

“PATTERNS OF PRAYER”

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VI. PRAYER AND LIFE

I don't know who or what put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer 'Yes' to Someone or Something, and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful, and that therefore my life in self-surrender had a goal.

Dag Hammarskjold

To pray is to let God into our lives. Prayer and life cannot be separated. If they are, prayer becomes unreal and life unsatisfying. Ultimately the greatest prayer of all is not what we say, but what we do. The question is not whether we have 'said' our prayers but whether we have lived them. Our deepest concern, then, should be to pray our lives, to make our lives the expression of our prayer. We should see prayer as the heartbeat of life which unites in one the hands of Martha with the heart of Mary.¹

Response to life

Prayer, in fact, can rightly be described as a response to life, a wholehearted and total saying 'yes' to life and to God, the Author of life. To respond, however, means much more than simply replying with an indifferent yes or no. It is a reply with a pledge in it: a commitment not just to think about life, but to live it as fully as possible so that our 'yes' becomes fruitful and creative. Response implies responsibility, a choice freely made with open hands and open eyes. Saying yes to life is saying yes to God, the Living God who has called us to the fullness of life in his Son, Jesus Christ.

In every human situation we can respond either positively or negatively. We can face the challenge or we can withdraw from it. This applies to such everyday decisions as getting out of bed in the morning, answering the telephone or watching television. It covers the more important and challenging decisions like choosing a career, changing to a new job or deciding to emigrate. To each of these openings we can respond with a prayer or a complaint. Each of them can be a source of growth or of diminishment, a blessing or a curse. The glory of God is man fully alive, fully responsive, fully human. Holiness and wholeness are both variations on the same word, the same reality. True holiness always leads to and

¹ cf Luke 10:38-41

demands wholeness. The first purpose of prayer is not to make us better, but to make us more real, more authentic, more honest with God, with others and with ourselves: then indeed it will make us better.

Walking in the truth

The surest way to make prayer real is to begin with real life, to start with the concrete human situation in which we find ourselves. It is all too easy to slip into a daydream world with regard to prayer, to speak of an 'elevation of the mind' or an 'uplifting of the heart' as if this was the simplest thing in the world to do. Very often it is wiser to look at ourselves first and go to God through our needs. Whether we like it or not, the immediacy of our own everyday experience impinges itself on our consciousness and for this reason it can be our first step in our response to God and to life.

This perhaps is the secret of such bestselling books as Michel Quoist's *Prayers of Life*, Rita Snowden's *A Woman's Book of Prayers*, and William Barclay's *The Plain Man's Book of Prayers*. Out of the ordinary everyday events of life a prayer is made – a hospital ward, a telephone call, a letter from a friend or a football match. Whether it be at the kitchen sink or the supermarket, the city park or the underground station, a person reflects on life here and now and out of the experience of the present moment a prayer is made. The prayer can be one of joy and thanksgiving, of petition and supplication, or simply one of anguish and frustration. The circumstances shape the prayer and give it wings. This is surely what St Paul meant when he urged his Christians to 'pray at all times in the Spirit'.²

To pray in this way means to base our prayer on truth. It means beginning with facts not day-dreams. It means accepting the truth about ourselves and about others: our homes and families, the office, the shop and the factory, the people we work with and the ones next door. In this way we come to God exactly as we are, spreading out our lives before him in humility and truth. It is basically what St Teresa of Avila calls 'walking in the truth'. We become like the men and women in the Gospel who met Jesus in the circumstances of their daily lives. What else would a blind man ask for but to see, or a leper except to be made clean?

The gift of life

Finding God in the reality of life means of course facing up to life itself. Life itself is a challenge; it demands a response. But it is also a process, an invitation to growth and maturity, and prayer itself is part of this process, part of this becoming. God did not create life: he shared it with us. Something of himself is given to us in the gift of life. I live because he lives. To pray is to be aware of this mystery of life and this mystery of myself. Awareness

² Ephesians 6:18

is at the heart of all prayer – awareness of God as totally real and present to me, awareness of life itself as a gift, and awareness of myself as a unique and individual expression of God's creative and sustaining love. To reflect on life and search out its deeper meaning is ultimately to accept the invitation of the Scriptures to 'seek the face of the living God'.³

It is not just what I ask of life that is important, but what life asks of me. Life itself is given, it comes to me and my essential response must always be a willingness to learn from it. To pray means both to ask questions and to hear them; to respond by doing and to respond by being. To pray does not mean to have all the answers to life; my prayer can be within the questions, within the searching and the seeking, even within the confusion and uncertainty that surround so much of my life. My response right now may be just to live and pray these questions hoping one day to be able to hear and understand the answers. Prayer, like life itself, is a journey – but in each case the path is made by walking in it. 'He who does the truth,' St John reminds us, 'comes into the light.'⁴

Providence

To 'pray our lives' means to believe in God's caring providence. It means to see his guiding hand in all things, even the smallest events of our lives. To pray is to find God in our lives not only in the quiet moments of personal prayer, but also in the constant struggle and daily grind of workaday reality. Those who pray do not believe in accidents. There are no gaps in God's providence, no waste matter in his ruling of our lives. To the vision of faith all ground is holy ground, every bush is a burning bush.⁵ Events are the language of God; it is through them that he speaks to us whether in joy or in pain, happiness or sorrow. St Thérèse of Lisieux understood this when she said, 'Everything is a grace.'

To enter into God's providence is to enter into the present moment, the eternal 'Now'. For it is in the here and now that God acts and that essentially he is to be found. This is what is meant when we say that for a Christian there is no tomorrow, only the given reality of the present moment. If we do not find God where we are, we shall not find him at all; if we do not encounter him on earth, we shall not meet him in heaven. Life itself is the first source of grace: God is within the ordinary, the trivial and the mundane. We can waste our time waiting for life to 'happen' while all the time it is passing us by. Each moment, each event and each person is a God-given and a God-bearing invitation to life and to love. Each is special because it is unique. How well Mary of Bethany understood this truth as she sat at the Lord's feet; the housework and the dishes would still be there tomorrow, but the present moment of Christ's visit was too precious to be distracted by anything but listening.

³ cf 1 Chronicles 16:11; Psalm 24:6, 27:8f, 105:4; Hosea 5:15

⁴ John 3:21

⁵ Exodus 3:1-6

Prayer as service

Yet prayer can never be an evasion of our responsibility or of our concern for other people. Life and prayer really become one when prayer issues forth in service; authentic prayer always increases self-giving. Someone has rightly said, 'he prays badly who prays only on his knees', God asks for working hands as well as praying hands, hands to serve as well as hands to intercede.

Genuine service of others will force us back to prayer. Practical Christianity demands practical prayer. Caring for the sick, visiting the old, comforting the distressed, working for peace – these things cannot be done for God without his help. Thus prayer becomes the workshop of life. In this sense to work is to pray; but the prayer must already be in the heart; caring for others only makes it visible.

To say we have no time for prayer has no meaning if prayer and life are one. If we have time to live, we have time to pray! Prayer is not an optional extra; it is a way of living and a way of being. I can no more exclude life or others from my prayer than I can exclude God. Prayer is, in fact, my total response to God, to others and to myself. It is my sharing in God's creative and redemptive plan for the world. It is a call to life, a call to the fullness of that life which Christ came to share with us so abundantly.