

At our 8:00 service on Sundays, we usually pray a classic, 471-year-old prayer from our earliest version of *The Book of Common Prayer*. It's a prayer that speaks of the attitude we should have when we approach God, and more specifically when we approach God's table for Holy Communion. But it's also a prayer that reminds us of who God is, and who we are, and what our relationship to God is. And these are all important themes that are relevant on Ash Wednesday. The prayer is written in old, Elizabethan style English. And it says this:

*We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

This year we're going to be using a version of this prayer at St. Paul's during the season of Lent. We'll be using a more modern language version that comes from our mother church, the Church of England. I'd invite you to look at it. It's in your bulletins (on page 5 @12:00; 6 @6:00). Because this prayer speaks about having an attitude of humility when approaching God, the old nickname of this prayer is "The Prayer of Humble Access." So what does this prayer say about who God is, who we are, and what our relationship to God is?

Well, right off the bat there is a strong statement that we are not to be presumptuous when approaching God:

*We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies.*

In other words, we don't come before God relying upon how wonderful we are, or how wonderful we think we are. We are not to come trusting in our own righteousness, or self-righteousness. We are not supposed to rely spiritually upon our own talents, our abilities, our wealth, our power, our achievements. No, we have to come before God with an attitude of humility.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, Jesus tells the parable contrasting the prayers of a Pharisee and a tax collector. In that parable, the Pharisee stands up and arrogantly offers a prayer of thanksgiving for how wonderful he himself is. And then in his prayer he rattles off a list of his own best attributes. But the tax collector comes before God in humility, relying only upon God's mercy. He prays, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"<sup>2</sup> And Jesus tells us that it is this second man who is justified, who is made right with God. In the words of the prayer of humble access, he is not presuming, and he is not trusting in his own righteousness. He instead is asking only for God's mercy.

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<sup>1</sup> BCP p337

<sup>2</sup> Lk 18:13

And as the Prayer of Humble Access reminds us, we trust in God's manifold and great mercies. Manifold is a word we don't use much anymore. It simply means many, multitudinous, abundant. We are relying upon the huge breadth and depth of God's merciful nature.

At the 8:00 service, this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> time the word "manifold" is used. It appears twice in reference to our manifold sins which we repent of. But this 3<sup>rd</sup> time manifold appears, it is in reference to God's mercy. And that's where we need to place our trust.

The next line also reminds us that we are not to rely upon how wonderful we are. It's a pretty stark reminder:

*We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.*

But then there is the wonderful line about who God is:

*But you are the same Lord whose (property, whose) nature is always to have mercy.*

It's not about how wonderful we are. It's about how wonderful and merciful and loving God is. As we hear in the wonderful proclamation from Exodus, God proclaims that he himself is

*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.<sup>3</sup>*

So at the end of the Prayer of Humble Access, we come before our merciful and loving and grace-filled God and ask,

*Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.*

We're saying, 'God, in your mercy let us come to your table to receive your gifts, not because of how wonderful we are, but because of how wonderful you are. Let us partake of the Body and Blood of Christ. Let that sacred meal shape and mold and fashion us into the Body of Christ. God, let us forsake our manifold sins, and place our trust in your manifold mercy, and love, and grace. Help us to be the Body of Christ in this world; help us to be instruments and agents of your love.

And that's what we're about on Ash Wednesday. In a few moments we will remind ourselves that we are dust. We are mortal and finite creatures. But God is infinite and immortal.

After that we pray Psalm 51, an ancient prayer of confession. Then we continue with a more modern confession. We confess our manifold and varied sins. We confess the ways we fall short of being the people God creates and calls us to be.

But trusting in God's grace, and love, and forgiveness, and mercy, we then come to his table, and share the sacred meal he provides for us. We ask God to fashion us into people, his Body, to do his work in this world.

*Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 34:6