

Prayer:

It is not hard to find definitions and descriptions of prayer which have all been put together from systems and methods that have proved helpful. But as with anything that employs system [and that is virtually everything since we cannot operate effectively without it] there can also be a problem. There will always be *the temptation to believe that fidelity to the system will lead to the acquisition of value.*

Why is there so much concern about prayer? Why is it that the moment we get serious about the spiritual life we are told that we must pray? Here again, the same problem arises: there are many who rightly insist on the primacy of prayer in everyday life, but often forget that many people are hearing this as *a statement*, but are not, through no fault of their own, as yet able to appreciate it as *a value*. It is only when we are able to *experience* life with people who are *living prayer* that we will begin to experience something of value; otherwise it will be seen as a duty, even as an important duty, to be undertaken along with other duties.

A new impetus was given to prayer after the Second Vatican Council, and such was the popularity of it that any course, lecture, seminar on prayer could be guaranteed a full house. But that changed within a few years, and *people no longer wanted to hear about prayer, they wanted to pray*, to be with praying people; and so Prayer Groups replaced talks about prayer. Not only was prayer something we were told was important, we began to appreciate the reality of it more and more for ourselves.

Someone said: *"whatever prayer is, we do it badly"*. More than likely this is so because we do tend to regard prayer as *something we do, or ought to do*. This means that prayer will inevitably take the shape of other things we do. Our activities are goal-oriented: to provide a meal requires shopping, preparing, cooking, presenting, timing... so that some end-product may result, and our enthusiasm, or lack of it, will determine the quality of that product.

Prayer does not belong to such a model. It is not something done for something else, in fact it is closely allied with the need to say "I love you", in so many different ways. As a relationship develops the need to articulate what is happening will become irresistible, one will say to the other "I love you". This will then be said a thousand times one to the other, but without them ever repeating themselves, since love can never be expressed definitively.

If you asked why they actually say "I love you" the answer would be because this is who we are, this is how we are experiencing ourselves in the context of each other, it is not what we are doing, it is who we are. We are simply articulating what is happening within us because of our relationship.

We should note very carefully that it is not the saying of the words "I love you" that creates the relationship, there is a growing awareness of a relationship already happening which now compels us to externalise it. The words spoken are not intended for any other purpose or goal, love is not "used" for anything. The words used are simply the ultimate phase in what is happening within a relationship.

This is a perfect model for prayer. We must leave aside the notion that we pray to achieve something. There is certainly a right and proper place for Prayer of Petition [as there is room for request within a relationship], as we will see later.

It was not unheard of to receive the advice that if things were tough and we were floundering around getting nowhere, we should pray all the harder. The implication was that since our faith is weak we must try to bolster it up through prayer. Reasonable as that might sound, it tends to get things the wrong way round. Certainly we must always pray for an increase in faith, but we actually pray because we believe, no matter how weak or inadequate our faith might appear to be.

Just as saying "I love you" cannot establish a relationship, neither can simply going through the motions of prayer create the environment of faith. Something more is required [as we have seen "*something more*" is how the writer of Hebrews describes grace].

Prayer rises out of *experiencing a need to belong* which, in turn, comes from our *being*, giving evidence of its origin in a longing for meaning, and discovering that every meaning which is finite and limited is not enough. Prayer is actually given to us, as S Paul tells us in Romans 8., "*we do not know how to pray... the Spirit prays in us*". Prayer actually rises out of the relationship Gods claims with us, even though it is not initially experienced as such. This relationship is the reason why God created us, and we have different ways of being in touch with it, without ever adverting to God or even if there is a God.

In terms of *felt* need God comes second. We experience the need for something. Life must have purpose and this purpose must have qualities. It is only in actually engaging in the search that the inner, anonymous yet very real need can come face to face with the explanation, origin and fulfilment of that need in Jesus Christ. The gift of self, the growing awareness of a need requires the other and outer gift of God in Jesus if the anonymity is to be removed. Being involved in this process will result in all kinds of articulations and expressions, and from within certain experienced moods ranging all the way from anxiety and anguish, through frustration and anger onto incredulity and even ecstasy - and back again!

We certainly know when we have prayed from our very depths. We have a need for the transcendent since we become more and more frustrated by the inadequacy of limitation, especially when this limitation appears to infect what is most treasured and most personal, when I discover that my love does not appear big enough, at times, to save either me or anyone else. Who has not felt the anguish of such impotence at the bedside of someone special who is dying? At moments like this we are actually experiencing a need for something bigger than ourselves, for the transcendent.

