

15. Holiness

The link between holiness and prayer is obvious when we realise that to be holy is to be in communion with God. It is a communion of the real self with the real God. Since God is love, it is obvious that holiness is intimately related to love.

The Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium, 1964] reminds us that we are all called to a life of holiness:

‘The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful. And so it must be. It is expressed in many ways by those who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love’ (LG n.43).

Since holiness consists in tending to the perfection of love and since prayer is this experience of being in communion with the all-holy God who is love, the link between prayer and holiness should be obvious. To understand the place of prayer in our lives it is important to understand the nature of holiness.

In the Book of Revelation, the martyrs join with the crucified and risen Christ in singing ‘the song of the Lamb’. Their song of praise includes the words: ‘You alone are holy’ (Revelation 15:4). To understand holiness properly we must see that only God is holy. We recall the vision of Isaiah:

‘I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of God’s robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God’s glory”’ (Isaiah 6:1-3).

The word ‘holy’ focuses on God’s transcendence. The people are told that they may not approach the mountain where God has chosen to reveal God’s Self (Exodus 24:2). For the same reason the tent of meeting is to be pitched *outside* the camp (Exodus 33:7-11). The holy of holies is out of bounds for all but the high priest and even his entry is severely restricted (Leviticus 16:2).

All this changed when ‘the Word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us’ (John 1:14). In Jesus was revealed that God wanted us to draw close. Jesus is ‘the holy one of God’ (Mark 1:24, John 6:69). He is the tent of meeting (John 2:21). People had always recognised the immanence of God in creation and in history, but those who experienced Jesus came to see that we are drawn into communion with the Holy One not by withdrawal from the body, from the mind, from thoughts and feelings, but by allowing the Holy One to draw us into the heart of the created world where God will transform us. In the light of the Incarnation, we came to the astonishing insight that God is indeed the ‘heart’ as well as the ‘beyond’ of everything.

Jesus also astonished us by showing that this is true of sinners and that we sinners are invited to enjoy God’s embrace:

‘All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them”’ (Luke 15:1-2).

We sinners are called to be in communion with Jesus and so with the Holy One:

‘For their sakes I make myself holy, so that they also may be made holy in truth’ (John 17:19).

‘It is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’ (Hebrews 10:10).

‘Jesus suffered in order to sanctify the people by his own blood’ (Hebrews 13:12).

We are made in God's image, for God creates us for communion. God, 'the fountain of all holiness' (Second Eucharistic Prayer) is constantly pouring the Spirit of love into our hearts, drawing us into divine life and so sharing God's holiness with us. Especially significant for this intimacy are times of prayer when our mind and heart are turned to God in loving attentiveness. It is in prayer that we say Yes to the communion which God is offering us. It is in prayer that we open our souls to receive God's offer of God's Self. It is in prayer that we grow in holiness – a holiness that is expressed in every aspect of our lives.

Let us listen to the New Testament:

'This is the will of God, your sanctification' (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

'May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless' (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

'God's temple is holy, and you are that temple' (1 Corinthians 3:17).

'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'

(Romans 12:1)

'God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in God's presence in love' (Ephesians 1:4).

'As God who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct' (1 Peter 1:15).

When we speak of a someone as being holy, or when we describe some place as a holy place (a 'sanctuary'), we are not speaking of a characteristic that is inherent in the person or place, or of something that can be acquired by endeavour or discipline. We are not the initiator of any attitude or action that can result in holiness. We are holy to the degree that God, the one who alone is holy, is dwelling in us in a communion of love which is transforming us into an ever more profound participation in divine life. It is because God, the One who alone is holy, is present uniting us to Himself that we are living in this divine communion. In prayer we consciously focus on this most profound dimension of our lives. In prayer we become holy.

Bernard writes:

'Show me a person who loves nothing but God and what is to be loved for God's sake, to whom to live is Christ, and of whom this has been true for a long time now; who in work and leisure alike endeavours to keep God before his eyes, and walks humbly with the Lord his God; who desires that his will may be one with the will of God, and who has been given the grace to do these things. Show me such a person, and I will not deny that they are worthy of the Bridegroom's care' (*Song of Songs*, Sermon 69,1).

Likewise, Therese of Lisieux:

'Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, well aware of our feebleness, but boldly confident in the Father's goodness' (words spoken from her deathbed).

Jesus was speaking of holiness when he invited the Samaritan woman to drink from the well of his love:

'Drink of the water that I will give you and you will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14).

To grow in holiness we must cooperate with grace. Since God is love, God's gracious initiative comes to us as an offering, an invitation. Since we are created by God and created precisely for divine communion, the invitation finds an echo in our longing. However, we are free to reject or to accept God's loving invitation. The transformation which we call holiness and which is union

with God occurs only to the extent that we welcome God's grace and open our minds and hearts and wills and bodies to the transforming action of God's Spirit - the Spirit of love.

Endeavour and discipline are needed if we are to remain attentive to grace and to allow God's grace to transform us. We must be careful to be attentive to grace so that our endeavour and discipline is indeed in response to grace and not coming from our own ego. The spring of divine life (the spring of holiness) issues from the Heart of God alone. We need to allow God the vine-grower to prune away whatever is dead wood. We need to cooperate as God the gardener clears away whatever is blocking the spring or hindering the flow of water. We need to keep responding to grace by cooperating in keeping the channels open and clear. We need to allow the water of life to penetrate the soil of our lives. But we do not hold the shears; we do not do the pruning; we do not create the water or initiate its flow. A holy person is not a humanly perfect person. A holy person is one who has allowed himself or herself to be transformed by communion in love with God – a communion initiated and sustained by God.

