

13. Prayer of Petition

Prayer has as many moods as the human heart. When God draws us into communion our response depends upon our circumstances and upon the chords of our heart that are plucked by God's gentle hand. Underlying nearly all prayer is the profound longing of our restless hearts to rest in God. We find ourselves at times caught up in wonder and awe as we contemplate the presence and action of God in creation, in history and in our own personal lives. At other times our response is more one of delight, or we are moved to praise or thanksgiving. Sometimes we find ourselves expressing our trust in God. At other times we are moved with sorrow for the ways in which we fail to live in love or obey the inspiration of God's Spirit. We find all these sentiments expressed over and over again in the Book of the Psalms, the prayer book of the Jewish and Christian communities.

The response that we find recurring in the Psalms more frequently than any other is that of Petition. This should not surprise us. We live in a broken world, facing war and disease, the uncertainty of the seasons and the inevitability of death, as well as internal turmoil and the ravages of sin on both a personal and a communal level. It is not surprising then that, as creatures who are totally dependent on God for life and for all that we receive, we find ourselves crying out, pleading with God to care for us, to protect us, to save us from harm. The people of Israel recognised God as the one who hears the cry of the poor, and God encourages this prayer: 'Call on me in the day of distress. I will free you'(Psalm 50:15). However, whereas the other responses mentioned above probably require no explanation, the prayer of petition does need some explaining if it is to be a genuine expression of prayer and not an exercise in superstition or magic.

Jesus encourages us to be like a child and to make our requests of God with the simplicity of a child speaking to a parent. However, we cannot afford to behave like spoilt children expecting to receive everything we ask for. After all, God has a wisdom that is far beyond anything we can lay claim to. Furthermore, life has surely taught us that we do not always know what is best for us. Jesus uses the image of a little child who is hungry and who points pleadingly to a scorpion, mistaking it for an egg. Surely, says Jesus, you Dads will not give the child the scorpion just because the child is demanding it and threatening to give way to a tantrum. No, you have the wisdom to know what it is that the child really wants and you remove the scorpion on which the child is focusing and give the child the egg it needs (see Luke 11:12).

We are encouraged to ask God for whatever we feel we need, but we are to be sensible and humble enough to know that we do not have the wisdom to know what really is for our good. We are to trust that God does know, and that God will always hear our cry and 'give the Holy Spirit to those who ask'(Luke 11:13). Giving us God's own Spirit means giving us love. What effects that will have in our lives is something we can confidently leave to God. God will give us what we really need, but not always what we ask for. John of the Cross writes:

The discreet lover does not ask for what she lacks or desires, but is content to indicate her need, that the beloved may do what he pleases (*Spiritual Canticle* 2.8).

There is also the matter of timing. God hears our cry and responds, but we may not be ready yet to receive what God is offering. We might think we are ready, and we might think that we have prayed too long without an answer. We are asked to trust. We are asked to believe that God is love, that God is listening, and that God is offering us what is best for us. God keeps patiently offering love, longing for us to welcome it, but awaiting our readiness.

It may be that sometimes God holds back because God knows that if we were to receive the grace for which we are praying now, we might spoil it. We might take glory in it and use it to show off by drawing attention to ourselves rather than to the Father of all good gifts. God is our Father, our Mother, and God knows when best to meet our request. God asks us to open ourselves to God's steadfast love, to get to know God. Then we will cry out in our distress, knowing in trust that God will hear our cry and will respond to the deepest desires of our hearts that are causing us to cry out, even though we may not know them ourselves.

Of course the quality of our living matters. The prophet Isaiah has God say:

When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood (Isaiah 1:15).

It is not so much that God does not listen. It is that our way of living makes us unable to welcome God's response. We find a similar warning in Job:

If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored, if you stop acting contrary to God's will ... then you will delight yourself in the Almighty, and lift up your face to God. You will pray to God, and God will hear you (Job 22:23,26-27).

It is also possible that we are ready and listening, but others are not, with the result that what God wishes to offer us through them does not happen. God, being love, cannot and will not force them.

Whatever the situation, the problem is never God's failure to offer grace. God is love, and, as Saint Paul reminds us:

We might be faithless, but God remains faithful, for he cannot deny his own self (2Timothy 2:13).

God's love is unconditionally offered to all of us all the time. Furthermore, this love is offered to us whether or not we ask. Our asking is our opening our hearts to welcome God's offer. It can be gently raining outside, but this will be of no help to the pot plant that is inside the house. We must take it outside if we want the rain to benefit it. It is much the same with prayer. The prayer of petition does not change God, but it does alter our relationship with God, turning us towards God and opening us to welcome the love that God is offering us. Like a sunflower, we are opening our petals to the sun to receive its warmth and nourishment. For, while God's love is unconditionally offered, it is not unconditionally received. God respects our freedom. Loving is not something mechanical or automatic. It is for us to turn towards God and welcome the love which we are being offered. The reader may want to read Chapter 30 of *The Way of Perfection* for advice from Saint Teresa regarding prayers of petition.

