

01. Prayer

Teresa of Jesus, a sixteenth century Carmelite, is acknowledged as one of the great teachers of prayer. She defines prayer as: 'friendly communication, and frequently solitary conversation, with God who we know loves us' (*Life*, 8.5). In another place she offers the following advice: 'It is for you to look at God; God never takes his eyes off you' (*Way of Perfection*, 26.3).

Prayer is essentially a personal response to God's mysterious presence. We each have to find our own unique way of responding to God's loving invitation to communion. We each have to find our own way of praying. At the same time there are some general principles that can guide us in our response, and we can learn much from the teaching of those, like Teresa, who have journeyed in prayer and who have given expression to what they have learned along the way.

John of the Cross, whom Teresa chose to help her in her Carmelite reform, writes: 'The language which God hears best is silent love' (*Maxims on Love*, n.53). Therese of Lisieux, a young Carmelite sister who died at the end of the nineteenth century, and who has been declared a Doctor of the Church for her role in bringing many people to an understanding of the essence of the Christian life, including prayer, writes: 'Prayer is a surge of the heart; a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy' (*Story of a Soul*).

Ruth Burrows, a contemporary English Carmelite, has this to say: 'True prayer is a giving of self to God, an opening of the self to God' (*Before the Living God*, page 101). In another work she writes: 'Prayer is our saying Yes to God who is bending to us, offering us love, inviting us to intimate friendship' (*Living in Mystery*, page 96). A Carmelite Magazine has the following statement:

'Prayer is a conversation, not an interview. Its purpose is friendship, not gain. It is a dialogue, not a monologue. It involves listening as well as talking. It requires silence as well as sound. God can talk to us by an earthquake, or by a gentle breeze. God can talk to us without the noise of words. God can talk to us equally well while we are talking to God ... God hears what we are saying. God hears what we are not saying. God hears what we are unable to say. And God answers in God's own way from within our thoughts and our words. God can bypass the ear and the imagination and the intellectual concept, and give us to understand God's meaning beyond the reach of words. God has no need to come in through the ear. God is already in our heart and knows its content.'

I have begun with statements from Carmelite women because of the wonderful contribution they continue to make in teaching us how to pray. However, everyone who has ever responded to God (including you the reader) has something to say on this most wonderful of subjects. Julian of Norwich writes: 'The best prayer is to rest in the goodness of God knowing that goodness can reach right down to our lowest depths of need.'

Anthony Bloom writes:

'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's Self.

'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. I use the word "immensity" on purpose. It means that the depth cannot be measured, not because it is too great for our measurements to reach it, but because its quality is not subject to measurement at all. The immensity of our vocation is to share the divine nature, and in discovering our own depths we discover God' (*Courage to pray*, pages 5-6).

Michael Leunig writes:

'Mornings and evenings. The traditional times for prayer and the singing of birds, times of graceful light whereby the heart may envisage its poetry and describe for us what it sees. But how do we find the mornings and evenings within? How do we establish and behold them and be affected by their gentle atmospheres and small miracles? How do we enter this healing twilight? The matter requires our imagination. In particular, it requires the aspect of our imagination we have come to know as prayer.

We pray. We imagine our way inwards and downwards, and there, with heartfelt thoughts or words we declare our fears and our yearnings; we call out for love and forgiveness; we proclaim our responsibility and gratitude. The struggling, grounded soul speaks to the higher spirit and thus we exist in the mornings and the evenings of the heart: thus we are affected and changed by the qualities we have created within ourselves. Might not prayer then be our most accessible means to inner reconciliation, a natural healing function in response to the pain of the divided self and the divided world? Might not prayerfulness be part of our survival instinct belonging more to the wilderness than to the church? And just as we have become somewhat alienated from nature and its cycles, could it be that we are also estranged from our instinctive capacity for prayer and need to understand it afresh from the example of the natural world?

The person contemplates the tree. The tree sends its roots beneath the surface, seeking nourishment in the dark soil: the rich "broken down" matter of life. As they reach down and search, the roots hold the tree firmly to the earth. Thus held and nourished, the tree grows upwards into the light, drinking the sun and air and expressing its truth: its branches and foliage, its flowers and fruit. Life swarms around and into it. Birds and insects teem within its embrace, carrying pollen and seed. They nest and breed and sing and buzz. They glorify the creation. The tree changes as it grows. It is torn by wind and lightning, scarred by frost and fire. Branches die and new ones emerge. The drama of existence has its way with the tree but still it grows; still its roots reach down into the darkness; still its branches flow with sap and reach upward and outward into the world.

A person kneels to contemplate a tree and to reflect upon the troubles and joys of life. The person imagines mornings and evenings in a great forest of prayers, swarming and teeming with life. The person is learning how to pray' (from *The Prayer Tree*).

Having shared these brief glimpses into our subject, let us examine at greater depth the origin of prayer. It was Saint Augustine who said: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you' (*Confessions* I.1). Prayer arises from our restlessness and our being drawn to respond to a mysterious Presence that impinges on our consciousness in the world around us and in our heart, the Presence we call 'God.' We know that our existence is not something we initiate. We sense that the same can be said of everything we experience. We sense a call to be in communion with the One who is the source of everything. Prayer is our response to that call. We sense that we are being called to a deeper communion with God. When we respond we find ourselves engaged in prayer.