The text from Romans 8. actually goes on to describe the language of prayer, telling us that the Spirit prays in us "*using God's own language*", and we know that this language is Incarnation - the Word became flesh. In terms of prayer this means that all those inner movements, searching, experiences that cannot easily be expressed in words, are picked-up by the Spirit in such a manner that we find ourselves not so much praying as becoming a prayer.

We pray best from within experienced needs: to say thank-you, to plead, to protest; from within the loneliness which makes us cry, the happiness that needs to shout, the emptiness that is frightening. How could any of this be adequately described as "*saying prayers*"?

The Pray-er is the Prayer:

Most things which happen during the course of a day do not seem to have any specific rhyme or reason as to why they happen, and we use expressions like *c'est la vie* to say so. But when, within these everyday things, there are moments when we are overwhelmingly aware e.g. of the giftedness of life, especially of our own life, how do we cope? How do we say "thank you"?

When we do voice our gratitude, or complaint, it is the conviction that we matter enough for there to be an answer that is crucial. Grappling with this and sorting it out is prayer. To pray is to situate ourselves within a love which is essentially greater than we are, and one which is active in promoting our well-being. It is being convinced of this that makes "thank you" appropriate, just as it makes "why should this evil happen?" an honest cry from an anguished heart.

This is not a request for unresolved problems to be sorted out, but for ourselves to be assured of the experience that no matter what may come, all manner of things shall be well. In this way we do not so much pray as become a prayer. As the saying of "I love you"

entrusts self to another, just so does prayer express the desire to entrust ourselves to God, to believe in the love God has for us, and gradually to believe in our own loveliness, since love loves the lovely.

What gives quality, value and tone to our living? *Involvement* and *commitment* are the qualities best suited to faith and trust. Each time we commit ourselves to another in some form we are taking steps in faith and trust, we are actually investing ourselves to live differently because of what we are experiencing in this relationship.

What is best in life emerges *tangibly* the more we accept what we are discovering and take steps to become what we are receiving. It is obvious, therefore, that to be faithful does not require that everything be sunshine and roses, but that I go on believing in the love that is assured in the face all the evidence to the contrary. As we have already seen, the Good News is not that everything is all right, because it obviously is not, but that everything is not all right, and that is all right!.

Just as the *activities* of love cannot be separated from the value they seek to express without prostitution, neither can prayer be real without commitment to believing in love, and desiring, in some way, actually to become what we believe.

Prayer is not an attempt to make up for personal inadequacies, nor is it a mechanism to redress injustice. Prayer does give meaning to all the disorders by the way it actually situates the self within them, as one convinced of being loved with a love that is alive and active within the heart of everything. To accept love in this way is to become lovely [faithful], the first-fruits of the abundant life Jesus came to bring.

Of all the things lovers do together, none can be singled out as the one vital ingredient of the relationship. What makes behaviour appropriate, is the relationship which underpins everything else. Likewise, when faithful people engage in the activities of faith there is no one action which validates their behaviour other than the underlying relationship involved in hearing the Word, believing it and seeking to become the love that is thus received.

Praying involves revealing self, articulating who we are from the depths, keeping things simple, risking the saying of who I am as worth it in the presence of one I believe has my well-being as a priority. This means that the persuasion involved in prayer is not to make God aware of me, but to make me aware of me as loved by God.

Christian contemplation involves much more than simply looking at God. Looking at someone special, as from afar, can have the daunting effect of emphasising the difference between us. But when, in looking at God, I discover that God is already looking at me, distance evaporates. *We pray badly when we do not see our own well-being as God's priority.* This is not the product of wishful thinking but of Revelation.

God who is nothing else but love establishes prayer through presence, often made poignantly evident through absence. To strive to accept love is to believe, and prayer is seeking to articulate self within the relationship God claims with us with all the implications proper to such growing awareness: the need for sorrow for infidelity, the need for gratitude for gift, the need to be angry... the need to question... the need to believe when all the evidence is to the contrary. Prayer intensifies the loving awareness of the presence of God.

This asks all kinds of questions, since we do "use" prayer for our own needs and "for those who are dear to us". How do we combine the truth that prayer is non-functional with Jesus' insistence: "*ask and you will receive*"?

First, we must have a look at our expectations. We speak easily of "almighty God" and of "our Lord". What are we saying when we do this? What is the almighty power proper to God and the Lordship proper to Jesus? What power are we actually addressing when we "petition"

God? No matter how well-motivated our intentions might be, to use prayer in an effort first to predicate coercive power to God and, secondly, to seek to harness this power towards the achieving of something is doomed, since there is no coercive power in God. But we do ask and we have been told to ask!

