THE PRAYER OF HUMBLE ACCESS.

Introduction – Why the Prayer Matters.
Why do some Anglican churches say the Prayer of Humble Access at every celebration of Holy Communion, while others leave it out? Do we still hear and understand what we are praying? Is this simply a matter of liturgical use, or does the decision to include or omit the prayer reflect different theological understandings of the Eucharist?

The Prayer of Humble Access has a special place in Anglican worship because it reminds us that we come to the Lord's Table not because we deserve to be there, but because we depend on the mercy of Jesus Christ. Although Anglican prayer books and modern liturgies differ in where the prayer is placed and whether it is said, its central message remains the same: we come before God humbly, trusting not in ourselves but in Christ's love and mercy.

This raises a more important question: what does the prayer teach us about receiving Holy Communion? Rather than focusing only on whether the prayer is said or omitted, we need to consider what its words mean and why they matter. The prayer reminds us of our human weaknesses, our need for God's forgiveness, and the mercy of Christ, who welcomes us to His Table. It calls us to approach Holy Communion with humility and faith, not because we believe ourselves worthy, but because we trust in the grace and mercy of Christ.

But how did this prayer become part of Anglican worship, and why has its place in the Communion service changed over time? To answer these questions, we need to look back at its origins and trace how the prayer developed within the history of the Church and the Anglican tradition.

Historical Origins and Development

The Prayer of Humble Access is traditionally associated with Thomas Cranmer and first appeared in the 1548 *Order of the Communion* as a prayer expressing humility and a desire to receive Holy Communion worthily. It was then incorporated, with revisions, into the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* under Edward VI. In the 1548 service, the prayer appeared after the Comfortable Words, which followed the Confession and Absolution. Its position therefore placed it among the prayers and words of assurance leading towards the reception of Holy Communion.

A significant change took place in the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*. Both the wording and the placement of the Prayer of Humble Access were revised. The prayer was moved to immediately after the Preface and Sanctus, before the Prayer of Consecration. The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* retained the 1552 wording and placement.

This change in position is important because it affects how the prayer functions within the Communion service. In 1548, it came later in the service, closer to the reception of Holy Communion. From 1552 onwards, it formed part of the congregation's preparation before the Prayer of Consecration. In this position, it reminds worshippers of their dependence on Christ's mercy as they prepare to celebrate the Eucharist. The change, therefore, is primarily one of liturgical sequence and emphasis; it does not, by itself, demonstrate a change in Eucharistic theology.

This historical development helps us understand why the prayer continues to hold different places in Anglican worship today. Its wording and position have shaped how generations of Anglicans prepare for Holy Communion. To understand why some churches retain it while others omit it, we must consider not only its history but also the theological meaning it carries and the role it plays in the worshipping life of the Church.

While the history of the Prayer of Humble Access explains how it became part of Anglican worship, its deeper meaning is rooted in the Biblical teaching which has shaped the Church's theological understanding of approaching the Lord's Table.

Biblical Foundations and Theological Influences.

The Prayer of Humble Access draws particularly on two New Testament passages that express humility and confidence in Christ. In Matthew 8:8, the Roman centurion says to Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed." Although the centurion acknowledges his unworthiness, he demonstrates strong faith in the authority and power of Christ's word.

A similar combination of humility and faith appears in Mark 7:28, where the Syrophoenician woman replies, "Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs." In Matthew's parallel account (Matt. 15:22–28), she is described as a Canaanite woman. Her response shows humility, persistence, and trust in Christ's mercy. Together, these passages illuminate the central message of the Prayer of Humble Access: Christians approach the Lord not on the basis of personal merit, but in humble dependence on his mercy and grace.

These biblical themes also find echoes in the wider Christian tradition. Scholars have identified parallels between the Prayer of Humble Access and

THE PRAYER OF HUMBLE ACCESS.

prayers found in Eastern and Western liturgies, as well as in medieval theological writings. One example is the Liturgy of Saint Basil, which includes a prayer expressing "*unworthiness to receive Christ's Holy Body and Precious Blood, yet trusting in his loving-kindness*." Although the wording differs from the Anglican prayer, the underlying idea is similar: the communicant approaches the Lord's Table with humility while relying on divine mercy.

A further parallel appears in a traditional prayer before Communion associated with Thomas Aquinas, which begins: *"As a sick man I approach the physician of life; as a man unclean, I come to the fountain of mercy…"* This language similarly recognises human need while directing the worshipper towards Christ as the source of healing and mercy. These parallels do not establish that the Prayer of Humble Access was directly translated from any single earlier text. Rather, they show how its themes belong to a wider Christian tradition of preparing to receive Holy Communion through repentance, humility, and trust in God's grace.

This understanding of humility also has an important theological implication. Stephen (Peter) Tong, in his discussion of the Prayer of Humble Access, draws attention to the danger of spiritual pride and reliance on human merit. His emphasis highlights the balance at the heart of the prayer: acknowledging our unworthiness does not mean approaching God in despair, but trusting in the grace and mercy made available through Christ.

The Prayer of Humble Access may therefore be understood as a reminder that receiving Holy Communion is not a claim to personal worthiness or righteousness. Its words challenge self-reliance and invite worshippers to approach the Lord's Table with humility, faith, and confidence in Christ's mercy. In this way, the prayer brings together biblical teaching, the wider Christian liturgical tradition, and the theological conviction that we receive the gifts of God not because we deserve them, but because of his grace.

