes for the world, which are embodied in him. Our intercessory prayer changes things.

3. The third and final heading we want to consider, Intercession is the *T* of Transformation.

A story is told of an old man who used to pray silently for many hours every afternoon. One day, a minister walked in to visit him, and decided to ask the old man what he prayed for throughout all that time. “Oh”, the man replied, “I just look at God, and God looks at me.”

When we place people or situations consciously before God, we are seeking to include them in that constantly expansive relationship of love, which is God’s own dynamism, so that they can be transformed in the extraordinary generative gaze between the Father and the Son.

Therefore, all Christian prayer takes place in the Holy Spirit, which prompts us to address God as intimately as Jesus teaches us as “Abba, Father.” It is this same Holy Spirit, St Paul teaches us, who intercedes for us “with sighs deeper than words” even before we have begun to pray.

Therefore, the initiative for prayer is always God’s, and the transformation we pray for – for others and ourselves – is also always God’s.

This means that although we may have wise insights into what might make any particular situation better, it also warns us against seeing intercessory prayer as simply a great prescription to tell God what God should be doing, and quite how God should be doing it!

Often, most of us fall into the trap of thinking that it’s all a bit of a divine bargaining system– “if I pray a bit more like this, God might change his mind”; or perhaps like Aaron, “if I put this bit of incense over here, God might be persuaded to do something.” No. The reason that Aaron became a successful intercessor is that he stands in what the writer of what Numbers calls “the place between the living and the dead”: that strange place of prayer where all things are possible because of God. Aaron dares to stand in the volatile ground of God’s holiness.

He is a successful intercessor because of how he occupies that intensely sacred ground where transformation is possible.

So the reason why the intercessor stands on sacred ground is because the place of intercession is a place where intimate relationships are re-ordered in the

light of God's radical self-giving love.

And let me say, this can be risky. Through the graced relationship of prayer, intercession seeks a different context for situations or people, who need to be transformed through a renewed relationship with God. It dares to place them, their values, their strife, their troubles, and their longings, within the context of the Kingdom of God.

As a result of this link between our intercession and our receiving of the Kingdom of God, there can be no simple dividing line between our intercession and how we live our own lives.

Just as much as the Church's prayer "springs from the abundance of the Church's heart" – Christ – our own hearts need to be shaped by Christ, and woven more deeply into the life of God. We need to pay attention to how our spiritual lives are formed by our encounters with Christ in the scriptures, and by the sanctification he offers us at the Lord's Table.

So there you have it, the **RGT of RoGaTion** meaning to ask.

The R of Recognition, the G of Gathering and the T of Transformation are not abstract concepts.

Intercession **is Recognition, Gathering, Transformation.**

Our intercession should inform how we spend our lives, what we do with our money, which charities we support, how we pursue our relationships, how we conduct our debates in Church, how we spend our leisure time. As we intercede for others and for our world we let our Lenten journey be our own roga-tion-tide.

Let us pray that our own hearts may be transformed as we seek, through the grace of the Spirit, to place others more deeply in the gaze between the Father and the Son.

Let us attend to the abundance of our hearts, that our mouths may speak clearly, not just in our private and communal prayer, but that as we share in Christ's own priestly prayer for the world, the Kingdom might be proclaimed, and the world might believe and be saved