FEW who know her novels would be surprised to hear that Jane Austen was at ease in the language of faith. From *Pride and Prejudice’s* Mr Collins to *Emma’s* Mr Elton, and on to Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, her novels positively bulge with clergy. She was a child of the rectory, and one of her brothers was ordained. Fewer will be aware that she also wrote prayers. Only three survive, each written for evening devotions, and saved for posterity by her beloved sister, Cassandra. This first prayer centres on a petition for mercy and grace.

In her book on Austen’s spirituality, Paula Hollingsworth notes that, in the Georgian rural Church of England, “Christian faith was practised without excess of showy religious devotion, respected people’s consciences rather than being overly intrusive . . . and expected that people would recognise their moral duty to their neighbours in a way that was appropriate to their place in society” [(*The Spirituality of Jane Austen,* Lion, 2017)].

Austen’s prayer sits comfortably in a vision of faith which does not make windows into people’s souls. It also shows, however, how such “discreet” religion can model steadfast and passionate faith. Its opening petition balances a tender request for grace with a recognition that those who follow Jesus Christ should not simply go through the outward performance of religion. Its focus on the inner disposition of those who follow Christ reveals the depths of Austen’s faith.

 AS A cradle Anglican, Austen was a woman formed in and through the rhythms and sureties of the [Book of Common Prayer](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/topics/book-of-common-prayer). We hear echoes of it throughout her prayer, not least the collect for purity, when she says: “Thou art every where present, from Thee no secret can be hid.” As one would expect of a person formed by the Prayer Book, Austen’s words show no fear of talking honestly about human wickedness while recognising that we need not be crushed by sin. Austen hopes we will be taught “to fix our thoughts on Thee, with reverence and devotion that we pray not in vain”.

In *Mansfield Park*, the heroine, Fanny Price, laments the loss of the practice of daily family devotions. She says: “It is a pity . . . that the custom should have been discontinued. It was a valuable part of former times. There is something in a chapel and chaplain so much in character with a great house, with one’s ideas of what such a household should be! A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer, is fine!”

While many readers have found Fanny a somewhat priggish heroine, perhaps she comes close here to articulating Austen’s own view on devotion. It is certainly not difficult to imagine how her prayer’s humble, yet determined, interrogation of the inner life would fit into the domestic prayers of the Austen household as night drew on.

This prayer, like the other two still in existence, was meant to close with the Lord’s Prayer. It is a family prayer that prepares the household to share in *the* family prayer.

AS WE seek to keep a hopeful and holy [Lent](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/topics/lent), there is much to learn from Austen’s approach to prayer. In the midst of our capacity for sin and inattention, she invites us to interrogate the ordinary and everyday for mercy and grace. To pray and to follow Christ can be a wonderfully domestic matter. It is the work of the household of God in the broadest sense, but it is also something we are invited to locate in that often most undervalued realm: the domestic.

In a world where paid work can take so much of our energies, and there is, perhaps, an over-valuing of public ministry, the domestic is often coded as second-best. In patriarchal societies, it has often been seen as the realm of women and “women’s work”. Yet Austen’s prayer — created for family devotion — reminds us of the dignity of home. The domestic may be claimed as much for men as women as a place of goodness and grace.

 I admit to something you have probably already guessed, and that is I am not a ‘happy clappy’ type of worshipper. I do not doubt that there is a place for a wild speaking in tongues and enthusiastic attitudes.

There is joy and hope, however, in the determined and loving constancy of a quieter devotion. In her novels, we have become used to Austen’s staggeringly insightful wit and appreciation of human nature; her prayers reveal that, when we attend to the things of God, we are rewarded with reality.

We, too, would do well to pray: “Give us a thankful sense of the Blessings in which we live, of the many comforts of our lot; that we may not deserve to lose them by Discontent or Indifference. Be gracious to our Necessities, and guard us, and all we love, from Evil this night.” Thus we might walk deeper into this remarkable and astringent Lenten season.

Amen

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