

“PATTERNS OF PRAYER”

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VII. PRAYER AND FRIENDSHIP

Prayer is very simply being on terms of friendship with God, frequently conversing alone with one who, we know, loves us.

St Teresa of Avila

Prayer has been described as conversation with an ideal Friend. Friendship is something that we all appreciate and the idea of a perfect friend with whom we can communicate is certainly one that appeals to us.

Friendship is, in fact, an essential human experience. Few things in life are more precious. It is the one reality that dissolves loneliness and is a basic condition for any genuine human relationship or sharing. It is also a deeply religious experience – the vital atmosphere of our faith-response to God in prayer.

I call you friends

Most of us would find it hard enough to define friendship, but in practice we know what a real friend is. He or she is one with whom I can be totally myself and by whose presence in my life I am enriched. A friend is one with whom I can share thoughts and feelings, hopes and aspirations; one with whom I can share, without embarrassment, not only my tears and my laughter but also my silences. In a word, a friend not because of what I am, but just because I am.

Friendship is more than affection; its roots are deeper. It is more than fellowship; its bonds are closer. It may not be as great as love, but then love itself is dependent on it. We may not like those we love, but this distinction does not hold in friendship. We must like our friends, for friendship of its very nature is mutual; it either finds or makes persons equal. Perhaps this is what is meant by saying that it is not lack of love that upsets most marriages, but lack of friendship.

The most essential quality of friendship is that it is creative. It brings out the best in me; without it, I would be less than I am. It is not that my friends do not know me as I am; true friendship is clear-sighted. But what a friend sees is what others miss – the miracle of me, so



often hidden from myself. I rejoice not only in what my friend is in himself, but also for what I am because of him.

Can you imagine the effect of our Lord's words to his disciples at the Last Supper: 'no longer do I call you servants, you are now my friends'?¹ Friends – his friends! From then on, everything was different. Humble fishermen, hated tax-collectors – now they were the friends of Christ. He had seen the hidden possibilities and brought the miracle to light.

God who is faithful

Prayer is friendship with God simply because God is a friend. This is how he has revealed himself. The God who walked with Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the evening,² who spoke to Moses 'face to face as a man speaks to his friend',³ and who gathered Israel into the community of his chosen people, is the same God who calls us now to a new and eternal covenant of friendship with him. His friendship has stood the test of time and proved itself in countless ways; it is as everlasting and unchanging as God himself.

The whole meaning of the Christian revelation is that now, through grace, we are on terms of friendship with God. 'Grace', St Thomas Aquinas reminds us, 'is nothing else but a certain friendship between God and ourselves'. And it is this gift of friendship that makes Christian prayer possible. 'You are no longer strangers or foreigners', St Paul tells us, 'but fellow-citizens and members of God's household'.⁴ We belong to the family of God; we are born of him, children of God at home in our Father's house.

Prayer, then, finds its full meaning as an expression of our friendship with God and just to become aware of what this friendship really means is to break out automatically into prayer.

Conversation with a friend

St Teresa of Avila, a great teacher in the art of prayer, always saw it in terms of friendship with God: 'Prayer, in my opinion, is nothing else but being on terms of friendship with God and frequently conversing alone with him who, we know, loves us'. For St Teresa prayer is always a relationship of friendship, a mutual response in an atmosphere of openness and trust. She knew only too well that it was not just what we say to God that is important, but what we are before him.

To be true, then, prayer must reflect this friendly, intimate relationship with God. Our prayer should be easy, relaxed and spontaneous, without formality or constraint. We should

¹ John 15:15

² Genesis 3:8

³ Exodus 33:11

⁴ Ephesians 2:19

not be shy or bashful with God, for that is to put barriers to our friendship with him. It has often been said that the right way to talk to God is as a friend talks to a friend as they relax together in a chair before the fire!

But such a friendship is not easy, nor is it automatic. All friendship – human or divine – must be worked at and constantly renewed. Everyone needs friends, but unfortunately not everyone has them. The reason is simple: to have a friend, you must be one. People who won't take time and care to interest themselves in others can hardly expect friendships to grow and develop. Very often real friendship is the fruit of sacrifice and demands an unselfish generosity that shows itself in confidence and trust. Our friendship with God .is no exception: it must be kept in constant repair. But it is a friendship worth working at, and faithfulness and generosity in prayer are the foundations on which it is built.

Jesus our Friend

Jesus spoke a lot about friendship. His own relationship with his disciples was a model for all human friendship: 'You are my friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father'.⁵ For three years they were in his company, sharing the road, listening to his teaching and sitting down in table fellowship with him. They saw his miracles, shared the glory of Tabor, the agony in the garden and finally the joy of the resurrection.

Jesus knew the importance of friendship and mutual support among his disciples as he sent them out two by two to preach the Good News of the Kingdom. He knew, too, and appreciated the welcome he received in the house of his friends, Martha and Mary, where he was obviously so much at home. Neither was Jesus ashamed to be called the 'friend of sinners',⁶ and to welcome them into his company. And when he wanted to express heaven's joy over a repentant sinner, he could find no better image than that of the father who killed the fatted calf and called together all his friends to rejoice with him and celebrate.

But it was above all in the Upper Room that the depths of Jesus' friendship were revealed. There, in that atmosphere of intimacy and familiarity, he laid bare his soul to his disciples. The Eucharist, the Priesthood, the promise of the Spirit, the new commandment of love and the beautiful priestly prayer of Jesus all flowed together to be consummated ultimately on the cross when the 'greater love no man has' was revealed and he 'laid down his life for his friends'.⁷ Thus, in his life and in his death, Jesus revealed to his disciples and to all his followers down through the ages the nature of our relationship with God – a relationship of friendship, sharing and love that is ultimately the root and foundation that makes all prayer possible.

⁵ John 15:15

⁶ Luke 7:34

⁷ John 15:13

Friendship with others

Just as we can learn a lot about human friendship from Jesus, so we can learn a lot about friendship with God from our relationship with others. Every true human friendship is a mirror of the divine and points to it. God does a lot of his loving of us through other people and gives us the chance to return his love in the same way. The disciples on the road to Emmaus met Christ as they went along sharing the road together. Though they were dejected and downcast and their whole world had fallen about their ears, yet they remained together; they had each other and in that fellowship they found the Risen Lord.⁸ How often does Christ come along the way of human friendship to walk the road of life with us!

In friendship one human life is taken hold of by another. In prayer that other is God. Prayer, like friendship, can never be abstract or theoretical; it has its roots in each one's personal discovery of God and individual relationship with him.

Words are not the most important element in friendship, neither are they in prayer. The soul of friendship is sharing, being together, rejoicing in each other's presence. Prayer, too, is not so much talking to God as sharing his presence. When we pray we deepen our awareness of this presence; we make it more real and active. Certainly, in prayer absence does not make the heart grow fonder! To grow in prayer is to grow in friendship with God. In him all friendship finds its source. Prayer renews our weary souls in the spring of his eternal friendship.

⁸ Luke 24:13-32