

10. Self-Knowledge

Prayer is communion with God. God, the initiator of this communion, dwells in our hearts, drawing us into ever deeper intimacy. As prayer deepens, the real, living God will be revealed to us. God is love and the experience of this in prayer will bring a profound sense of peace and joy to our hearts. As the love-communion deepens we will come to know ourselves more truthfully, because we will come to see ourselves as God sees us.

It is the real me that God is inviting into prayer, the real me precisely as I am now. It is not the me that I used to be. It is not the me that I would like to be. It is not the me that others think I should be; it is the real me whom God is wanting to draw into deeper communion. Of course, if I respond to this grace, I won't remain the same. How could such a love enter my life without changing me? But it is the real me, here and now, who is being invited into this intimacy.

This is a very consoling truth. We don't have to be different to attract God's attention. We don't have to earn God's love. Whatever kind of mess I may be in, God is wanting to love me, here and now. When we doubt this, we have the Prodigal Son and Mary of Magdala and the thief on the cross and the leper and dozens of others from the gospels to remind us. Only those who truly love us see us as we are. God is love. God knows us in our most intimate reality, and he invites us into prayer. This is expressed nicely in the following hymn by Deirdre Browne:

'Come as you are. That's how I want you. Come as you are. Feel quite at home.
Close to my heart, loved and forgiven, come as you are. Why stand alone?
No need to fear. Love sets no limits. No need to fear. Love never ends.
Don't run away, shamed and disheartened. Rest in my love. Trust me again.
I came to call sinners, not just the virtuous. I came to bring peace, not to condemn.
Each time you fail to live by my promise, why do you think I'd love you the less.
Come as you are. That's how I love you. Come as you are. Trust me again.
Nothing can change the love that I bear you. All will be well. Just come as you are.'

We may find this amazing, but it is true. It is the good news preached and demonstrated by Jesus. The more we respond to God's invitation to communion, the more we will see ourselves as God sees us – and God sees us as we really are. From one point of view this is, indeed, consoling, but it does require that we be prepared to let our masks fall away; we have to be ready to stop deceiving ourselves, kidding ourselves, living in a make-believe world. We have to mature. We have to grow up. Love of any kind requires that. How much more the love of God.

If we are going to pray we will place ourselves in the presence of God and, if the communion is real, we will not be able to avoid seeing our real selves in this relationship. This will require a lot of adjusting and we may not like it. An English Carmelite, Ruth Burrows, highlights the importance of self-knowledge for our journey in prayer:

'It seems to me that God has given me the grace to seek the truth and to stand in the truth, and essentially this means the truth about myself ... Early in my spiritual life I was given a deep self-knowledge. This was to be the foundation upon which God wished to build. It forced me into the arms of God's mercy' (*Before the Living God*, page 74).

'Almost always God's greatest gifts are wrapped up in the sacking of painful self-knowledge' (*Ascent to Love*, page 58).

We won't like everything we see, for the real self, the self that is called to holiness, the self that is drawn into the communion of prayer, is not all beautiful - not yet. We are weak, wounded people. Sin has polluted the environment in which we have had to learn to live, and we have given in to sin ourselves. We have been hurt, but we have also hurt others and ourselves. Even what is good in us has its shadow side.

Self-knowledge, therefore, is not always a pleasant thing. We can be inattentive to our real feelings and to our actual motivation. We can, even unwittingly, be acting in ways that are not truly coming from our heart or from grace, doing what others expect of us or what we have come to expect of ourselves, living according to a pattern that we have learned but that is not an expression of our real self and so is not helpful either to others or to ourselves. Failure to know ourselves can lead to behaviour that is quite destructive.

John of the Cross writes:

‘All our infirmities are brought to light. They are set before our eyes to be felt and healed. Now, with the light and heat of the divine fire, we see and feel those weaknesses and miseries which previously resided in us hidden and unfelt, just as the dampness of the log of wood was unknown until the fire was applied to it and made it sweat and smoke and sputter. This is what the flame does to the imperfect’ (*Living Flame of Love*, Stanza I, 21-22).

In a similar vein Bernard of Clairvaux:

‘There is nothing more effective, more adapted to the acquiring of humility, than to find out the truth about oneself. There must be no dissimulation, no attempt at self-deception, but a facing up to one’s real self without flinching and turning aside. When you thus takes stock of yourself in the clear light of truth, you will discover that you live in a region where likeness to God has been forfeited, and groaning from the depths of a misery from which you can no longer remain blind will you not cry out the Lord as the Prophet did: “In your truth you have humbled me” (Psalm 119:75).

