

ANCIENT PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH

The last time I was in All Saint's Winterton, the day the lockdown started or thereabouts, I wrote these words in the blue Register of Services. I was worried, confused, rather angry that I wasn't to go into any of my churches any more for who knows how long.

The words were simple, and in Greek *Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison, Kyrie Eleison*. They are of course generally known as "The Kyries" and in our Eucharists during Lent and Advent we regularly say or sing them, *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy*. They have been used in the church for as long as it has existed, and in the Gospels we often have people walking up to Jesus saying something very similar.

I've known this prayer for many years, when I was around 7 or 8 I sang it, as an animal (Mrs Dog, since you ask!) as we marched, in pairs, two by two to the stage Ark for a performance of Benjamin Britten's children's opera *Noye's Fludde*, based on the Medieval Mystery plays. The familiar story unfolded and at the end we marched out singing "Alleluia...."

And that day in March I could think of nothing more appropriate to write in the book than these ancient words, and their relevance continues for me at any rate, but also, maybe for you? I find myself praying them often, as I hear news, as I hear of people dying, or sick, as I hear of acts of sacrifice, courage and love. I long for the day I will write "Alleluia" instead. It will come, but who knows when?

There's an ancient Christian tradition, recommended by St Paul which is to "pray constantly" or "without ceasing" depending on which translation you're looking at (1 Thessalonians 5: 17). He doesn't explain how to do this, but the Eastern monastic tradition has come up with a possibility, a short prayer, almost like a mantra which can be used all, or any of the time. The version I know best goes like this:-

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

It is generally called the Jesus Prayer and I believe that it was not unknown for contemplatives to use it constantly, whatever they were doing. Last thing at night and first thing in the morning and probably the rest of the time too. Again, it would have New Testament roots, many people approached Jesus using similar words in the Gospels.

At first sight it looks like a plea for mercy and forgiveness, and that may have been what was in the mind of the first users, but there's something else you can do with it. Like the Kyries I would say this is a prayer that despite its age is entirely relevant to us today. You can pray the whole thing, and it's easy to remember, but you can also contract it, altering its focus. Leave off the last four words and you have a general prayer for mercy:-

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy.

Or it can be an affirmation of our faith and trust in our Lord, a brief Creed, or act of praise if you like:-

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God!

Use these prayers, however you feel them to be helpful, they are not written down in tablets of stone, and it's fine to be creative with them. Prayers should be tools, not straitjackets.

May I encourage you all to keep praying, in hope. The more of us the better.

In Christ's love Alice