

The fence around the garden

Our worship and prayer life

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The plants in a garden have to be looked after. They need to be watered and fed, and they need to be protected from animals that could get in and destroy them.

When we were baptised God put a new life within us. This new life has been compared to a garden. God nourishes this new life. He looks after the plants in his garden by feeding us with his words of assurance. He gives us his message of love and forgiveness through Jesus, and he gives us Christ's body and blood in the sacrament of holy communion.

God has also put up a fence around this garden to protect it. The fence is our whole worship, devotional and prayer life. Sometimes we think of these activities as being different and separate from each other, but actually they belong together. They're all part of our ongoing interactive relationship with God. God comes to us in public worship with other Christians, in our daily devotional activities and in our prayers. He speaks his word to us and gives us healing and reassurance, strength and growth. And we respond with our praise and thanks and requests.

This fence that God has put up to protect our new life consists of strong posts at regular intervals, a top wire and a bottom wire joining the posts, and wire mesh stretched between the top and bottom wires. The fence keeps God's garden safe from marauding animals.

The strong posts holding up the fence are the regular liturgy of the church. The top and bottom wires are our everyday morning and evening prayers, our daily devotions. And the wire mesh in between represents our ongoing personal prayers throughout each day – all our moments of awareness of God's continual presence with us, all our cries to God asking for help and our exclamations of thanks.

The fence needs both the posts and the wire. The posts by themselves aren't enough to make a fence, and the wires and the mesh need the support of the posts. Our prayer life needs to have a strong basis or framework, and it also needs to be continuous. If the fence only had posts, no matter how firmly anchored, there would be great gaps in between, leaving the garden open to the animals. And the wire by itself wouldn't be enough either, because it would collapse without the posts to support it.

So in our prayer life we need the formal public worship of the whole church, as well as our own ongoing family and personal prayers.

We need the regular liturgical Sunday worship. We need the support and fellowship of other Christians, the whole church, past and present, here and everywhere. We can't be Christians alone. We need to worship with others.

Worship together gives us stability and anchoring. It gives us a balance of the whole scope of God's word in the regular Bible readings and the preaching. It gives us the sacrament of Christ's own body and blood. It gives us absolution after we have confessed our sins together. It enables us to join in the church-wide confession of faith and allegiance to God and in the prayers of all God's people. It gives us God's blessing pronounced on his people. And we're able to join our praise of God to the praise of all the other people. We are just too weak to be able to do all these things by ourselves. These regular worship times are the strong posts holding up the fence.

But we also need the wires and the wire mesh, our ongoing prayers right through the week, every day, and in fact at all times. In our regular daily prayers we may follow readings through a book of the Bible or readings related to the Sunday readings. At various moments through the day we may remember words and phrases from the readings and the sermon we heard in church and meditate on them. As we face problems, we turn to God and recall his promises and reassurance. We remember and echo the prayer topics, the people and activities the church prayed for. We also add our own personal requests. And as we're surrounded by God's daily blessings, we remember that God makes his face shine on us and gives us his peace.

We need that repeated assurance to hang on to through the week. Perhaps as we're challenged by daily life we sometimes almost forget who we are – that we are Christians who bear the name of Christ. We actually have God with us, and within us, all the time. In the liturgy the minister says to us a number of times: 'The Lord be with you.' Jesus is not only far off in heaven to be called upon, but he's standing right alongside us. And even more: because we're Christians he's in us and we are in him. And all the other Christians are with us too, as part of his body.

So God looks after his plants. He protects our Christian life with the fence around his garden. So let's 'rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you' (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18).