‘How can you escape being genuinely humbled on acquiring this true self-knowledge, on seeing the burden of sin that you carry, the oppressive weight of your mortal body, the complexities of earthly cares, the corrupting influence of sensual desires; on seeing your blindness, your worldliness, your weakness, your embroilment in repeated errors; on seeing yourself exposed to a thousand dangers, trembling amid a thousand fears, confused by a thousand difficulties, defenceless before a thousand suspicions, worried by a thousand needs; one to whom vice is welcome, virtue repugnant? Can you afford the haughty eyes, the proud lift of the head? With the thorns of your misery pricking you, will you not rather be changed for the better? Let yourself be changed and weep, changed to mourning and sighing, changed to acceptance of the Lord, to whom in your lowliness you will say: “Heal me because I have sinned against you.” You will certainly find consolation in this turning to the Lord, because he is “the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3)’ (*Sermon 36:5*).

We are quite capable of deceiving ourselves. We can be working out of false assumptions. We can be swept along by some trendy opinion that claims to be spiritual. We may like it, but it may not be of God and it may well not be drawing us closer to God. We can be as gullible in spiritual matters as we are in other areas of our life. We can have quite unreal expectations of ourselves and we can live within quite unreal limitations because we fail to get in touch with the real passion that is somehow blocked off inside us. Others, even those who love us, can blunt our spirit, and we can accept to conform when God is calling us to an eccentric sanctity.

It is essential that our self-knowledge be true. Ruth Burrows writes:

‘Unless getting to know oneself really leads to a change of heart, a more careful and conscientious fulfilment of one’s obligations and a more selfless love for others, it is useless’ (*To Believe in Jesus*, page 57).

A monk writes in a similar vein:

‘Today, people may pay lip-service to their nothingness, but their real preoccupation is with “developing their personality”. The claims we make for our ego are insolent’ (*The Hermitage within*, page 52).

John Henry Newman (d.1890) makes the following points in a sermon entitled ‘Secret Faults, a reflection on “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults” (Psalm 19:12).

- Many are content with such accidental information about themselves as the events of life force upon them. They neglect the duty of self-examination.
- To have only a slight acquaintance with one’s heart is to have a superficial faith.
- Motive? Do I do good for praise, to avoid shame, for the satisfaction of being occupied?
- Do I pray to God to reveal my heart to me?
- I should be suspicious of untested virtue, while remembering that we can fail even in areas where we have been found faithful.
- There is a danger of living a life of self-deceit, thinking far more comfortably of our spiritual state than is warranted.
- Self-knowledge is the fruit of ascetical practice.
- self-love inclines us to hope for and presume the best. This is a danger especially when things are going smoothly and ‘successfully’. Then being content is mistaken for the peace of Christ; natural affection is mistaken for Christian love; natural energy is mistaken for zeal.
- habit can cause us to sin without noticing it.

In the light of what we have written we should not be surprised to hear the great master of prayer, Teresa of Jesus, insisting on the necessity of self-knowledge:

‘However high a state we may have attained, self-knowledge is incumbent upon us, and this we will never be able to neglect even if we should so desire ... Self-knowledge is so important that, even if you were raised right up to the heavens, I should like you never to relax your cultivation of it’ (*Interior Castle*, I. ii).

Teresa insists that we do not gain true self-knowledge by turning our gaze inward on ourselves. We are to focus on Jesus, remaining open to see ourselves in the light reflected from him.

‘We will never succeed in knowing ourselves unless we seek to know God ... We get a distorted idea of our own nature, and, if we never stop thinking about ourselves, I am not surprised if we experience many fears. It is for this reason that we must set our eyes upon Christ our Good from whom we will learn true humility ... Our understanding will then be ennobled, and self-knowledge will not make us timorous and fearful’ (*Interior Castle*, I. ii).

Similarly, Catherine of Siena:

‘As you come to know yourself you also come to know God better, for you see how good God has been to you. In the gentle mirror of God you see your own dignity: that through no merit of yours but by God’s creation you are the image of God. And in the mirror of God’s goodness you see as well your own unworthiness, the work of your own sin. For just as you can see better the blemish on your face when you look at yourself in a mirror, so if in true self-knowledge you rise up with desire to look at yourself in the gentle mirror of God with the eye of understanding, you see all the more clearly your defects because of the purity which you see in God’ (*Dialogue*, chapter 13, page 48).

And Julian of Norwich:

‘Our good Lord want us willingly to accuse ourselves, and to see truly and know our falling, and all the harm which come from it, seeing and knowing that we can never repair it. God wants us also willingly and truly to see and know the everlasting love which God has for us, and God’s plentiful mercy. To see and know both together, by grace, is the meek self-accusation which our good Lord asks from us’ (*Showings*, chapter 52).

‘I saw most surely that it is quicker for us and easier to come to the knowledge of God than it is to know ourselves. For we are so deeply grounded in God and so endlessly treasured that we cannot come to self knowledge until we first have knowledge of God, who is the Creator to whom we are united. But nevertheless I saw that we have, naturally from our fullness, to desire wisely and truly to know ourselves in God’ (*Showings*, chapter 56).

Nicholas of Cusa (d.1464) makes the same point:

‘Make certain that you find yourself in God’ (*On Learned Ignorance*, §179, page 168).

