

Prayer: a sharing in the prayer of Jesus

Prayer is our response to God's invitation. God speaks to us a Word of love and engages our longing for communion. God's Word was spoken long before the Incarnation. God has been pouring his Spirit of love out upon the world since the beginning of time. God speaks his Word in every culture and to every person and there have always been those who have heard the Word and responded in saintly ways. But, because of our human propensity to sin, the Word is often not heard and often distorted, and so God chose to speak his Word in a faultless human way in Jesus. He is God's focal Word, making sense of, giving perspective to, and perfecting all the many ways in which people of every culture have heard and responded to God's self-communication.

'All things came into being through God's Word, and without him not one thing came into being ... The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace ... No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is in the embrace of the Father, who has made him known'(John 1:3,14,16,18).

The Spirit of God is always being poured out in the world, in every culture and to every person. Jesus' disciples looked on Jesus, his heart pierced on the cross, and opened their hearts to his love. They experienced the Spirit of love that unites Jesus to the God he called 'Abba' being poured into their hearts. It is this Spirit that brought healing and meaning to them in a way that transcended any previous religious experience and they found that the same was true for those of the non-Jewish world who opened their hearts to Jesus in the same way. In the words of the Second Vatican Council: 'All are called to union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, towards whom our whole life is directed'(LG n.3).

It is our Christian belief that the risen Jesus, in eternal communion with his Father, has made his home in our soul: 'If you love me, my Father will love you and we will come to you and make our home in you'(John 15:21). When we enter into prayer, therefore, we are responding to God's Word of love and we are not alone. We are with Jesus. He draws us to himself and takes us to the Father: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself'(John 12:32).

Jesus not only shows us the way to God. He *is* the way (John 14:6), for it is our communion in love with him that opens us to the Father's love and draws us into God's embrace. In Paul's words, he is the Yes to all God's promises (2Corinthians 1:20). Jesus reveals God's faithful love to us by being himself the expression of it. Jesus *is* the way because he is the perfect human expression of God's Word and it is only by responding to God's Word that we can be in communion with God: 'No one can come to the Father except through me'(John 14:6).

In his book 'One with Jesus', Paul de Jaegher SJ speaks of having 'a loving docility to the guest of one's heart'(page 56). He warns against having too great a preoccupation with our self and counsels us to keep our eyes on Jesus. He reminds us that it is not a matter of imitating Jesus from the outside, but rather of allowing grace to transform us into Christ:

'Formerly the soul encouraged herself in the practice of higher virtues by an imitation of Jesus, which I may well describe as an imitation from the outside. Jesus was her model, but outside of her, a model whose divine virtues she strove to reproduce somewhat after the fashion of a painter who copies his subject. Imitation after this fashion appears somewhat cold and dull. But now Jesus means something very different for her. To imitate Jesus is no longer to copy Jesus, but to be transformed into Jesus, to become Jesus. It is no longer to bring out in herself the features of the beloved Model, but to allow Christ to develop and reproduce himself in her. It is imitation from within. There is no question of merely becoming like Jesus, but of being one with Jesus, the God-Man'(page 50-51).

Through Jesus we know God as communion in love: Father-Son-Spirit. Those who experienced Jesus came to a wonderful insight that God is not individual. God is communion in love. Of course we cannot see God or comprehend God, but this communion, this love which is God, is such that it is revealed to us in Word and Spirit. In Jesus the Word is made flesh. In Jesus the Spirit is experienced without reserve. To believe in Jesus is to share in Jesus' communion, is to be drawn into communion of love with Jesus and with his Father and with the Spirit that is their bond of love. It is this communion which brings salvation: salvation from all that holds us bound, because of our sharing in the life of divine communion. Since it is the one and only God who is communicating himself to us in his Word and in his Spirit, the experience of Jesus and of his disciples points to something in the mystery of God's transcendent being. We cannot comprehend God, but we can grow in the knowledge of God that comes with intimacy.

We are invited to keep our eyes fixed on the limited, concrete, historical ways in which God has chosen to reveal his presence and his activity in our real history, especially in the history of Jesus. These insights have been traditionally expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity which speaks of God's ways with us and expresses as much of God's mysterious being as these ways reveal.

When we pray we are being drawn into Jesus' own prayer. Jesus responded to God in intimate communion 'as the only son of a father'(John 1:14). Through communion with Jesus we are drawn into his prayer. More than the other evangelists it is Luke who keeps reminding us of Jesus' prayer as the following references amply demonstrate (Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28-29; 10:21; 11:1-2; 18:1; 22:41-42; 23:34; 23:46). Watching Jesus praying, we are to remember that, through the gift to us of his Spirit, it is his prayer that is taking place in our hearts. Let us listen to Paul:

'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me'(Galatians 2:20).

'We are the aroma of Christ'(2Corinthians 2:15)

'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit'(2Corinthians 3:18).

'The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God'(Romans 8:26-27).

Commenting on Paul's statement that we are the aroma of Christ, Augustine writes:

'When a prayer is sincerely uttered by a faithful heart, it rises as incense rises from a sacred altar. There is no scent more fragrant than that of the Lord. All who believe must possess this perfume'(Discourse on Psalm 140,4-6).

James McAuley, calls on Jesus, the Incarnate Word, to raise up people of prayer among us:

'Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, men who walk within the fire
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land:
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense
Of questioning, they do not know from whence.
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,

It works unseen like radium in the dark (from *Letter to John Dryden*).

Let us listen to the prayer of Jesuit paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (d.1955), composed in the Ordos desert, Mongolia, on Easter Sunday 1923:

‘Christ of glory, hidden power stirring in the heart of matter, glowing centre in which the unnumbered strands of the manifold are knit together; strength inexorable as the world and warm as life; you whose brow is of snow, whose eyes are of fire, whose feet are more dazzling than gold poured from the furnace; you whose hands hold captive the stars; you, the first and the last, the living, the dead, the reborn; you, who gather up into your superabundant oneness every delight, every taste, every energy, every phase of existence, to you my being cries out with a longing as vast as the universe: for you indeed are my Lord and my God’ (*Mass upon the altar of the world*).

Finally, a prayer of John Henry Newman (d.1890):

‘Dear Jesus, help me spread Your fragrance everywhere I go. Flood me with Your Spirit and Life. Penetrate and possess my being so utterly that all my life may be only a radiance of Yours. Shine through me and be so in me that every person I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my soul.’