Herein lies the challenge of becoming holy. We have to learn that we cannot initiate holiness. No amount of control exercised by us can produce or achieve holiness. God is holy. God is utterly transcendent, utterly beyond anything we can initiate. God, however, can and does directly act in our lives. We have to allow the self-as-initiator to be 'lost'. 'Those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 10:39). We have to let go control. We have to become like a little child and allow to happen whatever God wants to happen as a result of His love. 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Mark 10:15).

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves' (Mark 8:34). This self-denial is a denial or negating *of* the self (the ego), it is not a denial or negating *by* the self. It is allowing God to initiate rather than the self. It is allowing grace to transform. It is accepting to be loved and to love only insofar as loving flows from the transformation. This requires attentive discipline of our natural tendency to take control. We must resist the temptation to want to 'possess' or 'achieve' holiness.

This is what it means to be 'poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3). This is what it means to be detached, to be humble. This is what it means to be a child of God. This is what it means to cry out in childlike trust 'Abba!' – a cry that can be made only because the Spirit of Jesus has been poured into our hearts. Saying Yes to God's gracious offer to transform us through divine communion, we allow God to penetrate to the heart of our lives, and in so doing discover that God has drawn us to penetrate to the heart of God's life. Prayer is making space for God's transforming action in our lives. Prayer is giving ourselves, like a child, into God's hands. God will lead us along the path of holiness, for God will take us ever more closely to God's heart.

Jesus is the mediator who shows us how to walk this journey. Through giving us his love, the Spirit of love that he shares with the Father, he draws us to his heart and so to the heart of God. The journey of becoming holy is a journey of being transformed into Jesus:

'All are called to union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and towards whom our whole life is directed' (Vatican II, LG n.3).

'It is no longer I who live. 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).

Teresa of Jesus (d.1582) insists that the path to holiness and so the journey of prayer is in the company of Jesus:

'It is for you to look at him. He never takes his eyes off you' (*Way of Perfection* 26, 3).

'Mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with the One who we know loves us' (*Life* 8.5).

I conclude with a short piece composed by a 20-year old who was preparing for final vows in a religious congregation. He was responding to a loving call but experiencing something of the cost of following his heart's desire. The asceticism asked of us is always in order that we may be able to receive and give more love.

'The mountain stream finds its winding way through the folds of grass and granite to pour its clear freshness into a valley, small and green. Clinging to the bank in the still and shallow waters grew a reed. This reed was not alone. It had enjoyed companionship ever since it first saw the light of day reflected through the water. Naturally enough it had grown to love the other reeds, and the life in the valley with its birds and flowers and children,

One day a mist crept up the valley and covered the reed with its blanket of cold. It felt strange and sad and alone. Then it heard, rising in the distance, the faintest strains of a flute. At least it sounded like a flute. The reed couldn't be sure. The music was coming down the hill, and as it drew nearer it sounded even more beautiful.

The mist was clearing at its approach and now the reed could make out, not far away and coming towards it, a man, a minstrel, and he was playing on something that looked like a reed. But, of course, it couldn't be a reed, for reeds cannot sound like that!

The lone minstrel came closer and knelt down, and, looking deep into the eyes of the reed and asked if it would it come up the mountain with him. What me? But how can I? The valley was the only life it knew. How could it leave it? Where would this man take it? But there was something in the minstrel's eyes that told the reed that there was nothing to fear. So it said Yes, and the minstrel took it in his long and gentle fingers and drew it from the water. They started to climb together. His hands were warm.

They hadn't gone far when the reed looked back and in the clear sunlight saw the other reeds swaying to the breeze and sending each other messages over the rippling water. It felt very lonely. It could call all the reeds by name. It loved them, and they loved it. Why did this man take it away from them? Would it ever see them again? It was frightened, and, as they continued to climb, the air was colder and the wind whispered of other places, unknown. The reed looked into the eyes of the minstrel and hoped.

In the valley ... in the valley were the flowers and the birds and the laughter of the waters, and the leaves that floated by, bringing news of other parts. But they were climbing, above the roofs and the blue smoke that came curling upward. They climbed even into the clouds - the clouds that brought the drops of water it had played with since it could remember; the clouds that rainbowed down light and warmth.

The mountain continued to climb before them. Suddenly the reed found itself in darker cloud, heavy, black and threatening - the tall trees creaking and groaning, lashed by the wind, their gnarled trunks labouring with the chaotic clash of twisted branches. But something in the minstrel's eyes said not to be afraid and the small reed held fast to the hand that clasped it. They continued to climb.

The reed looked back now. It could no longer see the valley. It strained to see the valley, and its heart was torn. Around it was rock, bare, bleak rock; and above - the width of snow. Silence ... Stillness ... Immensity ... Not hills but the peaks of hills. No valley to be seen. Just the peaks of hills, silent and still.

Silent ... but now they had stopped, and a marvellous thing happened. For the silence of the endless snow was broken by the pure tones of what sounded like a flute. But no! The music came from a reed! from this reed! For as they had climbed, it had gradually left behind the marrow and substance of its own being, and now, unburdened, it was open to the life and breath of the minstrel. It had not dared hope. It had not dreamed. But the message of the minstrel echoed through the silent distances and down into the valley. For they were

coming back, back to the other reeds. The mists thinned and vanished before them, and the minstrel bent down and drew other reeds to himself. It had been worth the climb!