

Longing for God

To this point we have been reminding ourselves that God is the heart and the beyond of everything. He draws us to himself through his Word coming to us in creation, through people and most intimately in the Word-made-flesh. He is also pouring his Spirit into our hearts drawing us into the depths of our own soul where he delights to commune with us. Since in prayer we experience the intimacy of communion with God we can expect to discover a God who is love and we can expect to discover ourselves as God sees us. We are encouraged in our prayer by knowing that it is Jesus himself who is sharing his own prayer with us, for he is the Way to the Father. We grow in holiness through our union with him. We have also pointed out the importance of obedience and humility if our inner journey of prayer is to be genuine and fruitful.

We are now ready to look more closely at the experience of prayer itself and we begin by stating that since God remains transcendent, we should not be surprised to discover that the primary experience of prayer is not one of rest in the possession of God, though, as we shall see, there are moments when we do have such an experience, however imperfectly. It is, rather, the experience of longing. Perhaps the best way to reflect upon this truth is to join our soul to the prayers of longing found in the Scriptures and then to listen to some of the great masters of prayer in the Christian tradition, as they share their experience with us. Let us go first to the psalms, savouring their words in an attempt to pick up similar longings coming from our own soul:

‘O Lord, all my longing is known to you; my sighing is not hidden from you’(Psalm 38:9).

‘As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?’
(Psalm 42:1)

‘O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;

my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory’(Psalm 63:1-2).

‘My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;

my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God’(Psalm 84:2).

‘Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.

Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually’(Psalm 105:3-4).

‘I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land’(Psalm 143:6).

We find similar expressions of longing throughout the Scripture in both the New and the Old Testaments. The following examples will suffice for the present:

‘My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you’(Isaiah 26:9).

‘When you search for me, you will find me;

if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord ...

and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile’(Jeremiah 29:13-14).

‘The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’

And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen.

Come, Lord Jesus!’(Revelation 22:17, 20).

We find this sentiment of longing expressed again and again throughout the history of the Church. We will have to be content with a small sampling. Let us begin with Ignatius of Antioch writing ahead to the community in Rome as he was being taken there under armed escort to be

thrown to the lions for the sport of the populace. He is writing in the first years of the second century:

‘He who died for us is all that I seek; he who rose again for us is my whole desire ... Here is one who longs only to be God’s; do not delude him with the things of earth. Suffer me to attain to light, pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the passion of my God. If any of you has God within himself, understand my longings, and feel for me, because you will know the forces by which I am constrained ... Here am I, yearning for death with all the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for the things of this world, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, “Come to the Father”. There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love’ (*Letter to the Romans* 6,1-2).

Gregory of Nyssa (d.395) writes:

‘God wants the delay in pleasure to set afire the desire of the soul so that, together with this ardour, joy may also increase ... To find God means to seek Him continually ... This is truly seeing God, when one is not sated in desiring Him ... God is eternally sought ... The teaching which Scripture gives us is, I think, the following: the person who wants to see God will do so in the very fact of always following Him. The contemplation of His face is an endless walking towards Him ... There is only one way to grasp the power that transcends all intelligence: not to stop, but to keep always searching beyond what has already been grasped’ (*Homily 2 on the Canticle of Canticles*, 801).

The theme of longing recurs often in the writings of Augustine (d.431):

‘I call upon you, God my Mercy, who made me and did not forget me when I forgot you. I call you to come into my soul, for by inspiring it to long for you you prepare it to receive you’ (*Confessions* 13.1).

‘Desire itself is your prayer, and if your desire is continuous your prayer is unceasing. For the apostle did not say in vain: Pray without ceasing. Is it possible that we should unceasingly bend the knee or prostrate our body or raise up our hands, that he should tell us: Pray without ceasing? There is a prayer that is unceasing. It is interior; it is desire. Whatever else you do, if you desire life that is eternal you do not cease to pray. If you do not wish to stop praying, do not stop desiring. Your unceasing desire is your uninterrupted voice. You will grow silent if you stop loving’ (*On Psalm 37:14*).

‘The whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire. What you desire you cannot yet see. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when you do see, you may attain fulfilment ... By delaying the fulfilment of desire, God stretches the soul, and by this expansion he increases its capacity ... This is our life: to be exercised by desire. But we are exercised by holy desire only in so far as we have cut off our longings from the love of the world. We must empty that which is to be filled ... Let us stretch ourselves out towards God so that when He comes He may fill us. “We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is”’ (*Treatise 4 on the First Letter of Saint John*).

Gregory the Great (d.604) included the following in his sermon in which he was commenting on a phrase from the Divine Office: My heart is on fire; I desire to see my Lord. I look for him but cannot find him.

