

## What is Prayer?

- Teresa of Avila speaks of prayer as: ‘intimate sharing between friends ... taking time frequently to be alone with the One who we know loves us’ (Life 8.5).
- ‘Look at Him’, she writes, ‘He never takes his eyes off you’ (Way of Perfection 26.3).
- John of the Cross reminds us that ‘the language which God hears best is silent love’ (Maxims on Love 53).
- Therese of Lisieux writes: ‘For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned towards heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy ... It unites me to Jesus’ (Story of a Soul)

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom *Courage to Pray* pages 5-6

‘Prayer is the search for God, encounter with God, and going beyond this encounter in communion ... It arises from the awareness that the world in which we live is not simply two dimensional, imprisoned in the categories of time and space, a flat world in which we meet only the surface of things, an opaque surface covering emptiness. Prayer is born of the discovery that the world has depths; that we are not only surrounded by visible things but that we are also immersed in and penetrated by invisible things, and that this invisible world is both the presence of God, the supreme, sublime reality, and our own deepest truth ... Living only in the visible world is living on the surface; it ignores or sets aside not only the existence of God but the depths of created being. It is condemning ourselves to perceiving only the world’s surface ...

The human heart is deep. When we have reached the fountainhead of a human being's life we discover that this itself springs from beyond. The human heart is open to the invisible: not the invisible of depth psychology but the invisible infinite, God's creative word, God himself. Returning to ourselves is thus not a synonym for introversion but for emerging beyond the limits of our limited selves. Saint John Chrysostom said 'When you discover the door of your heart you discover the gate of heaven.' This discovery of our own depths goes together with the recognition of the depths in others. Each has his or her own immensity ... The immensity of our vocation is to share the divine nature, and in discovering our own depths we discover God.'

## The mysterious nature of prayer

Prayer has its origin in the wonder of God's self-revelation, for the initiative in prayer always comes from God. It is God who invites us into divine communion by revealing himself to us through his Word which we find in and through the world around us. and through his Spirit which we experience in and through the movements of our own soul. It is God who attracts us to respond. When we respond to God's gifts of himself in Word and Spirit, we find ourselves engaged in prayer.

## The mysterious nature of prayer (continued)

Our experience of God is necessarily always an experience of a mysterious presence inviting us to the heart of reality and to our own heart, and the closer we come to the heart the more we find ourselves drawn beyond into mystery. The journey of prayer will never end, for it is a journey into the Heart of God, and so into a 'beyond' that we will never fathom. God always remains in mystery for we are unable to contain God. Our response, therefore, will also always be mysterious and personal. Each person has his or her own way of responding to God's loving invitation. Each person has to find his or her own way of praying. Since we cannot comprehend God's initiative, we cannot categorise what a person's response should be.

## John of the Cross

John of the Cross has been presented to us by the Church as a master precisely in the area of his teaching on prayer. He insists that prayer, being communion with God, is always initiated by God. It is God's longing to be in communion with us. It is a gift of love from God. We are free to welcome the gift or to ignore it by being too busy to respond. Our role is to desire this communion, to make space for it, to remove obstacles to it, but it is essential that we know that we do not (cannot) initiate the prayer-communion, any more than we initiated our own coming into being or continuing in existence.

John's image of clearing the ground for a spring to well up.

## Some Basic Principles

In *Yielding to Love* Chapter II, I outline some basic principles to be kept in mind when we reflect on prayer:

I. Since prayer is loving communion with God, and since God is always the one to begin the communion, the best prayer is the prayer which God is offering.

Let us gratefully accept and treasure whatever communion God is offering us now, for God knows our present capacity to respond. We need to remember that to turn towards God is already to be in prayer.

2. We must constantly remind ourselves that God is offering us the intimacy of this communion.

3. The value or quality of our prayer is measured by the fruit which it produces in our lives: our obedience, our detachment, our humility and especially our love.

Teresa writes (Interior Castle IV.2.8):

‘It is in the effects and deeds following afterwards that one discerns the true value of prayer.’



4. Whatever happens, Teresa tells us: 'we must not abandon prayer'(Life 8.5). If we do, she offers the only remedy: we must 'begin again'(Interior Castle II.1.10).