Prayers of Intercession

Among the many wonderful stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, there are two especially memorable ones which speak of the power of intercessory prayer. One is where Abraham pleads with God to spare Sodom (Genesis 18:20-32). The other is where Moses is helped by Aaron and Hur as he prays for victory against Amalek (Exodus 17:8-13).

The power of intercessory prayer is mentioned also in the New Testament. Jesus himself, we are told, is interceding for us with his Father:

Christ Jesus, who died, was raised. He is at the right hand of God, interceding for us (Romans 8:34).

He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:25).

If we sin, we have Jesus Christ as our advocate with the Father (1John 2:1).

Because of this we are encouraged to approach God with confidence:

Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

Did not Jesus himself tell us:

Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened (Matthew 7:8 and Luke 11:10).

As we pray for each other, however, let us keep in mind the point made earlier in regard to all prayers of petition: we may ask for anything, but we must know that only God knows what is best.

There is comfort in knowing that someone is praying for us. The love thus shown us can ease what can otherwise be experienced as a profound spiritual loneliness. The prayer of another can encourage us to look towards God in faith, trusting that 'the Lord will fulfil his purpose for me'(Psalm 138:8). We are encouraged also by the words of Deuteronomy: 'It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed'(Deuteronomy 31:8). When things are hard we can easily think that there is no hope. When others enfold us in their prayer, we are reminded that we are held in love and that God will continue to fulfil in our lives the purpose God has for us.

We might wonder how effective such prayer is when the person for whom we are praying does not know? It is usually good to tell the other person that he or she is in our prayers. But if this is not possible, or not appropriate, we are reminded that we are all connected to each other even when we are unaware of the connection. We are like branches on a vine. If one branch draws in nourishment from the sun, all the other branches are helped. Ultimately the best help we can give anyone is to be close to God ourselves. A prayerful and open heart draws in grace and this helps the person for whom we are praying. Indeed the whole world benefits from such prayer, for it opens up the world to draw down the fire of God's love.

Of course, other people's prayer for us does not substitute for our own openness to God or our own response to God's grace. Likewise we cannot live other people's lives for them. But we can surround each other with grace. We can draw each other close and encourage each other to believe in God's love, and even when we are not conscious of other people's prayer, this prayer is working 'like radium in the dark'(James McAuley), giving out the spiritual energy of love.

Prayer for other people's needs can tend to take over our prayer and we can do it with anxiety and be so preoccupied going over the sickness or the troubles of those we love that there may be in reality very little communion with God going on. There is a way of expressing our concerns for others while at the same time not being distracted from a genuine faith-communion with God.

Firstly, let us be aware that God loves those for whom we wish to intercede. God has been gracing them long before we thought to pray for them. God is gracing them now. In our prayer our desire is to be in communion with all the members of the church, living and dead.

Then let us imagine taking the person for whom we are praying into our hearts. Incidentally, this is a good way also to listen to people: take them and what they are saying into your heart and listen to them there. If someone has requested our prayers, let us take that person into our heart, and then, from our heart, let us hold him or her up to God. A strenuous effort of concentration is not required, just simple awareness, as we might stand in the presence of a picture or of a sunset.

Finally, let us put the request aside and just *be* in the presence of God. We do not have to keep on reflecting that we are there on behalf of another: we have already made that clear. We just *are* in the presence of God. God knows our intention that God's love will flow freely in this other person, as we pray it does in us. It is enough that God knows and that we are open to welcome God's love.

To pray for others we do not have to be clever or eloquent or even perceptive of their needs; just be ourselves as we are: simple, a little confused perhaps, but wanting God's will, or wanting to want God's will for ourselves and others. It is God's business to take things on from there. We are to do what we can do. We are to fill the water pots with water, and we are to 'fill them to the brim', but we must leave the wine-making to God (see John 2:7-10). It is up to us to remove the stone, but the words 'Lazarus, come forth' belong to God (see John 11:41-44). We are dry bones; clothing these bones with flesh and breathing the Spirit of life into them is the work of God (see Ezekiel 37:1-14).

In this way the prayers we pray for others are more trusting. We entrust to the heart of God those whom we have taken into our heart. Do not go over and over their problems. Rather, we are to be ourselves in communion with God in simple trust, and spend the time of prayer open to God's grace and praying that the will of God will be done in our lives and in the world, and that we may be a vehicle of God's grace to others. God certainly hears our prayer, and, in a way that remains beyond our understanding, our prayer opens a way for grace to enter into the lives of others. It is not for us to know the state of readiness of the others to receive this grace, nor the ways in which their reception might affect their lives. We must leave all this to God.