Expectations of Prayer:

When Peter asked Jesus: "*what about us, we have left everything for you, what is in it for us?*", Jesus answered: "*you will have the hundredfold, even in this life...*". What is the hundredfold and is there any evidence that they received it? There certainly is evidence. The difference in them after Good Friday and prior to Pentecost and their post-Pentecost living is remarkable. The fear that compelled them to huddle away lest they be discovered is now gone. Whether they realised or not in this particular way is open to question, but what they were doing was developing their relationship with Jesus; they said so - we have left everything to be with you.

The heart of such relationships is to claim an identity of value and priorities with one we seek to be with. Jesus' declared purpose about his own values was clear: "*I have not come to be served, but to serve*". The difference the Spirit made was to set them free from their own expectations ["*let us sit on your right and left...*"] and to enlighten them as to what Jesus had said - this is the role of the Spirit - that they would also have his priorities as one wishing to serve, to be aware of people in need of service: "*the poor you will always have with you*" - the hundredfold. If their desire was like his, as they said it was, there will always be enough poor people around to ensure their heart's desire! Prayer always involves actually realising what it is we are seeking - and saying.

We too have expectations and many of them are direct consequences of how we actually organise our understanding of reality. We have spoken already about how we think in terms of "things" and how this helps us differentiate one from another; what we cannot identify in this way we tend to call no-thing. Having differentiated, comes the need to select, to have a hierarchy among things, and this tended to be established in terms of power.

The more power a person has the more important the person. Plato's adage that "being is power" is still alive and well. Then comes the obvious corollary: how much power? And we end up with distinctions like: animal/vegetable/mineral, living and non-living, rational and non-rational - which are all variations on how much power. Thus did God become "almighty God", the "Supreme Being, infinite in perfection". There is nothing wrong with this, as long as we understand what kind of power there is in God. This is not as obvious as it sounds. Whilst the message of the preacher has tended to be "*God is love and nothing else*", the treatise from the theologian interpreted this power more coercively than persuasively.

This presented us with the truth that God's love is ever faithful and always for us... but that if we failed to keep the rules we would go to hell. We were recipients of noble ideals and challenging values, but underlying it all was an energy of coercion well-suited to generate fear. The God who is love is very definitely almighty God.

At face value there is nothing wrong with the notion of using power to achieve something, but it certainly does make a difference what "power" we are talking about. If we are talking about the application of energy to produce results, to make changes, then the concept is valid provided the nature of power is being respected.

There is not a lot of difference between sophisticated abuses of power and brute force simply to maintain control. Domination, indeed any kind of "power over", neither requires nor seeks agreement or consent. Coercion is the imposition of ones will over another through use [and abuse] of authority. Parents use it with children, protesters seek to harness it, the Judiciary depends on it. From the point of view of the recipient it certainly appears to be true that might is right.

This has had a predictable effect on authority models, both prince and pope enjoy power over and "*freedom of the children of God*" came to mean freedom to obey. Not that there is no place for coercive power, but that its structure is inimical to freedom and the appropriate experience of equality. Coercion treats people as things, affording the right to the one in charge to make all kinds of decisions which will affect the lives and the well-being of others, and with little or no accountability - other than one which is controlled and favours the system, with predictable consequences and negative impact on self-esteem and self-value.

We are not related to God in this way, no matter who tells us to the contrary. Those who have experienced God as very near, the people who met and talked with Jesus Christ and those who live in his Spirit, all testify to the truth of his words "*I have called you friends*". God's power is never power over but *the power to be with*, no matter what the cost. God is real presence, being there for another. The experience of this is one of personal worth and actually living by this worship is what we mean by worship: "*God is praised when we are fully alive*" - S Irenaeus.

We are unique individuals with an innate need to belong, to be with and who need others to be with us. To this end we have to organise choices towards the one value which we perceive to be above all others - whatever we deem that to be. We have enough experience to show us how fascination can open us up to wonder and the crucial part *presence* plays in this. Experiences such as these help widen horizons and remove boundaries, provided that we allow the conviction of faith to remove the illusion of escapism. But the point here is that we respond more convincingly from persuasion than from coercion. Constraint denies a proper place to creativity and co-responsibility.

Prayer of Petition:

Finally, what does all this say about Prayer of Petition? We began by asserting that love is not for anything other than itself; and that there is an appropriate place within such a relationship for petition. What is it?

When I undertake to pray for someone I am offering to make space within my relationship with God for that person to be the subject of our conversation. This means that if I do not have a place within me for the person or the particular need, then I cannot pray in petition.

Petition does not mean making God aware of what is going on and what is required, but taking myself to God as a person changed by what I have made space for, a person concerned about what I am praying for, to such an extent that, if needs be, I actually can become both the prayer and the answer to the prayer, since life in grace always results in heightened sensitivity to the needs of others.