

“PATTERNS OF PRAYER”

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V. PRAYER AND AWARENESS

We shall not cease from exploration; and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot

The Zen master Iyoko was once asked by a disciple for a teaching. The master took a piece of paper and wrote on it the word ‘attention’. Next day the disciple returned saying that he did not understand what the master had written. Iyoko took the piece of paper again and wrote ‘attention, attention’. The following day the disciple came back still puzzled by the master’s words. This time Iyoko wrote ‘attention, attention, attention’.

The lesson the young disciple found it difficult to grasp is the oldest lesson in the world, the lesson of awareness and of total presence. It is the art of doing one thing at a time and living in the present moment. The past is past, we do not yet live in the future and the only true focus of life is the present. Truth is not an abstraction, life is not a theory. If life is to be lived to the full, it can only be in the reality of the present moment.

Attentive listening

To be attentive means to be present to something, to be aware and open to what is going on. We could speak of concentration if this did not conjure up images of wet towels, furrowed eyebrows and cramming for examinations! To concentrate, however, simply means to focus gently yet positively on what we are doing. For most of us this is not easy since the normal span of human attentiveness is only twenty seconds! To live in the present moment is to experience life and not just to think about it. It is to let life teach us. We can spend so much time and energy imagining all sorts of possible situations while all the time life itself is passing us by. The magic of the present moment eludes us because we are still trapped in the past or fearful of the future. Jesus directs us not to ‘worry about tomorrow; let tomorrow take care of itself’.¹ The same advice could apply to the past as well.

¹ Matthew 6:34

The right time

The lesson Iyoko tried to teach his disciple is that same lesson that is often found in the lives of the saints. St John Bosco, for example, was once playing billiards with some boys when one of them posed the question, 'What would you do if the end of the world was announced?' Some were for going to the chapel, others to confession, while yet another said he would say his rosary. John Bosco, however, assured them that he would play his next shot! In the same way, St Teresa of Jesus once scandalized some of her Sisters who saw her eating partridge. But the saint calmly replied, 'There is a time for penance and a time for partridge!'

Two thousand years before, the author of Ecclesiastes had already expressed the same idea:

There is a season for everything,
a time for every occupation under heaven:
A time for tears,...
A time for searching,...
a time for throwing away,...
a time for keeping silent, a time for speaking.²

It is not that one season is better than another; it is simply that each has its own time. Playing billiards, eating partridge, being with friends, talking to God in prayer: each has its own season and each is right in its own time. The secret is not to compare one with another, but to enjoy each as it comes along. It is the same present moment that brings us the fellowship of our friends at table and the companionship of God at prayer. And if St Teresa of Jesus directed her nuns 'not to talk to God and think about something else', you can be sure she would give exactly the same advice about talking to our friends.

Everything is a grace

Awareness, then, or attention as Iyoko called it, seems to be the key. But the key to attention is love. Love is the heart of presence. I am truly present only to the person I love. If I really love someone, I shall not be distracted out of their presence by other thoughts. This applies to other things as well: reading a good book, watching a film, taking a walk in the country. If I love what I am doing, then I am doing it with love.

To be attentive, then, means to be present. It means to see what is really happening, to hear what is really being said. It is to experience rather than to project. It implies an attitude of

² Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

receiving rather than of controlling, of being gifted rather than achieving. It is to appreciate with humble reverence the little things as well as the great. It takes nothing for granted. To live in the present moment is not to impose a whole lot of thought and meaning on every event. It is rather to let the experience itself reveal its own inner meaning and for us to become humble disciples in the great school of life itself. 'Everything is a grace', St Thérèse of Lisieux once said - and who knew better than she who built her life upon the little experiences that came her way and transformed them by her love?

Stop - Look - Listen

Ultimately, then, we can only live in the present. We can plan for the future, we can learn from the past, but we can only live our lives in the reality of the present moment. Creative living means responding to the present situation. It is not a question of what may happen or what did happen, but of what *is* happening. And that's what matters. Stop - Look - Listen is not just good advice for children crossing the road. It is a guiding rule for all of us along the road of life: to *stop* the racing mind, the worried, anxious thoughts, to *look* attentively at what is really before us and to *listen* to life as it comes to us moment by moment.

Strength and awareness come through presence as we learn to do one thing at a time. Of course it is not really a question of doing one thing at a time; it is a matter of realizing that in fact that is all we *can* do! Most of the time, however, we try to do the impossible! We pressurize ourselves with a restless anxiety and feelings of hurry, and we never really give ourselves to the task at hand. The anxious mind teems with images of duties, obligations and responsibilities. So much to do and so little time to do it...Yet even in the busiest day, the countless tasks come one at a time.

Presence of God

Learning to live in the presence of God implies first of all learning to live in the present moment. God is not an abstraction. He is immediately and personally present to everything that is. If he is real, he is real here and now, whatever the circumstances, whatever the situation. If he is not in the present moment, he is nowhere.

God speaks to us in the things he has made, the everyday event, the people we meet. His presence is distilled moment by moment. Though he is infinitely present, it is in a finite mould. We glimpse his presence rather than grasp it: 'a dim reflection in a mirror',³ St Paul called it. Life both hides and reveals him. The secret is to find life and let the presence reveal itself.

³ 1 Corinthians 13:12

Learning to see the things God has made is one of the best ways of learning to see him. Being sensitive to the present reality makes us sensitive to the ultimate Reality. The chances are that I will never 'see his blood upon the rose' if I do not first see the rose; the stars will never reveal 'the glory of his eyes' if they do not first reveal their own. In Matthew's Gospel, in the Last Judgement scene,⁴ those on the king's left hand were condemned not because they did not see Christ in others, but because they did not see the other – the sick, the hungry, the naked. Because they missed the present reality, they missed the reality of Christ.

God often hides himself in the obvious. Taking things for granted usually means taking him for granted as well. Yet he always remains the God of surprises and seems to delight in breaking into our dreary casualness in fresh and unexpected ways. This ultimately is the meaning of the New Testament: the scandal of the Gospel. The helpless infant, the carpenter of Nazareth, the friend of sinners, the condemned man on the cross - they are, St Paul reminds us, nothing less than 'the glory of God hidden in the face of Christ'.⁵ Jesus himself in his own teaching constantly recalls us not only to the reality of God, but to the God of Reality and the everyday things that reveal him: a mustard seed, a loaf of bread, wineskins and a widow's mite. It did not matter whether it was a wedding feast or a charcoal breakfast on the shore, those who had eyes to see saw his glory and believed.⁶ Perhaps this is why in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us to look at the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.⁷ Look, really look, and they will point us to their Father's house.

⁴ Matthew 25:31-46

⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:6

⁶ John 2:11

⁷ Matthew 6:26-30

