The Bidding Prayer
at the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols
A Brief Spiritual Commentary

The Bidding Prayer at the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols was written by Dean Eric Milner-White in 1918. Since then it has been used, mostly in an edited form, in millions of Carols Services around the world. At King’s we use the very lightly adapted version which is printed below. The thoughts that follow were first shared in a sermon on Advent Sunday 2016.

Beloved in Christ, be it this Christmas Eve our care and delight to prepare ourselves to hear again the message of the angels; in heart and mind to go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, and the Babe lying in a manger.

Let us read and mark in Holy Scripture the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience unto the glorious Redemption brought by this Holy Child; and let us make this Chapel, dedicated to Mary, his most blessèd Mother, glad with our carols of praise:

But first let us pray for the needs of his whole world; for peace and goodwill over all the earth; for unity and brotherhood within the Church he came to build, and especially in the dominions of our sovereign lady Queen Elizabeth, within this University and City of Cambridge, and in the two royal and religious Foundations of King Henry VI here and at Eton:

And because this of all things would rejoice his heart, let us at this time remember in his name the poor and the helpless, the cold, the hungry, and the oppressed; the sick in body and in mind and them that mourn; the lonely and the unloved; the aged and the little children; all who know not the Lord Jesus, or who love him not, or who by sin have grieved his heart of love.

Lastly let us remember before God all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no man can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom, in this Lord Jesus, we are for ever one.

These prayers and praises let us humbly offer up to the throne of heaven, in the words which Christ himself hath taught us: Our Father etc.
Commentary

As it starts, the Bidding Prayer presents a great journey. It invites us in heart and mind to go even to Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass.

The words are a bit indirect here - what is this 'thing'? We begin to ponder, wonder, even, and then ... we hear the simple phrase that was putting pictures in people's minds long before the Peter Paul Rubens’ ‘The Adoration of the Magi’ was installed here – the Babe lying in a manger.

That’s quite a phrase. Lying in a manger – lying in a feeding trough, with scratchy hay and the various attendant insects. Sometimes people rewrite this bit and have the baby in its mother’s arms. But the Babe in a manger suggests a more rustic image of incarnation. It invites us to believe that God didn’t come to earth in human form in order to experience coziness, but the blunt reality of life as experienced by the poor and vulnerable.

The prayer then goes on to say that we are going to read the Bible. And that’s the core of the service. It is nine lessons and, well, as many or as few carols as you like. So, let us read and mark in Holy Scripture ... Milner-White is alluding to the Prayer Book collect for the Second Sunday of Advent here, which says that we should not only read and mark but also ‘learn’ and ‘inwardly digest’. But what is it that we must thus absorb? Nothing other than the loving purposes of God.

Note this is not, 'the purposes of God'. Milner-White would not have understood what you meant if you insisted on talking about a ‘purpose-driven church’ or ‘purpose-driven life’ or whatever. Purpose itself is morally and spiritually neutral; there are all sorts of purposes, some good and many bad. But loving purposes - now we are talking! And although the sequence of readings is dominated by Genesis 3, and the story of the fall, Milner-White is not inclined to see this Chapel as a place for the miserable religion that sometimes follows from a limited exegesis of parts of that passage. On the contrary, he bids us make this Chapel... glad with our carols of praise.

And of course we look forward to doing just that, not only as we listen to the sweet singing of the Choir but also with the two great congregational hymns that come at the end of the service.
But we must not rush on too quickly. First we must pray. In three great and sonorous paragraphs the Bidding sets out an agenda for prayer. First, for the needs of his whole world. Surprisingly, perhaps, he then keeps us close to home, praying for our nation and locality and for this College and its older sibling. We might think it better to pray for others - but true prayer often begins close to home, or even at home. Why? Because true prayer is connected to love. You might even say that the only truly worthy prayer is a loving prayer; just as the only worthy purpose is a loving purpose.

The next paragraph is interesting to me because it begins and ends with a reference to God’s heart. At the beginning we hear that this of all things would rejoice his heart and at the end, we are reminded of those who by sin have grieved his heart of love. The paragraph is about the poor and vulnerable, including those who, like most of us, suffer from self-inflicted wounds. Milner-White settles in this long litany on those whom Jesus in the first beatitude called the poor in spirit.

We might well note that Milner-White is comfortable about naming sin. But in this prayer sin is not transgression, the breaking of rules, so much as failure to love. God doesn’t grieve because we misbehave. God grieves when we try to live without love.

Then we come to the words that of all those in this Bidding are the most resonant and well remembered:

Lastly, let us remember before God all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no man can number ...

The first Festival of Nine Lesson and Carols took place in 1918 when the College had been almost destroyed by the loss of so many of its members in the First World War. If the Chapel was full that day it was full of town, not gown, and of people from the military hospital behind Clare. The multitude which no man can number is not an abstraction, but an evocation of the slaughter of the innocents on the battlefields of Europe. Who would have known in 1918 that the multitude would have been multiplied so many times in the violence that has erupted so often since?
And then, after all this, the poetry of the bidding itself melts into the background as it invites us to offer all this not in our own words, but in the words *which Christ himself hath taught us*.

The great congregation devoutly says *Our Father, which art in heaven*, and across the world millions join in whether with their lips or in the silence of their hearts. And for a moment, a multitude which no one can begin to number, appreciates once again that it was to share in our suffering, as well as to save us from our folly, that the word became flesh and dwelt among us; and that as we behold his glory, a flickering light in the otherwise pervasiveness darkness, we are drawn to the eternally loving purposes of God, and we are made glad.

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Advent 2016