

## By Heart: Prayers of the Communion Service

### The Downs and Valley Churches, Lent 2026

#### 5. Lent 3 - 'Whose nature is always to have mercy'

##### (The Prayer of Humble Access)

*We do not presume  
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,  
trusting in our own righteousness,  
but in your manifold and great mercies.  
We are not worthy  
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.  
But you are the same Lord  
whose nature is always to have mercy.  
Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,  
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ  
and to drink his blood,  
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body  
and our souls washed through his most precious blood,  
and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.*

I've been thinking quite a lot about memory recently, partly because my Dad, aged 94, moved last summer from his own house to a Care Home in Chipping Campden. He's always had a very good memory, able to remember with extraordinary precision details of the past, for example. But just recently his memory has begun to fade. Some things are very sharp still (we had a good conversation last week about how he watched the 1948 Australian Touring Team, spurred by a photo he took of Don Bradman at the time), but many are just beginning to drift away. Yet I find that when I take him communion occasionally, the words of most of the prayers are still there. I've often found this before with other people, and I remember taking communion one Maundy Thursday to a woman who had had a terrible, incapacitating stroke. She didn't seem to understand who she was or where she was any more. Yet as I prayed some of the words of the communion in her home, she quietly whispered a few of the words and seemed to recognise the actions.

Terry Waite, who was kept hostage in Lebanon for almost five years from 1987, was once asked how his faith had kept going. He said that he had

been brought up with the Book of Common Prayer. The language of that was very, very helpful. I had unconsciously memorised it as a choir boy. If I can just give you an example of what I mean from one of the great old collects of the prayer book:

*Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night . . .*

That is very, very meaningful when you're sitting in darkness. That collect not only has meaning, but it also has poetry and rhythm. There is a relationship between identity, language and prayer; somehow they help you hold together at your centre.

Some people may find this strange, but I never engaged in what is called extemporary prayer during that time. I felt that if I did I would begin to, sort of, go down a one-way track, reveal my own psychological vulnerability and just get into the business of saying, ‘Oh God, get me out of here’—which isn’t prayer at all. That’s just being like a child. So by falling back on that which I knew, the Prayer Book and the balance of that, I was able to keep a bit more balance in my mind and also maintain some degree of inner balance.<sup>1</sup>

These prayers that we, often accidentally, know by heart may be more important than we think.

Here we reach what is called the ‘Prayer of Humble Access’: ‘We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord...’ It’s a prayer that was added to the Communion service by Thomas Cranmer when he wrote the first version of the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1548-49, a fresh creation that has stood the test of time. It was placed immediately before the congregation received the bread and wine. Paula Gooder and Michael Perham comment that Cranmer’s ‘intention seems to have been to create for the laity an equivalent to the priest’s private prayers before Communion...essentially a prayer for worthy and fruitful reception of the sacrament.’<sup>2</sup> That intention certainly seems to have been fulfilled, and for many over the centuries it has become a favourite prayer.

But there have been arguments about where it should properly go in the communion service, and liturgists – experts who are the technicians and theoreticians of worship – have often either been ambivalent about it, or wanted to remove it altogether. This is because some argue that its theology is muddled: the distinction between souls and bodies close to the end, for example, doesn’t make theological sense, and those lines were either removed or put in brackets in services from the 1970s to the 1990s. Gooder and Perham note that they were restored in *Common Worship* in 2000 because they were understood ‘as poetic rather than doctrinal’ and conclude that ‘these two phrases must be read poetically and together if they are to make any theological sense.’<sup>3</sup> But it is, perhaps, the poetic nature of the prayer which makes it appealing and memorable.

In his 1552 revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*, Thomas Cranmer moved it from being just before receiving communion to a place in the middle of the long eucharistic prayer. The reason seems to have been because (as mentioned last week) in 1552 Cranmer wanted the communion table to be placed in the nave of the church, lengthways, so that it was clear that this was a real meal, and the people were to gather round it for the eucharistic prayer. That’s why the prayer speaks of coming to the Lord’s table at that point in the service. But this way of doing communion proved too radical for most churches to cope with, and the buildings were re-ordered to the way they (mostly) still are today, with the communion table at the far, east, end, distant from the congregation. But the prayer remained there, some would say interrupting the flow of the eucharistic prayer, in successive versions of the Prayer Book. When the services were revised from the 1960s onwards, however, this prayer was moved back to Cranmer’s original place for it in his 1549 service, to come immediately before the congregation comes up to receive communion.

The placing of the prayer may have changed, but Cranmer’s language hasn’t, really. For some liturgists what seems to be the emphasis on the congregation being miserable sinners,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Terry Waite: Faith held hostage’ <https://hope1032.com.au/good-news/terry-waite-break-my-body-bend-my-mind-but-my-soul-is-not-yours-to-possess/>

<sup>2</sup> Paula Gooder & Michael Perham *Echoing the Word: The Bible in the Eucharist* (SPCK 2013) p.104.

<sup>3</sup> Gooder & Perham p.106.

unworthy to receive, has been a reason to suppress this prayer, but the focus is not, in fact, on our unworthiness, but on God's generosity and mercy. There's an important point here, as the prayer opens, that we are not 'trusting in our own righteousness.' God does not invite us to this supper that Jesus gave us because we've done anything to deserve it. You don't have to clock up so many points to get in. It's like the banquets mentioned in Jesus' parables: all you need is an invitation, and the invitation is open to all.

'We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs from under your table' we go on to say, echoing the words of the woman who came to Jesus and asked him to heal her daughter (Mark 7.24-30). It's a funny little story, because Jesus at first refuses to help her, but she appeals to the mercy of God – and wins the argument! Jesus himself seems to realise in a new way that the Father is mercy all the way through.

Two of our grandchildren will be 4 on Thursday (born on the same day, 45 minutes and 90 miles apart!). Four is a great age. Everything is 'Why?' 'Why is the sky blue? Why are elephants so big? Why have you got hair on the wrong end of your head, Grandpa?' And a lot of the time the answer is, 'Well, it's just like that!' This is the same. Why does God invite us to this table? Because he does. He is the God of 'many-fold and great mercies...whose nature is always to have mercy.' Let that sink in for a moment. The focus here is not on whether we are worthy. Forget that. Stop 'trusting in our own righteousness' (easier said than done, I know), seeking to earn acceptance, and just let God enfold you. We're not coming because we know we've made it, Lord, we say, but because you've asked us: 'you are the same Lord, whose nature is always to have mercy.'

A couple of years ago I was having a conversation about the language we use in our worship with someone in one of our parishes (not this one!), and this was the prayer she homed in on. 'The Prayer Book has, "whose *property* is always to have mercy"' she said, "and that's much better than "whose *nature* is always to have mercy."' I asked why – I'd never thought about it before. 'Because nature can change,' she said, 'but the property of something always stays the same.' I saw what she meant. Strictly speaking, *nature* means what something or someone is made or born with. *Property* means something intrinsic to something or someone, like the properties that chemical elements have. A property is unchanging, whereas nature can be tamed or altered. If mercy is God's property, then he is always merciful. Mercy runs through God like the letters in a stick of rock. It will never change.

That, rather than human unworthiness, is what this prayer celebrates.

And so the prayer ends as we recognise that as we 'eat the flesh of your dear son Jesus Christ and...drink his blood', it is by God's mercy, awesomely given to us by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, 'that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.' And then we come to receive that flesh and blood, remembering that God is always mercy.

This prayer, if we remember it by heart, will help us in the years to come not to remember our unworthiness, but God's property of mercy, which we call grace.