

One New Book for the Preacher

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John B. Rogers, Jr., *With All Our Prayers: Walking with God through the Christian Year* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids), 114 pages.

Many qualities adorn this collection of prayers. Here is the work of a preacher and pastor who understands that in addition to the sermon, the other essential contribution to worship is the pastoral prayer. When you read *With All Our Prayers*, or read even one of the prayers, you find yourself in a sanctuary again, so lively is the concern expressed for the congregation. You become aware that these prayers are on behalf of a church with whom the preacher has worked and laughed and prayed and sung, whose Session meetings he has moderated, whose hospital beds he has stood beside, at whose marriages, baptisms, and funerals he has officiated, and in whose wider community he has immersed himself. This preacher knows a congregation by heart, which is what counts most in ministry. That intimate knowledge is revealed in this slight volume in at least three ways: in the joy with which the people are brought to adore God for the work of creation and for God's sustaining presence in their lives; in the urgency with which personal anguish and public distress are encompassed within a confident dependence upon God's providential care; and in regular, faithful petition on behalf of the church and its members to fulfill their calling as emissaries and agents of God's purpose in the world.

In addition to prayers that mark the high points of the Christian year, the preacher uses scripture and lines from hymns to introduce individual prayers in ordinary time. These prayers demonstrate the pastoral devotion of one who is himself immersed in scripture and in the central convictions of Christian faith: most especially that we are known, swaddled, kept, sustained, upheld, and encouraged by the One who created us, and from whom, in Jesus Christ, we will never be separated.

Further, in an age when the language of worship in American Protestantism is unravelling, these prayers represent a recovery of language that boldly and eloquently kneels before the Eternal God, the Almighty One who is maker of heaven and earth and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is thoughtful language that is inclusive of all persons, but remains uncorrupted by casual, supposedly natural, phrasing that masquerades as extemporaneous prayer.

These prayers demonstrate, as well as any formal ecclesiology can define or claim, the centrality and importance of the particular congregation as the foundation of the church catholic: as the community, the place, where children and adults come to faith and are nourished and sustained in their personal and corporate witness to that faith. The prayers attest over and over to that reality as they are read and savored.

Here is a sampling of quotations to illustrate qualities I have described thus far. From prayers for Sundays in Advent:

Some of us come before you in need of courage. Many of us who are outwardly placid and comfortable are inwardly discouraged and beaten....

Death has come roaring into our households and laid its chilling hand upon our hearts. There are friends who have disappointed us and loved ones who have hurt us.... Let us remain long enough in prayer, O God, to hear you say to us: "Be not anxious.... Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." (p.6)

Give us ears to hear and hearts to understand Christmas as the astounding good news it is, O God... not as a deal we make or a bargain we control by our acceptance or rejection, but as a declaration of love that will not let us go even when we struggle against it. (p. 8)

From a prayer for the New Year:

Deepen within us the realization that you are not an abstract, impersonal "something," but a particular Someone—God with us, God for us, God among us.... And in that knowledge inspire us to dedicate ourselves to the peace you would bring to the world's enmity; the reconciliation you would seek for our estrangements.... May this be our vocation and our witness as your children and your church, O God... in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who, whatever the future holds, holds the future in the strong security of his steadfast love and invincible grace. (pp. 15-16)

From a prayer for Reformation Sunday:

Grant us to know you, O God, as our refuge and strength against all that assaults our souls. When greed lures us, make us generous. When pride would make us pompous, make us instead gracious. When envy bids to control us, help us to rejoice in the blessings of others. When we begin to turn in upon ourselves, give us instead a spirit of gratitude and a heart for friendship. (p. 99)

All of us who have prayed each week in congregations come sooner or later to realize that we are stewards of the prayers that have been prayed in our presence. Our own praying, either consciously or not, is filled with language and syntax and style that we have heard and read. We have been tutored by words that spoke to our minds and hearts, often in times of great joy or deep anguish, or words that broke through the distraction or boredom of ordinary days.

When John Rogers and I attended Union Seminary in Richmond, VA, we were mentored by such words in chapel. These services were Protestant worship at its simplest. Three out of four days a week, the worship was led by faculty. What I remember most profoundly when I look back are the prayers I heard prayed by the faculty and the president of the seminary. These prayers had about them the same eloquence as the prayers in this book. They awakened the heart without forsaking the mind, but most important, as we listened, we knew that the one leading us in prayer was speaking to the living God. (John Rogers writes of the influence that he experienced at Union Seminary in a concluding postscript to a prayer he includes on page 111, "A Funeral Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession.")

This book of prayers deserves its place on your shelf beside the prayers of Calvin and Augustine, of John Baillie and Ernest Campbell, beside whatever books of prayers to which you turn to nourish your spirit and jump start your imagination as you prepare the weekly prayers for worship with the congregation for which you are responsible. *With All Our Prayers* is a gift to preachers and to the church catholic.