The biblical and theological foundations of the Prayer of Humble Access help us appreciate its enduring message of humility, faith, and trust in Christ's mercy. But how has this understanding been expressed in actual Anglican worship? To answer this, we need to examine the prayer's place in Anglican Communion services, how different prayer books and rites have treated it, and why some Anglican churches continue to use it while others omit it.

The Prayer in Anglican Worship

Why, then, has the Prayer of Humble Access remained important within Anglican worship? Its enduring value lies in the way it brings together several theological themes that shape how Christian's approach Holy Communion: human unworthiness, dependence on God's mercy, and confidence in his grace.

The prayer begins, "We do not presume to come to this thy table … trusting in our own righteousness." These words remind worshippers that no one comes to the Lord's Table by personal merit or entitlement. Yet the prayer does not leave us in despair or fear. Instead, it turns our attention away from ourselves and towards the mercy of God.

This trust in divine mercy is expressed in the words, "But in thy manifold and great mercies." They remind us that our approach to God depends not on what we have achieved, but on his gracious love. In this way, the prayer brings together an honest recognition of our unworthiness and a confident trust in God's willingness to receive us through Christ.

It is this balance between humility and confidence that has given the Prayer of Humble Access a lasting place in Anglican worship. Its solemn and memorable words have shaped generations of Anglican Christians in their preparation for Holy Communion. However, while its theological message remains significant, Anglican churches differ in how they use the prayer within their Communion services. This raises a further question: how does its place in the liturgy influence the way worshippers understand and experience the Eucharist

The enduring place of the Prayer of Humble Access in Anglican worship invites us to look beyond its wording and position in the Communion service to consider what it means for the worshipper. Its significance is not merely historical or liturgical; it is also theological and pastoral, shaping how Christians understand their own unworthiness, trust in God's mercy, and prepare to receive Holy Communion.

Theological and Pastoral Significance.

The Prayer of Humble Access brings together several important themes of Christian faith: humility, sin, grace, mercy, and confidence in Christ. These themes help explain its continuing significance in Anglican worship.

First, humility before God reminds us that we cannot claim access to him as a personal right. The phrase "trusting in our own righteousness" challenges spiritual pride and self-reliance, reminding us that Holy Communion is not a reward for personal perfection.

THE PRAYER OF HUMBLE ACCESS.

Second, the prayer moves beyond the recognition of human unworthiness towards trust in God's mercy. The words "thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy" direct our attention to God's gracious character. The movement is not from guilt to despair, but from an honest recognition of our need to a confident trust in divine mercy.

Third, the prayer gives the congregation a shared way of preparing for Holy Communion. It encourages worshippers to approach the Lord's Table neither casually nor presumptuously, but with reverence, faith, and thanksgiving. In this way, it expresses the Church's dependence on God's grace and preserves an important part of the Anglican tradition of corporate prayer.

These theological and pastoral considerations help explain why the Prayer of Humble Access continues to hold a place in Anglican worship. However, its significance also raises a practical question: do worshippers today fully understand the language they are praying? While its traditional wording preserves the richness of Anglican heritage, some expressions may be difficult for contemporary congregations to understand. This leads us to consider how the prayer's language can remain faithful to its theological meaning while speaking clearly and meaningfully to worshippers today.

Language Accessibility and Use

The traditional wording of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* is valued for its literary beauty, rhythm, and theological depth. However, some of its older expressions may not be easily understood by every worshipper today. To address this, contemporary Anglican liturgies provide modern-language forms or alternative arrangements. *Common Worship*, for example, includes a contemporary-language version of the Prayer of Humble Access and allows for its optional use within the relevant service structures.

How, then, can Anglican churches help congregations understand and appreciate the prayer? Several practical steps may be considered:

1. Retain the traditional wording on appropriate occasions. Use the 1662 form for services where its historical and devotional significance is especially valued, in accordance with the authorised liturgy.
2. Use an authorised contemporary version where permitted. Where the approved liturgical provisions allow, a modern-language version can help worshippers understand the prayer without losing its central meaning.
3. Explain the prayer's meaning through teaching. Clergy, worship leaders, and catechists can briefly explain key expressions, such as "trusting in our own righteousness" and "whose property is always to have mercy," during sermons, Bible studies, confirmation classes, or preparation for Holy Communion.
4. Provide a short explanation in the service booklet. A brief note can explain that the prayer acknowledges our unworthiness while affirming our confidence in Christ's mercy. This allows worshippers to follow its meaning without interrupting the flow of worship.

Whatever approach is adopted, the aim should be to preserve the prayer's central balance: humility before God and confidence in his mercy. By combining appropriate liturgical use with clear teaching, Anglican churches can help worshippers appreciate both the beauty of its traditional language and its continuing spiritual significance.

Conclusion

The Prayer of Humble Access remains important in Anglican worship because it brings together two inseparable truths: our human unworthiness and our confidence in the mercy of Christ. It reminds us that we approach the Lord's Table not through our own merit, but through God's grace. Although Anglican churches differ in their use of the prayer, its central message remains the same: to receive Holy Communion with humility, faith, reverence, and thanksgiving. The question is not simply whether we say or omit the prayer, but whether we understand and live out its meaning. As we come to the Lord's Table, may our confidence rest not in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ, whose mercy welcomes us to receive God's grace with grateful hearts

Written by Bishop Charles Samuel

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