

The Prayer of Humble Access
The Rev. Blair W. Schultz
(2001—Revised 2010)

A few weeks ago I was visiting a parishioner and we began to talk about the Prayer of Humble Access. The parishioner said she loves this Prayer and hated the way it had been changed in the 1979 version of the Prayer Book. So this morning I thought I would talk about the Prayer of Humble Access and its history. The Prayer can be found on page 82 of the Prayer Book.

The Prayer of Humble Access was written by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1548 as part of what was called the *Order of the Communion*. This was an English form for administering Holy Communion “used in the [Latin] Mass immediately before the communion of the people.”¹ In 1549, the Prayer was incorporated into the first *Book of Common Prayer*. However, the name didn’t originate with Cranmer. It comes from the Scottish Prayer Book of 1637.

While the Prayer of Humble Access was an original composition of Cranmer, phrases in it were “suggested to him by familiar medieval Collects and some passages in the Greek Liturgy of St. Basil.”² These in turn originated from Scripture, St. Thomas Aquinas, and our Lord Himself. I would like to acquaint you with this background material in the hope that you will gain a better appreciation for this prayer.

In the first part of the Prayer there are two allusions to Scripture both of which involve our Lord’s acts of mercy to Gentiles. The first is the healing of the centurion’s servant. The second is the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman.

St. Matthew tells the story of how Jesus was approached by a centurion, a Roman soldier, who asked him to heal his servant (*Matthew* 8:5–13). Jesus agrees to heal the servant and says that He will follow the centurion home. But the centurion stops Jesus and says, “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.” Jesus is amazed at the words of the centurion and He says to the people around him, “Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in

¹ Massey H. Shepherd Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. xvii.

² Shepherd Jr., p. 82.

Israel.” Then turning to the centurion, Jesus says, “Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.” And as St. Matthew tells us, “his servant was healed in the selfsame hour”.

St. Matthew also records Jesus’ encounter with a Canaanite woman (*Matthew* 15:21–28). The woman comes up to Jesus and says, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.” Jesus ignores the woman, but she persists and says, “Lord, help me.” Finally, Jesus speaks and says, “It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs.” The woman answers, “Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master’s table.” In response, Jesus answers “O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.” And again St. Matthew relates, the “daughter was made whole from that very hour.”

So, “the first half of The Prayer of Humble Access gathers up the approaches made to Jesus by the centurion and the Canaanite woman.”³ *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:*

These are heady words. We don’t like to admit that we are unworthy. But as Andrew Mead wrote, “No amount of self-exertion and will power, no self-help courses or self-esteem therapy, nothing we can produce will make us worthy to come to that Table, or, for that matter, to gather up the crumbs underneath it. We might just as well feel self-congratulatory and good about ourselves while standing with Mary and John at the foot of the cross on Good Friday”⁴ And Massey Shepherd, Jr. wrote, “[the Prayer of Humble Access] is a searching and vivid confession of our utter unworthiness of God’s gifts from the Lord’s Table—[those gifts being: forgiveness, nourishment, and union with Christ.”⁵

Now we come to the second part of the Prayer of Humble Access. The Prayer recalls our Lord’s teaching in St. John’s Gospel (6:53–56). Jesus, after the feeding of the 5000, speaks of the true bread which gives life. In a climatic statement he says, “And the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” The Jews who were listening to Him ask how this can be. So Jesus says “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of

³ Andrew C. Mead, *The Anglican Digest*, (Vol. 40, No. 5, 1998), p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Shepherd Jr., p. 82.

man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.” This truly is a “hard saying” of Jesus and many of His disciples left Him. But Jesus says, “the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.”

There is not much I can add to this because we are talking about a great mystery. Jesus tells us, and tells us repeatedly in Scripture, that the bread that He gives for the life of the world is His flesh and that we are to partake of that flesh in the Holy Sacrament of the Altar. And He tells us that when we do this, He will dwell with us and we will dwell with Him.

So we pray for this union with God in both the Prayer of Humble Access—*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*—and in the Consecration Prayer—*And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee, that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.*

As an aside, in some ways this section of the Consecration Prayer is one of the most solemn parts of the Consecration. Before this section and after this section, I stand upright with my hands outstretched. But for this section, I bow down and hold my hands together. When I get to the words *humbly beseeching thee*, I kiss the altar because the altar represents Jesus Christ. When I get to the words *Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ*, I make the sign of the cross over the Bread and the Wine. And then at the words, *be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction* I cross myself. And it’s appropriate for you to cross yourselves at this point, too, because when I say “we” in this prayer I do not mean the “royal we”. I am saying this prayer on your behalf. So that we—you and me, and all others who may partake of this Sacrament when I visit them in their home or at the hospital—may be *made one body with [Jesus], that he may dwell in us, and we in him.*

Of course, how this happens we cannot completely understand, but do not worry. As William Barclay has written, “It is in the nature of things that the finite can never comprehend the infinite, that the ways of God can never be grasped by

the human mind, that man cannot ever fully understand God.”⁶ But there is one thing that we can understand, that we do know. Because Jesus said, “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him,”—because He said that, it must be true.

The second part of the Prayer also has an idea that comes from St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas “pointed out that Christ’s life-giving body makes clean our sinful bodies, and that his life-blood throughly washes our souls.”⁷

So the second part of the Prayer gathers together words from Scripture and the thoughts of St. Thomas Aquinas, “*Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy 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,*

In this one prayer we confess our unworthiness to God, we ask Him for His mercy, we remind Him, and ourselves, that we partake of this Sacrament because He wants us to, and we ask Him to cleanse our bodies and souls that we may live with Him for ever.

Mead concludes, “Take this great prayer deep into your heart. Live by His promise. [Jesus’] words are spirit and life. His life-giving flesh and blood are manna that will see us through our pilgrimage into the Promised Land.”⁸

Sources:

Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 1, 2nd Ed. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956.

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⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 1, 2nd Ed., (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), p. 234.

⁷ Mead, p. 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*