

ON PRAYER

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I SUPPOSE we must all, at some time, have been disturbed by the thought of how seldom we pray. We find, when we think it over, that we 'never seem to have time to pray', or even that we just 'never feel inclined to pray'. It does not 'come naturally', we realize; perhaps because there hardly ever seems to be any real 'occasion' for it; and all this can worry us. We feel, somehow, that we ought to pray more often, and more wholeheartedly, than we ever manage to do.

Is it a mistake, perhaps, to be upset about this? We talk of the 'gift' of prayer; and it may be that we are able to pray at all only when it is given to us, at moments of crisis, like the 'gift of tears'; how wrong it would be, for instance, to expect to be able to weep whenever required; or even ceremonially, on official occasions—as I believe was done, in some parts of the world, in ancient times!

Yet, of course, however true this may be, it does not dispel the anxieties that most people feel; anxieties not only about the coldness that it seems to show, but about the whole difficulty being there at all. How strange that it is a problem! Ought not praying to come quite naturally to us, without our worrying about it? It hardly ever seems to. Yet if there is more to it than that, then what more is there? What is prayer supposed to be?

'Master, teach us to pray' no doubt will jump to our mind; our request was once the disciples' too, if we remember the incident. Perhaps now we realize that all the Gospel events, like this one, were recorded, or even happened, to answer the questions we have just begun to ask. We have come to understand the disciples; in fact, we are the disciples now, we ask through them. We have not been unfairly deprived of Jesus's company by the gulf of centuries; he is here in the Gospels, we can ask him questions, and have his answers; by becoming the 'disciples', and asking their questions, in the Gospels.

'And when he was praying in a certain place', we read, 'as he ceased, one of his disciples said to him: Master, teach us to pray.' (Luke 2, 5; Matt. 6, 9.)

It may not have occurred to us before, but presumably his

disciples had been with him for some time by then; and yet he had never taught them to pray; in fact, they had to suggest it to him. Had he simply overlooked it? Obviously not; but praying, we see quite clearly, must not come first for him. What he had first asked of them, we are told, was to follow him. Prayer would come later; then he would teach them, when they had come to feel the want of it themselves. We have followed him, too; even if not as religious, quite formally and definitely, by 'profession', we have in some way left everything else behind to follow him, if we are 'religious'; and we have come to feel a need for prayer, just like the disciples again. But we see that it must have something to do with following him, if it has to come after that; if the disciples were ready only when they had followed him.

Why had they followed him? There must have been many reasons, in each of their minds, at first; but the main reason, the one they all came to in the end, was the reason he had for calling on them; which was to help him in what he was doing, to spread the 'Kingdom' or reign of God in men's hearts.

They must have heard him preach over and over again about God; and not as some vague cosmic spirit of any sort, that we can only assume in the background; but as a father. That, surely, is the only way in which to see, all at once, God's real character, or to picture him in our minds. We have 'got' him, caught the likeness, as a father. He is behind every father; the Father, of all fathers; over, and above them all; the most high and all-reaching, 'filling heavens and earth'. (Jeremias 23, 24.)

And he said to them: When you pray, say

—*Our Father, who art in heaven—*

What they were there for, and what they were following him to do, was to recognize their Father, spread his 'name', make him known and loved among all men;

—*Hallowed be thy name—*

and not just occasionally, by a mere passing deference, but by submitting constantly in their hearts to his rule, or 'Kingdom'; finding and following his will in everything; and just as much, among men, as we see it followed throughout the universe, in all the forces of heaven.

—*Thy Kingdom come;*

Thy will be done;

on earth, as it is in heaven—

But now that we have acknowledged him, and are facing him like this, we realize just how much we need him. We humans do not just 'live', as we suppose, for instance, the angels do; we live 'on' things, we need things, like warmth, and air, and food every day; we 'live on' God, in fact—as the Blessed Sacrament is meant to show. Now that we have turned to God, we beg our needs. We can not simply take what we need for granted, any more; we must have it 'granted';

Give us this day our daily bread—

and we are immediately aware of what we owe; we owe everything, more than we can ever pay; but the trouble is, we do not pay even what we can, we run into debt, further and further, by our continual failings; and trespass on his forgiveness. The only hope is to get our debts cancelled; and this we can do, by cancelling whatever debts we are owed—we gain credit in that way. We can have all 'debt' cancelled, if we will; and turn everything to 'credit';

Forgive us our trespasses

As we forgive them that trespass against us—

but to keep a better account in future, we want God to manage our lives; we are safe only with him. We turn to him, to be taken from all distraction or wavering from him; from the very evil of losing him.

And lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil.

'Watch and pray', Jesus said in the garden, 'lest you enter into trial.' He had prayed himself, then, and had just passed his trial, in prayer; and in prayer we, too, can pass all our trials.

Here was our Lord's teaching on prayer; not in wide principles and vague advice, but giving us his prayer to repeat after him. But the principles are there; and over the ages the Church has drawn them out, to guide us in all the different prayers we may ever want to make.

Prayer, we are told for instance in the Catechism, is simply 'the raising of the mind and heart to God'. It is something we do, then, not something that happens to us, or that we feel. It is not a mood, but an action; 'raising', not 'rising'. We are to raise our mind and heart, as we raise our eyes, or our voice.

But 'where' do we raise our mind and heart? We must be careful not to think of God as 'above' us, at least in the sense of

distant from us, 'up there'. Of course he is above us, and distant from us, immeasurably; but not 'up there'. He is everywhere; that is, not here, nor there, nor anywhere we might look for him. We do not need to look for him; in fact, we can not look for what is everywhere, like the air we breathe, unless we simply had not noticed it to begin with; and then only when we stopped looking for it somewhere, would we notice it, and find it, everywhere. Only when we stop looking for God, then, do we realize: he is everywhere, not 'anywhere'—where I could see him; not 'there', outside, for me to look at, in fact, at all; but, as St Augustine says,¹ 'more within me than my inmost self'—*interior intimo meo*.

It is a startling thought, and leaves me never the same again, once it has really got hold of me: that I find him in myself. Looking for him would be like looking for myself. I do not look for myself—I am not 'anywhere' else to be seen; I turn, to face myself, and 'find' myself in that way. Finding God is like this, only going further; it is like seeing myself, even more. I look for God in myself; not 'inside' me, but 'within' me; not just in what I am, but in what there is 'within' me—and he is 'more within me' than myself. I do not recognize him in me; but I recognize me, in him. I do not find him in myself; I raise myself, my mind and heart, to the full—to him, that is; and find myself, in him.

I can do this, simply and immediately, just as our Lord has shown; at least, I can begin. Even if I may never have found, or so I think, prayer is seeking, always finding, without ever ending. So St Thomas found, when he began, even as a schoolboy; and by asking his teacher what God is—not who he is. He found simply no question, at the beginning, as to who God is; but then found no answer, at the end, as to what he is; even after spending his life in the search. In his last months he abandoned the *Summa*: 'With what I have seen now', he told his companion, 'what I have written looks like chaff.'

He could only begin, all over again—as indeed he had begun, at the start—with the essential; the grain that lay there when all the chaff was swept away: we know God, even if we know nothing about him. We need not find out about him—in fact, we may not be able to; but must simply find him; and that we can all do, everywhere—there is nothing without him. We can find him in

¹ *Confessions* 3, 6.

anything; though again, not really him 'in' anything, but rather anything 'in' him. We find 'anything', as we find what we are really looking for, in it; as he tells us, 'I it am, I it am.'²

We shall find anything in him; anything that we look for, that is, we shall look for in him; and it may be to let us begin like this that St Thomas, in his treatise on prayer, brings in³ the other part of St John Damascene's definition;⁴ prayer as well as the 'raising of the mind and heart to God', is also 'asking what may be asked of God'—*petitio decentium a Deo*. But, we realize, it will be 'asking', here, in a very special way; we can not demand, or even expect, a 'reply'; or think that just by asking we get anything we want. We are asking 'what may be asked'; we must always know what we can ask of anyone; and here, we are asking 'of God'. Obviously it is not to tell God our needs—he knows them, more than we do; nor can it be to make him want what we happen to want, or to bring him round into giving in to us. What he must be wanting for us, and be doing for us, in his way, is the best that we could ever want. If we saw that, then, of course, we should want it too. If we come, in our prayer, to want that, then we have our answer; we get what we want.

But perhaps we simply do not see this, in our daily frustrations and disappointments, where we never seem to get what we want, and to be thoughtlessly deprived, even, of what we need. But if we think, there must be a meaning in all these checks and hurts; and we must be ready to find it. Only if we pray in spite of all, shall we see it; only if we are ready to pray, are we ready to see what God might mean by it. We follow our Lord in this; the one private prayer of his that we overhear is, significantly, the prayer of the agony; where he carries human love and worship to their limit, and brings himself to ask, though he knew even then, as we know now, what it meant: 'May your will be done.'

