

## **16. Prayer of Intercession**

Among the many wonderful stories in the Hebrew Scriptures there are two especially memorable ones that 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 New Testament, too, speaks of the power of intercessory prayer. 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’ (1 John 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 that we may ask for anything, but we must know that only God knows what is best. Let us listen to John of the Cross:

‘Discreet lovers only indicate their needs, that the Beloved may do what he pleases [‘They have no wine’, John 2:3] ... There are three reasons for this: first, the Lord knows what is suitable for us better than we do; second, the Beloved has more compassion when he beholds the need and resignation of one who loves Him; third, we are better safeguarded against self-love and possessiveness by indicating our lack, rather than asking for what, in our opinion, we need. Here we are saying something like: Tell my Beloved, since I have become sick, and he alone is my health, to give me health; and, since I suffer and he alone is my joy, to give me joy; and, since I am dying and he alone is my life, to give me life.’  
(*Spiritual Canticle*, 2.8)

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. God will be with you.  
God 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. The prayer of other people reminds us that we are held in love and that God will continue to fulfil in our lives the purpose he 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 nourishment in 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 grace in 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. Herein lies the importance of holiness and of prayer.

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, in the words of James McAuley, 'like radium in the dark', giving out the spiritual energy of love.

Henri Nouwen writes:

'Often I have said to people, "I will pray for you" but how often did I really enter into the full reality of what that means? I now see how indeed I can enter deeply into the other and pray from that other person's centre. When I really bring my friends and the many I pray for into my innermost being and feel their pains, their struggles, their cries in my own soul, then I leave myself, so to speak, and become them, then I have compassion. Compassion lies at the heart of our prayer for our fellow human beings. When I pray for the world, I become the world; when I pray for the endless needs of the millions, my soul expands and wants to embrace them all and bring them into the presence of God. But in the midst of that experience I realise that compassion is not mine but God's gift to me. I cannot embrace the world, but God can. I cannot pray but God can pray in me. When God became as we are, that is, when God allowed all of us to enter into his intimate life, it became possible for us to share in God's infinite compassion.

'In praying for others, I lose myself and become the other, only to be found by the divine love which holds the whole of humanity in a compassionate embrace ... Compassion belongs to the centre of the contemplative life. When we become the other and so enter into the presence of God, then we are true contemplatives. True contemplatives, then, are not the ones who withdraw from the world to save their own soul, but the ones who enter into the centre of the world and pray to God from there' (*Genesee Diary*, page 144).

Anthony Bloom writes:

'When we seek God we must love our neighbours, and when we seek our neighbours we must love God. In one of his letters a Russian holy man describes how one day he was asked a question: "Why is it that the workers under your charge work so hard and so well when you do not watch over them, and those that we watch over are always trying to deceive us?" The holy man replied: "When I come in the morning to give them their work, I am overcome with pity for them. They have left their village and their family for a tiny wage, how poor they must be. And when I have given them their work I go back into my cell and pray for each one of them. I say to the Lord: 'Lord, remember Nicholas. He is so young. He has left his newborn child to find work, because they are so poor. He has no other means of supporting it. Think of him and protect him from evil. Think of her and be her defender'. Thus I pray, but as I feel the presence of God more and more strongly, I reach a point when I can no longer take notice of anything on earth. The earth vanishes, God alone remains. Then I forget Nicholas, his wife, his child, his village, his poverty and am carried away in God. Then, deep in God, I find the divine love which contains Nicholas, his wife, his child, their poverty, their needs, and this divine love is a torrent which carries me back to earth and to praying for them. And the same thing happens again. God's presence becomes stronger, earth recedes. I am carried again into the depths where I find the world that God so greatly loves.'" Encounter with God, encounter with others. They are only possible when both are so greatly loved that the one who prays can forget himself,

become detached from himself, and become only an orientation towards them, for them. This is the fundamental character of intercession' (*The Courage to pray*, pages 14-15).

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. Our desire is to be, in our prayer, in communion with all the members of the church, living and dead, praying for them.

Then let us in our imagination take the person for whom we are praying into our hearts. This is the best way also to listen to people: take them and what they are saying into your heart and listen to them there. If someone has asked our prayers, let us take that person into our heart, and then, from our heart, 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 and it is simply that God's love will flow freely in this other person, as we hope it does in us. It is enough that God knows.

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'. We must leave the wine-making to God (see John 2:7-10). It is up to us to remove the stone. The words 'Lazarus, come forth' belong to God (see John 11:41-44). We are dry bones; clothing them with flesh, and breathing the Spirit of life upon 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, 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 the love encounter with God for which we are praying.