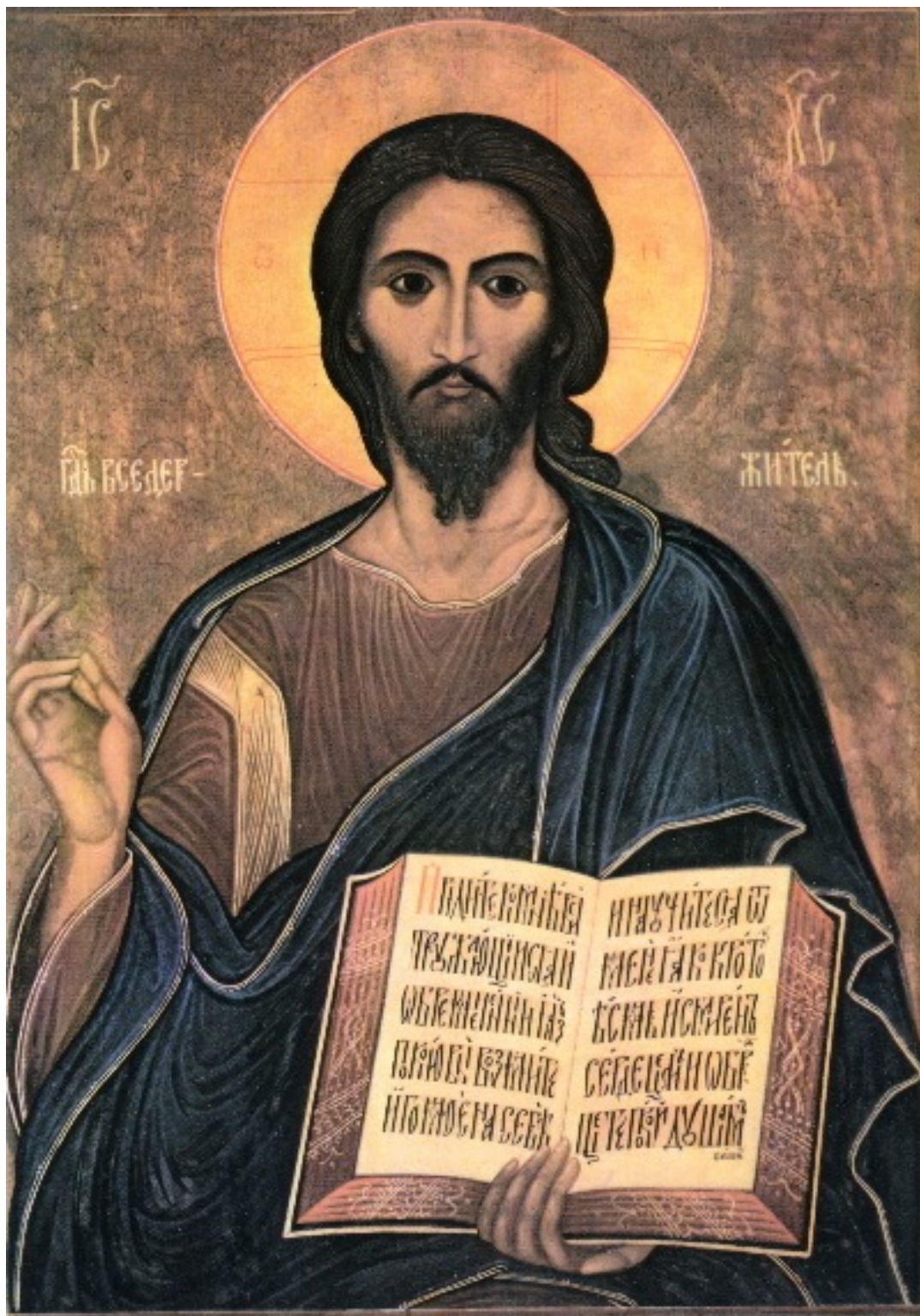
5. We should not expect the journey to be one of simple progression: 'There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it is not necessary often to return to the beginning'(Teresa, Life 13.15).

6. It is essential to follow the advice of Teresa and ‘set our eyes on Christ’ (Interior Castle I.2.11).

Jesus will journey with us leading us to a deeper knowledge of the true God – a knowledge that comes through love.

He will also lead us to a deeper knowledge of our real selves, for in Jesus we see what it means to be made in God’s image and likeness.

We see also who we are called to be.





Furthermore, by looking at Jesus we see by comparison how sinful we are. This acts as a warning. It nurtures humility and safeguards us from thinking that any value we have comes from ourselves.

It reinforces our longing to gaze on God, the sole source of all good.



7. If we are serious about prayer we must be resolute in turning away from sin, for it blocks out the light of God and opens our souls to darkness.

We will need a resolute will to detach ourselves from whatever is cluttering up our lives and holding us back.

This will vary from person to person, and according to each one's state of life.

If we are serious about prayer we must try to live virtuous lives in obedience to God's will as revealed to us through the ordinary means of God's providence.

8. While there is some value in studying prayer 'from the outside', we will only truly be helped to the extent that we are praying.

Without praying we can learn what God is doing in people's lives and we can get some idea of the intimate communion to which God is inviting us. However, we can understand what other people tell us about prayer only to the extent that their words shed light on our own personal experience of prayer.

Teresa herself tells us this: 'As much as I desire to speak clearly about these matters of prayer they will be really obscure for one who has not had experience' (Life 10.9).

## Teresa of Avila on Obedience

‘The highest perfection consists not in interior favours or in great raptures or in visions or in the spirit of prophecy, but in the bringing of our souls so closely into conformity with the will of God that, as soon as we realise that he wills anything, we desire it ourselves with all our might’(Foundations 5.10).

‘Believe me, it is not length of time spent in prayer that brings a soul benefit. When we spend our time in good works, it is a great help to us and a better and quicker preparation for the enkindling of our love than many hours of meditation. Everything must come from the hand of God’(Foundations 5.17).

## Teresa of Avila (continued)

‘There are three things which are very important in helping us to preserve peace, both inward and outward. One of these is love for each other; the second, detachment from created things; the third, true humility, which is the most important of the three and embraces all the rest’(The Way of Perfection 4.4).

‘I cannot see how humility can exist without love, or love without humility, and it is impossible for these two virtues to exist save where there is great detachment from all created things’(The Way of Perfection 16.1).



## Teresa of Avila (continued)

She is not speaking of any kind of love which we might have for others. She insists that the love which we offer be in response to grace and in obedience to God's inspiration.

It is the same with detachment. It is not for us to decide what we are to be detached from. We are to attend to God's call and the many ways in which God reveals his will to us. Detachment is to be response to God's love.

Likewise with humility. True humility is not discovered by looking down on ourselves. Rather it is the fruit of the self-knowledge that comes through seeing ourselves as God sees us.

The quality of our prayer is in direct proportion to the quality of these virtues in our lives. The discipline which we acquire in exercising these virtues prepares the ground for whatever gift of prayer God chooses to offer us.

After reflecting on obedience, therefore, we will look in turn at love for others, detachment and humility.

Only after reflecting upon these four fundamental virtues will we be ready to listen to John of the Cross as he guides us in the commitment and discipline necessary for us to work at the kind of prayer-response which we are able to make to God who is calling us into communion with Himself.