

**Module: Prayer / Teaching** 'Open my lips'

**Applicable to:**

- The opening prayer for a meeting/gathering

**Preparation:**

- Have the following text available to each participant, whether via a whiteboard, data projector or print material.  
*Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare your praise.*  
*Adonai, sef'tai tif-tach, u-fi ya-gid ta hi le-techa*
- Be ready to play the song, with CD or guitar.

**Introduction:**

Read the prayer, slowly, in English. Engage your group.

*How many people recognize this prayer?*

*From where do you recognize it?*

It appears every day in the Divine Office.

*And where does the office/prayer of the church take it from?*

Scripture. Psalm 51.

*How does this prayer move us? What is it calling us to do/be?*

e.g. 'A call to prayer.' 'It opens us up to God.'

'It's just a kind of introductory sentence to me.'

Thank/affirm them for their comments/sharings.

*Such a 'Catholic' prayer isn't it?*

*So many faithful priests, brothers and nuns, and lay people too, pray it regularly.*

*We feel so steeped in our Catholic tradition when we hear and pray these words.*

*A beautiful, rich, ancient prayer.*

**Explain the Hebrew.**

*This prayer, from Psalm 51, from the Old Testament scriptures, was originally written in Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people who wrote and preserved and handed down these scriptures to us.*

*What happens when we read the same verse in Hebrew?*

Pick up a Tanach— 'Jewish' bible— for effect, and read:

*Adonai, sef'tai tif-tach, u-fi ya-gid ta hi le-techa*

*The word Sef'tai means my lips.*

*But the Hebrew word can also mean edges / boundaries.*

*Let's translate it into English again, this time praying:*

*Lord, open my boundaries, that my mouth may declare your praise.*

*This time, what are we asking of God? Not just to open my physical lips, but to open my boundaries, my edges, my limits, my ambitions, whatever closes me in.*

*What a difference one word can make to our prayer. This is a dangerous prayer!*

**Testimony:**

If appropriate, Briefly share your personal experience of discovering something of the Hebrew background to this prayer.

*E.g. "I began to pray this in Jan 2006, aware of asking God to 'open my boundaries', and nearly 3 years later I look at my life and see conversion, new faith experience, new friendships, new work...."*

**Further reflection points:**

- We can draw out further riches from the context of these words in Scripture. Psalm 51. According to tradition, the words of this psalm are on the lips of David, ancient Israel's greatest king. (Note to presenter: be clear in your own mind that this is not historical fact but part of our religious storytelling as God's people).
- What is this Psalm about? This psalm is about David awakening to the reality of his sin. What was his sin? Arranging the death of Uriah, so that David may have his wife. (SS ref)
- So, in the great king David of Israel, we have a story of lust, betrayal, murder. But also, as expressed in this psalm, a prayer of repentance, hope, humility.
- 'Lord, open my boundaries...' 'Take me forward' not because I am feeling strong and adventurous, but right now when I am feeling most vulnerable and weak. In *that* moment, open my boundaries that I may declare your praise.
- When we are weak, the instinct is to turn away. Disappointed, to pull back. Feeling inadequate, to reduce ourselves. But here, the instinct of faith must be to open ourselves to growth, praise, hope. The moment of failing is the moment when we are most vulnerable to the truth and greatness of God's love.
- Example: In our faith communities (e.g. parish, family life) we see people with great commitment and idealism, true to their values. But when they make a drastic mistake, take a wrong turn, experience as moment of weakness (e.g. teenage pregnancy; falling-out in a relationship; inability to sustain a work) there can be such a sense of failure and self-judgment that the person 'drops out' of community life altogether. Understandable, yes. But this psalm calls us to a radically different response. Our moment of greatest weakness can in fact — like King David — be our moment of greatest prayer, a moment of greatness in faith.

Prayer in Song

With all that in mind, let's sing the verse. We can let go of all that holds us back from God... our failings, our shame, our disappointments, our fears, our inadequacies... Let's throw open our hearts, allow God to open our boundaries... So that we may truly come into the Lord's presence with our deepest self, declaring God's praises. As we launch into the seminar (or meeting), let's pray that the Lord will indeed open our boundaries, to declare His praise.

- We read together in English...
- And we can read in Hebrew, line by line, after me...
- And feel free to join in as this prayer is sung... (play / CD)