

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER: A TEMPLATE FOR OUR LIVES

Week #1. Give God Thanks and Praise

Do you remember the first prayer you ever learned?
Perhaps it was:

*Angel of God, my guardian dear,
to whom God's love commits me here,
ever this day be at my side, to light and guard
and rule and guide.*

Or

*Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

Do you notice all the personal pronouns, the “my’s” and “I’s” and “me’s?” We learned this and other childhood prayers at a time when we were, each of us, the center of a very small world. But, at the same time we were learning these bedtime prayers, we were also being taught to give thanks together at mealtimes:

*Bless us O Lord, and these Thy gifts,
which we are about to receive,
from Thy bounty, through Christ, our Lord.*

Our parents were teaching us to look beyond ourselves and our needs – our natural focus – to see others. We learned about the “we” beyond the “I.” We learned in our petitions to pray for our parents and siblings and friends. We learned to pray for people we had never met, and might never know. We learned at table to give thanks for the gifts laid out before us. We learned at table to bless.

To bless a person or a thing is to acknowledge its true identity and its true source. When we bless a meal we acknowledge that it is a gift from God. We are not more deserving than the hungry people of Haiti; we simply accept our bounty as a gift, something we neither deserve nor earn. When we bless a child, we acknowledge that she is not our property, but a gift from God, from whom she came and to whom she belongs. Blessing teaches us to loosen our grip on all we believe to be ours – our families and friends, our husbands and wives, our health – and to return it to God, to whom all life belongs and from whom all life comes. Blessing teaches us to turn our eyes from ourselves and to turn them to the

source of all that lives and moves and has being. Blessing teaches us to look to God for each day, whatever it may bring. Blessing acknowledges the world as gift, leads us to thanksgiving, acknowledging the giver of the gift. Thanksgiving leads us to praise. Praise is beyond thanks for gifts given and received. Praise is a love song, a hymn to God. Like any lover gazing upon the beloved, we simply acknowledge who God is, in beauty, in wonder, in mercy, in might.

We hear this hymn of praise every time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist. The Preface, the opening movement of our Eucharistic Prayer, always begins with praise¹,

Father, all-powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks through Jesus Christ our Lord...Now we join the angels and saints as they sing their unending hymn of praise:

and ends by joining our thanks and praise to that of the angels and saints as we sing:

*Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.*

We sing this praise Sunday after Sunday. We sing this praise when our children have run away from home, when our health has failed, when our houses have been foreclosed. We sing this praise at weddings and at funerals, in good times and in bad. And when our tears will not allow the words to form, the community sings God's praise for us and with us, lifting us up with their praise.

What we learn in praising God is what we first learned as children: Thanking God for the food at the table doesn't depend on the menu. We thank God for lentil soup as we thank God for beef tenderloin and chocolate cake. And we praise God not because of our circumstances, but because God is.

Praise shapes our lives. Like water running over a rock, the praise of God sculpts us, forms us and turns us from a people looking in the mirror to a people looking at God and God's world, at God's gift. It transforms us into a people whose very lives are a daily acknowledgement of God's glory. Our tradition calls this "doxology" from the Greek meaning a word (*logos*) about glory (*doxa*).

Seeing this glory, praising this glory, living and moving and having our being within this glory is the goal of all our prayer, indeed, of our very lives. This is why our highest form of prayer, the Eucharistic Prayer, always ends in doxology,

Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever, Amen.

¹ Preface from First Sunday of Lent (P12).