

“PATTERNS OF PRAYER”

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III. PRAYER AS LISTENING

Do you imagine that God is silent because we cannot hear him! He speaks directly to our hearts when from our hearts we ask him to do so.

St Teresa of Avila

A lot of people start their prayers at the wrong end. They begin with themselves instead of with God. Real prayer always starts with God – with his love for us and his invitation to friendship. No matter how much we think we want God, he always wants us much more.

The first principle of prayer is that God is accessible. He is not some vague, distant Shadow out in the unknown. Out of the darkness and the void God has come and told us about himself. Just as friends and lovers share secrets, God has shared his secret with us: the secret that he is Love and that we are called to share it. All that is needed is a ‘listening heart’ to hear that message of love. How well Solomon understood this need when, in his search for wisdom, he prayed for the gift of ‘hearing’: ‘Give me, O Lord, a heart that listens’.¹

First love

Prayer always begins with God because he first loved us. This is the whole meaning of the Bible story from the opening pages of Genesis to the Book of Revelation. It is the message of the first Christmas, just as it is of Calvary: God with us, God near us, laying down his life and taking it up again for us, proving his love in life and in death.

Most people think of prayer as asking something of God, forgetting that he already gave us everything when he gave us his Son: ‘At various times and in many different ways in the past God spoke to our ancestors...but now, in our own days he has spoken to us in his Son’.² Jesus is God’s ‘I love you’ to the world – the supreme gift ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’.³ In giving us his Son, God has given us everything: even though God is infinite, he has no more to give. The message proclaimed by God at the Transfiguration,

¹ 1 Kings 3:9

² Hebrews 1:1-2

³ Colossians 2:3

and the response he wants from us are still the same: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him'.⁴

Blessed are those who listen

In the Scriptures listening always 'takes precedence over seeing. The ear is more important than the eye. Faith comes from what is heard, St Paul reminds us.⁵ Jesus opens his teaching with the simple admonition, 'Listen'.⁶ He ends with the invitation, 'Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear'.⁷

The first and the greatest commandment is the commandment to love God. Yet it is a commandment dependent upon listening: 'Listen, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...'⁸ To love is to listen, really to hear and to receive. As Mary of Bethany discovered sitting at the feet of the Lord, the 'better part'⁹ is often just this openness and this listening. Jesus himself counted it among the beatitudes: 'Blessed are those who listen to the word of God and keep it'.¹⁰ When one really loves, listening is every bit as important as speaking; hearing the word is just as precious as talking about it. Prayer begins when we receive the word of God with a welcoming heart and let it take root in our souls.

Invitation

How often we think of prayer as knocking at the door of heaven when, in fact, it is the other way round. It is God who is doing the knocking: 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone listens to my voice and opens the door, I will come to him and dine with him and he with me'.¹¹ For the truth is that God is always knocking, always speaking, always inviting. All he asks is that we listen to his voice and open the door to him. The rest will follow: as we 'dine' with him we grow in the knowledge and love of him. The beginning of prayer is to let God into our lives and to open the door of our hearts to him. How well Mother Teresa of Calcutta expressed this truth when she said, 'Prayer is the expansion of our heart to receive God's gift of himself'.

To pray is to listen

It takes two to pray, each giving and each receiving. To receive is just as important as to give. Listening is a way of receiving. In prayer we must listen to God just as, in the same way, we ask him to listen to us. That is why prayer always implies an openness to God, a placing of ourselves at his disposal and a readiness to receive. Watching and waiting are the eyes of

⁴ Mark 9:7

⁵ Romans 10:14

⁶ Mark 4:3

⁷ Mark 4:9

⁸ Deut 6:4

⁹ Luke 10:42

¹⁰ Luke 11:28

¹¹ Revelation 3:20

prayer; a listening heart is the key that unlocks the door. 'Prayer is talking to someone who is listening, and listening to someone who is talking'.

God speaks to us in many ways: in the scriptures, in the liturgy, in the community, in the wonders of creation, in the circumstances of daily life and in the depths of our own heart. His voice has many sounds and it often rings in strange places. Our needs, our friends, the people we meet, the joys and sorrows of life – all these can carry his message and speak to us of his love. To pray is to listen. To pray well is to listen deeply – to God, to ourselves and to others.

Sharing his presence

Speech implies presence. Where God acts he is immediately present. His word is a creative word. He spoke and all things were made, and he is always totally present to his own creation. God does not come and go from place to place. To speak of placing ourselves in his presence can be misleading. We cannot, in fact, place ourselves outside of it; we are surrounded by it as by the air we breathe. 'Closer to me', St Augustine tells us, 'than my inmost self'.

To pray is to realise this presence of God, for prayer is not so much talking to God as sharing his presence. It is a meeting of presences: God's presence to me, my presence to him. It is a way of being open and receptive to his presence. Listening sharpens awareness. To listen to him is to find him; to hear his voice is to come into his presence. Listening to God's voice, hearing his word is, at the same time, to be aware of his presence. And what is prayer ultimately but our response to this presence?

Silence

Silence is an essential condition for listening. Prayer is born in silence, a still receptive silence that enables one to hear the deep things of the spirit. Silence is our way of helping God so that he can help us. We try to be still, conscious of our own poverty and of our own need to hear and to receive. Silence is much more than an absence of words or noises, much more even than just being quiet. Rather, it is a response of our whole being reaching out to grasp the word of life. It is an alert and attentive receptiveness to 'hear the word of God and keep it'.¹² Like the boy Samuel we cry out with our whole heart, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening'.¹³

Listening heart

We often complain that God does not hear our prayers, does not listen to our requests; when we speak he does not listen. Yet the truth is the other way round. It is we who do not hear, we who are deaf to his requests, insensitive to the pleadings of his love. Too often our hearts are set for transmission only, and incoming calls are not received. His invitation is not accepted. We do not respond because we do not listen; we forget that for us prayer is always

¹² Luke 11:28

¹³ 1 Samuel 3:10

the response of a listening heart. Yet the truth remains: God is always 'on the air' and it takes only a listening heart to hear his voice and understand the message he speaks.