If we fail to see ourselves through the compassionate eyes of God who loves us, we will get only a distorted view. Teresa writes:

‘Beware of certain kinds of ‘humility’ which the devil inculcates in us and which make us very uneasy about the gravity of our past sins. There are many ways in which the devil is accustomed to depress us ... Everything such a person does appears to her to be dangerous, and all the service she renders, however good it may be, appears to her fruitless. She loses confidence and sits with her hands in her lap, because she thinks she can do nothing well and that what is good in others is wrong in herself’ (*Way of Perfection*, 39).

In the light of all this let us see, in a general way, what we can learn about ourselves from being in the communion with God that we call prayer. I can learn, first of all, that I am a creature held in existence by the love of God my creator. We are not ‘lost’ in God, or ‘absorbed’ in God. Paul’s beautiful words: ‘I live no longer I but Christ lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20) should not be misunderstood as though the self vanishes or does not matter or can be neglected and forgotten. God continues to hold each of us in existence, and we never cease being the unique, limited, dependent, graced person that we are. Of course, of ourselves we are and remain nothing. But we are not ‘of ourselves’, we are of God. To know myself in God is to know my real name, known only to God and to myself (Revelation 2:17). All we are and all we have is gift. This realisation is the ground of humility and of gratitude and of a real spiritual life, for then we realise that in being open to God there is no limit to the life we are called to live. As Jesus said: ‘I have come that you may have life and have it to the full’ (John 10:10).

Secondly, I can learn that I am someone dear to the heart of Jesus. Because God is our Father-Mother, we have Jesus as our brother. We might reflect on the following statements from Saint Paul:

‘You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body’ (1Corinthians 6:20).

‘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 the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20).

‘Christ Jesus has made me his own’ (Philippians 3:12).

‘We are the aroma of Christ to God’ (2 Corinthians 2:15).

‘Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realise that Jesus Christ is in you?’ (2 Corinthians 13:5).

‘Christ in you, your hope of glory’ (Colossians 1:27).

We remember Jesus' own promise:

'If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you' (John 14:23).

Thirdly, I can come to know that I am a temple of God's Holy Spirit. Let us listen again to Paul:

'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?'
(1 Corinthians 3:16)

'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?' (1 Corinthians 6:19).

'It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting God's seal on us and giving us God's Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment' (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

'The Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him' (Romans 8:9).

If we are to make these general truths personal, we will need to discover the actual ways in which God has shown graceful love to us. In what way am I personally made in God's image? Thanks to God's grace, each of us is capable of receiving and giving love in a unique, wonderful and creative way. We cannot love exactly as others love, however we might admire them and however close we feel to them. Each of us has to find his or her own unique way of loving. No two flowers have the same perfume. Not even identical twins are identical in their manner of loving. The key to discovering how I can love is found in being attentive to the actual ways in which God has graced me in my life. Grace is to be relished and remembered, for it is in the light of such graces that we discover who we are. Such remembrance gives rise to gratitude, responsibility and fidelity.

It is important also to discover the ways in which sin expresses itself in my life. Each of us is wounded in different ways by the hereditary and environmental factors that affect our different lives. We call the evil influences and consequent tendencies 'Original Sin' for they come from our origins. In different ways we all experience a profound lack of harmony in our being. We experience desires that work against our ultimate longing and our ultimate good. We experience an urge to be independent and self-reliant, or we experience reluctance to let go unhealthy dependencies. Either way we fail to trust in God.

In Baptism we are welcomed into the Christian community which keeps before our eyes the memory of Jesus and which draws us into the ambit of God's grace in a special way. The darkness is still there for each of us, but the light of the Gospel and the abundance of grace offered us in the community act as a light continually dispelling the darkness so that it does not dominate our lives. We have been freed from Original Sin in the sense that we are given a choice: we are enabled to opt for communion with God rather than allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by distraction and sucked into the whirlpool of a meaningless life, which threatens us with being trapped in darkness.

The problem posed by Original Sin is vastly complicated by our own personal sins. We each have a history of ways in which we have said Yes to sin and have chosen to add our own spiritual pollution to the world. Nothing does us or others more harm than personal sin. If we are to grow in prayer we will need to see our personal profile and name our sins and realise how little we can do about our sinfulness by our own power. We will need to cry out to God in our distress and we will need courage to believe in God's grace and to take steps to allow the Spirit of Christ to

influence our wayward passions and addictions, so that we can truly 'live in love as Christ loved us' (Ephesians 5:2).

Finally, we must recognise the limits of our capacity to probe and to gain understanding of ourselves or of others. God has chosen to express God's Self in each of us in limited and participated ways. We must never lose sight of our own or other's mystery, for we cannot fathom our own being, because we cannot fathom God. If we fail to respect the mystery of the sacred, we are, as Anthony Bloom observes, like a person digging 'to find the source of a spring, the point where the water begins, the point just before which there is no water. In this case it is possible only to destroy not to discover' (*Courage to pray*, page 9).