That is 'what may be asked of God'; and that is what he came to teach us. But now, of course, comes the question: then what is the use of praying, if it is only to ask God for what he is going to do in any case? And here, I think, we have come to the heart of the mystery. God needs no asking; but we must ask. We must make the demand on him; before he can answer our want, we must have the want. It all comes in the way we take it. 'Ask—and you

² Julian of Norwich, *Revelations* ch. 26.

³ 2a-2ae, 83, 1. ⁴ *De Fide Orthodoxa* bk 3, ch. 24.

are given; seek—and you *find*; knock—and it is *opened* for you.' (Matt. 7, 7.) Then he can go on to promise us we shall have 'anything you ask'; not anything we fancy: anything we can 'ask'. In asking we turn to God, but in turning to God we turn to his way of thinking—we do not turn him to ours; and what we can ask, in his way of thinking, we have. 'Do not worry about what you are to eat, or drink, or what to wear', first of all; 'your Father in the heavens knows what you *need*.' (Matt. 6, 31.) In fact, as St Paul tells us, of ourselves 'we do not know how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit' that we have from Christ 'itself pleads for us, with groans beyond all utterance' (Rom. 8, 26). We pray with Christ, that is; and we must have whatever we can ask 'through him'. God must give it, if God makes us want it; if, as he tells us, '*I am the grounds of your asking*'.⁵ We shall have what we ask, the more we ask in this Spirit. Our Lord has told us: 'Whatever you ask *in my name* you will have.'

But we can go even further; our Lord actually recommends us to persist in our prayer until we get what we pray for, like the householder who bangs at his neighbour's door all night, until the poor occupant simply has to get up and give him what he needs. The point is, that the persistent householder needed the food; he just had to have it, and the other had to give it to him—or so he made sure. We too must have what we need. As we pray, we are to think of what we really need—forgetting what we should like—and then see that it is given to us. If we need it, it must be given to us; in fact we could even 'make' God give it, simply by coming to need it. Surely this is the point of the wonderful stories that we read of the saints: to show just what will be done for these extraordinary people, who somehow come to require such things; they have them, even if all the rules are broken. But the lesson is the same for us all: to show just how much we are given what we need. It is our prayer that will make us think of what we need; and by praying for it, make us ready for it when it comes; because it comes, then, as it should, with our asking for it. We make God give it, in fact; it doesn't just come. Quite simply, then, prayer is not making God do any more for us; but making more of what he does. We just cannot make him do any more for us, or think any more of us; we must think much more of him.

⁵ Mother Julian, *Revelations* chs 41-43.

Prayer, too, makes us think more of each other; in bringing us to God, it brings us together. We come into church to pray together; we meet there, because there, as nowhere else, we are all at one. By coming together, we feel all the wants and needs we have in common; and realize how much we can speak for each other. That is just what we feel about the saints, still more. They can speak for us too, in their triumph; let God see good in us, if we invoke them; and we can do the same, in our way, for the dead. In fact, prayer will open our eyes to the 'Spirit of love' that is in the Church.

Have we ever wondered just what 'love' is? St Thomas defines it quite simply as 'wishing well to anyone'; which may look a very mild definition, rather of benevolence (we think of a 'mere well-wisher') than of love. Love, we think, is something much more exciting. But the excitement and the thrill of love are not at all what the love is, but only one sign of it, of how it moves or excites us. The love itself is for the other person; it is a compelling interest and concern for them. Even in the extreme case of the young man, by tradition most obviously, not to say ostentatiously, 'in love', it is the same; what he wants is not for him, actually, but for her; and the most wonderful and important acquisition he can imagine for her—himself, in fact!

Love, then, is not any feeling of pleasure in another's company, or of desire for them, or even of admiration for them; it is, quite simply, wishing well to them. So we can be commanded to love; not only our friends, but strangers, and even enemies. And love is not a passive wishing well, but an active wanting well; which is just what it is, when we pray. Then we are doing all we can; we want what God wants for them; we identify ourselves with God, who is simply called 'Love'. This is what prayer can give us—a new 'identity'; we 'find ourselves'; and find ourselves 'in Love'. We find, in prayer, and come to want, what we need; and we find it is this. So when St Thomas was asked what he wanted, he said: 'Nothing, Lord—except you.' He wanted, in his prayer, this other identity. And it is an identity; that we all have, in prayer; as our Lord, at the last supper, prayed:

*And not only for them do I pray,
But for those also who, through their word, shall believe in me;
That they all may be one, as you in me, Father, and I in you;
That they, also, may be one in us.*