

“PATTERNS OF PRAYER”

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IX. PRAYER AND COMPASSION

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which look out
Christ’s compassion on the world.
Yours are the feet with which
Christ is to go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which
he is to bless people today.*

Words attributed to St Teresa of Avila

Two friends were once fighting in the same battalion close to the enemy line when one of them failed to return. The other asked for permission to go out and look for him. But the officer did not want him to risk his life as his friend was probably dead. Nevertheless the other went and returned a short while later mortally wounded and carrying the body of his dead friend. The officer was furious: ‘I told you he was dead; now I’ve lost both of you. Was it worth going out to bring in a corpse?’ ‘Yes’, the dying man replied, ‘when I got there he was still alive and his last words were “I knew you’d come”’.

Sometimes the best prayers are not the ones we say but the ones we do. In fact, sometimes they may not seem to us to be prayers at all, but any action born out of love is in itself a prayer. A compassionate heart cannot help expressing itself in deeds of love and, whether aware of it or not, walks along the way of prayer.

A way of love

Prayer that excludes others is not Christian prayer. Real prayer always has an outward dimension to it. Though it springs from within, its effects flow out to other people. Prayer must touch not only the lips but the heart and hands as well; it must express itself in action as well as in words. ‘I would not give much for the sort of prayer’, St Teresa says, ‘that is always turned inwards and thinks only of itself’. True prayer is born out of compassion. Compassion, not in the sense of pity or even sympathy, but in its deepest sense of sharing



with and entering into the 'passion' of another human being. To say 'I'll pray for you' is one thing; to witness to the reality of that prayer in deeds of love is, in fact, the test.

Togetherness

Compassion is not just a feeling for someone; it is much more a feeling with – a oneness, a togetherness. It is neither sacrificial nor vicarious; it neither gives nor takes. It simply is. It is much more a question of being, rather than of doing: a reaching out and into another person's experience in order to make it one's own.

The root of compassion is solidarity, the basic reality of our shared human experience. At the deepest level, what we hold in common – that strange, wonderful thing we call 'our nature' – is a vast reservoir of common thoughts, feelings and emotions. We are all so much alike – full of boundless hopes, dreams and promises – yet, all the while, hurt, wounded and scarred. The same current runs through the blood of all of us: fear and joy, laughter and sorrow, tears and smiles. There is no human response that I experience today that someone else will not experience tomorrow or has not already done so; no fear, no worry, no anxiety, no joy, no happiness for which there is not some measure of a human common denominator.

We are all in a sense incomplete. We need others just as much as they need us. We belong to others just as much as we belong to ourselves. The 'other' is part of me. To know another human being and enter into his or her passion is to awaken within myself the agony and the ecstasy of our shared human condition.

The way of tenderness

Compassion is concerned with feelings, not with ideas or insights. It means putting oneself in another person's shoes, wearing the same clothes, feeling the same feelings, sharing the same emotions. Compassion moves along the way of tenderness, yet it enters into the whole world of human reality: fear, loneliness, rejection, despair, sometimes even the ultimate despair, despair of life itself.

Compassion takes what it finds, the raw, brute reality of each human experience. It is not concerned with 'problems' but with people, or rather with the one unique human being with whom it seeks to identify. Compassion does not seek to solve, even when a solution is obvious, or to argue when the situation is negative. It does not need to judge, give advice or offer directions. It is not afraid of silence, or of tears, or of laughter. Rather, it is a quality of offering to another human being a free space and a safe boundary within which they can feel at home.

Perhaps, in the end, it is the difference, in a rescue situation, between throwing a rope down the well and going down into the well oneself.

A compassionate God

In the Scriptures God has shown himself as a God of mercy and compassion. To Moses on Mount Sinai he revealed himself as 'a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness, abounding in mercy'.¹ Unlike the gods of the surrounding nations, Israel's God was a personal God, one who had come into their lives, working 'signs and wonders' as he led them out of slavery, through the desert and into their own land. He was a God close to his people; he revealed his name to them, fought their battles, healed their wounds, and carried them 'on eagle's wings'.² He was their God and they were his people.

But there was a still greater revelation to come. In Jesus we see the fullness of God's compassion, God truly 'with us'³ having a human face and a human heart, sharing our flesh and blood. Now God himself was a partner and a companion in our human condition, weak, vulnerable, fragile. 'Like us in all things'⁴ we are told, especially the things that make us most human: our tears and laughter, our fears and joys, our hopes and disappointments. This was compassion in its truest sense, a sharing in the whole broken, fragile world of human reality.

Time and time again we see him moved with compassion',⁵ either for the multitude or for the individual who came to him: the leper, the blind man, the woman caught in adultery, the thief on the cross. They recognised him as one of themselves; they knew his tears were just as remarkable as his miracles.

Prayer of the heart

It is out of this sort of compassion that true prayer is born. If prayer is turning to God, it is also a turning towards others, identifying with them as we walk the road of life together. Real prayer has no boundaries of race, language or creed. It sees only a brother or sister, someone with whom we share a mutual struggle and a mutual destiny. Across the barriers of language or land we are all one and in that oneness we find the heart of God and the heart of all our fellow-travellers. They are all there: those who seek the truth and those who are afraid of it, those who walk in the light and those who worship from afar, those who love and those who are unable to receive love.

¹ Exodus 34:6

² Exodus 19:4

³ Matthew 1:23; 28:20

⁴ cf Hebrews 4:15

⁵ Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 20:34; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13

Gandhi saw prayer as ‘the daily admission of our weakness’. Compassionate prayer is surely the daily admission of our corporate weakness, the humble acknowledgement of our need for each other as much as our need for God. Prayer makes us stop and listen; it invites us to pay attention and be aware. If I listen to my own heart, I am listening to the heart of all men and all women and when I hear the ‘cry of the poor’ I am admitting my own poverty and my own helplessness. When the only son of an elderly widow was killed, the Curé of Ars came to visit her. People expected the saintly Curé would somehow make sense of such a terrible tragedy. But all he could do was to sit there in silence with his arms around her and let his tears flow with her own.

To pray for someone is not a subtle effort to influence the will of God. Rather, it is to invite them into our own hearts and make their needs our own. To pray for others means to make them part of ourselves. It is not just a question of remembering a sick friend, an unemployed neighbour or a distressed relative but somehow of ‘becoming’ those for whom I pray. I stand with them before the face of God and my prayer becomes theirs and their cry becomes mine. Together we place ourselves and our needs before our Father and open our hearts to the healing power of his Spirit.

Compassionate prayer is corporate prayer. It is a way of being together, an expression of fellowship and of shared faith. It is the cry of all who suffer: the prisoner, the exile, the forgotten victim of war, violence or injustice. But it is also the praise of those who celebrate: christening robes, wedding bells and examinations passed are all part of a common joy and happiness we share together. Compassionate prayer binds and heals; it unites in suffering and in thanksgiving and makes the world a very small place of welcome and hospitality. It is the pilgrim prayer of a pilgrim people.

In the end, compassion is love and prayer is love. And they are both one.