‘Because of the ardent love of her heart, Mary [of Magdala] continued seeking Jesus when she could not find him, even after the other disciples had gone away. In tears she kept searching, and, afire with love, she yearned for him. Thus it happened that she alone saw

him. She had already sought and found nothing, but she continued seeking and so found the object of her love. While she was seeking, her longing grew stronger and stronger, until it was allayed in the embrace of Him whom she was seeking ... At first she did not recognise him, but then Jesus said to her: Mary! ... as if to say: “Now recognise the one who recognises you” ... Outwardly it was He who was the object of her search, but inwardly it was He who was teaching her to search for Him’ (*Homily 25*).

In his commentary on the Book of Job, Gregory writes:

‘The Bridegroom hides when he is sought, so that, not finding him, the Bride may seek him with a renewed ardour; and the bride is hampered in her search so that tis delay may increase the capacity for God, and that she may find one day more fully what she was seeking’ (*Moralia V.6*).

In a conversation between his soul and God, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (d.1109) writes:

‘Come now, fly for a moment from your affairs, escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God and rest for a little in Him. Enter into the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything save God and what can be of help in your quest for Him and, having locked the door, seek Him out. Speak now my whole heart, speak now to God: ‘I seek your face, O Lord, your face I seek.’ ...

What shall I do, most high God, what shall this exile do, tormented by love of you and yet cast off far from your face? I yearn to see you, I desire to come close to you, I long to find you, I am eager to seek you out and I do not see your face ... Look upon us, Lord; hear us, enlighten us, show yourself to us. Give yourself to us that it may be well with us, for without you it goes so ill for us. Have pity on our efforts and our strivings towards you, for we can avail nothing without you. Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you’ (*Proslogion* chapter 1).

Elsewhere he writes:

‘By you, O Lord, I have desire; by you let me have fulfilment. Cleave to him, O my soul, and never leave him. Good Lord, do not reject me; I faint with hunger for your love; refresh me with it. Let me be filled with your love, rich in your affection, completely held in your care. Take me and possess me wholly, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit are alone blessed to ages of ages. Amen’ (from *Meditation on Human Redemption*).

We find similar sentiments in Bernard of Clairvaux (d.1153)

‘If you find that it is good to cling close to God [Psalm 73:28], and if you are so filled with desire that you want to depart and to be with Christ [Philippians 1:23], with a desire that is intense, a thirst ever burning, an application that never flags, you will certainly meet the Word in the guise of a Bridegroom on whatever day he comes. At such an hour you will find yourself locked in the arms of Wisdom; you will experience how sweet divine love is as it flows into your heart. Your heart’s desire will be given to you, even while still a pilgrim on earth, though not in its fullness and only for a time, a short time ... And if you persist with prayers and tears, he will return each time, but only to disappear soon again and not return unless he is sought for with all your heart.

And so, even in this body we can often enjoy the happiness of the Bridegroom’s presence, but it is a happiness that is never complete because the joy of the visit is followed by the pain of his departure. You are his beloved and you have no choice but to endure this

state until the hour when you lay down the body's weary weight, and, raised aloft on the wings of desire, you follow the One you love wherever he goes'(*On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 32:2).

'The psalmist says: 'Seek his face always'[Psalm 105:4]. Nor, I think, will a soul cease to seek him even when it has found him. It is not with steps of the feet that God is sought but with the heart's desire; and when the soul happily finds him its desire is not quenched but kindled. Does the consummation of joy bring about the consuming of desire? Rather it is oil poured upon the flames. So it is. Joy will be fulfilled, but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search. Think, if you can, of this eagerness to see God as not caused by his absence, for he is always present; and think of the desire for God as without fear of failure, for grace is abundantly present'(*On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 84,2).

Teresa of Avila tells us that if we wish to grow in prayer we will need the eyes and the heart of an eagle. She warns beginners that great desires for God can mask illusions and pride. The answer is to be found in humility not in the blunting of desire: 'Desire from me what you want to desire, because this is what I want: for all my good is in pleasing you'(*17th Soliloquy*). Similarly, John of the Cross:

'God's favours and visits are generally in accord with the intensity of the yearnings and ardours of love which precede them'(*Spiritual Canticle* 13,2).

'God does not give grace and love except according to the soul's desire and love. The more the soul desires and loves, the more God gives'(*Spiritual Canticle* 13,12).

'Since the soul lives with that driving force of a fathomless desire for union with God, any delay whatsoever is burdensome and disturbing'(*Spiritual Canticle* 17,1).

'The waters of inward delights do not spring from the earth. One must open toward heaven the mouth of desire, empty of all else that might fill it: "Open wide your mouth that I might fill it"[Psalm 81:10]'(*Letter*, 18th November 1586).

John Donne (d.1631) is not one to neglect or ignore feelings:

'To our bodies turn we then, that so
weak men on love revealed may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
but yet the body is his book'(*Ecstasy*)

He pleads with God:

'Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
but is captived and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me'(*Holy Sonnets v*).

To begin a life of prayer we must be attentive to the invitation of God whose Spirit is drawing us into the very centre of our being where God has made his home as in a temple. To persevere in

prayer we must, with awakened and attentive heart, stay in touch with the longing of our soul for God, a longing which is itself a gift of grace. The pull of this longing will draw us into the heart of God.