

“PATTERNS OF PRAYER”

Fr. Eugene McCaffrey OCD

VIII. PRAYER OF PETITION

It is strange indeed that we should have the strength to move God; but it is our privilege to know that we can do so.

Cardinal Newman

For many people prayer simply means asking things of God. This is perhaps the most common and accepted understanding of prayer. Certainly it finds every encouragement in the Scriptures where we are told to present our needs to God, asking in faith and trusting in his goodness. St Paul's directions are explicit: 'In every need make your requests known to God in prayer and petition'.¹

Our God is a God who gives. He likes giving and wants to share his gifts with us. As God and Father he is attentive to our needs. This is the foundation of all prayer and the basis for our confidence. This is the meaning of St John's saying, 'God is love'² – a meaning caught very beautifully in a saying attributed to St Teresa of Avila: 'He knows all things, he can do all things and he loves me'.

Afraid to ask

Most people pray in times of great distress or in a crisis. 'There are no atheists on a life-raft' was a saying of World War II. When all human help seemed lost, men and women raised their eyes to heaven and prayed. God may not be the 'god of the gaps', but it is often only in the 'gaps', when we come to the end of our own strength, that we begin to acknowledge God's.

Yet prayer is surely more than a last resort, a desperate cry for help when all else has failed. Asking God for help means more than turning to him when we have reached the end of our own resources. The truth is that as long as we live in this valley of tears our constant approach to God must be that of persons in need. We are wayfarers journeying the road of life, carrying ourselves, as St Paul reminds us, 'in vessels of clay'.³ For the blessed in heaven, their normal prayer may be one of praise; for us who are travellers on the way it is the

¹ Philippians 4:6

² 1 John 4:8

³ 2 Corinthians 4:7

prayer of petition. That is why St Thomas Aquinas when he was writing about prayer defined it as ‘asking God for things that are right and fitting’. Simply to ask is to admit our need, our helplessness, our poverty. Prayer is not a matter of hiding our littleness but of presenting it to God in order to receive his healing love and mercy. Our fundamental attitude towards God must always be one of honesty. Prayer is not only a call for help; it is first and foremost an acknowledgment that everything we are and everything we have comes from God.

Nor is it time to say that, since God knows our needs, it is not necessary to ask him. Prayer is not a matter of telling God something he does not know, but rather a way of reminding ourselves of something we so easily forget – that God is God and we are dependent on him. When we ask God for something we bring into the open our real relationship with him: we acknowledge the truth about God and about ourselves. We cannot hide our hearts from God, nor should we try to do so. Rather, as we accept our brokenness and littleness, we make space within our hearts to receive his healing grace.

The Our Father

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray he taught them the Our Father which is one continuous prayer of petition. He taught them to ask for many things: the coming of the Kingdom, the fulfilment of God's will and the everyday necessities of life – daily bread, pardon for faults and deliverance from evil. The Our Father is the prayer of a person who is fully conscious of his fundamental relationship to God, one with his feet firmly on the ground and his face set steadfastly towards God.

In the Gospels we see how Jesus' personal prayer was a reflection of everything he taught his disciples. Many times he turned confidently to his Father in prayer: he prayed with the little children, at the tomb of Lazarus and for Peter that his ‘faith might not fail’.⁴ Chapter seventeen of John's Gospel gives perhaps the most beautiful example of Jesus' own prayer. This prayer is quite remarkable both in its detail and in the number of things for which he prayed. His prayer was personal (he prayed for those who were listening to him, for their unity, their safety, their joy) and yet it was wide enough to embrace all people down through the ages who ‘through their words will believe in me’.⁵

So there is nothing humiliating or demeaning about the prayer of petition. God is our Father and we are never more fully his children than when we turn to him in confident prayer. We stand before him as persons, free and independent, simply acknowledging our own need and his power to help. Indeed, by unveiling ourselves before him, we enter into his creative designs for us; we share, as instruments, in his gentle government of the world.

⁴ Luke 22:31

⁵ John 17:20

A God who cares

Underlying all prayer of petition there must be a firm belief in the providence of God, a strong awareness that God is very much present and active in this world of ours. He is at the innermost heart of all reality, powerfully accomplishing his purpose. He is not an absentee landlord or a remote control officer. He is present to and within his own creation, ultimately involved in all that concerns this world of flesh and blood. This does not mean that God acts wantonly or interferes at random in his own universe. He is the first to respect the laws he himself has made, just as he is the first to honour the freedom and independence he has given us. But it does mean that God cares for each of us, knows us by name and is always moved to order things creatively for our own good: 'look at the lilies of the field and the birds of the air', said Jesus, '... are you not more precious than any of these?'⁶

Every prayer of petition, then, implies an act of faith in the reality of God's presence, a presence that is both immediate and active. It is easy enough to see God's hand in the pleasant things of life. It is not so easy to see it in the more difficult and painful things. And yet 'for all those who love God, all things work together for good'.⁷ St Augustine, reflecting on these words of St Paul in the light of his own experience, added, 'yes, even our sins'. God is the infinitely consummate artist who writes straight with crooked lines, bringing good out of evil, beauty out of chaos and changing Good Friday into Easter Sunday morning.

Unanswered prayer

Many people are distressed by the problem of unanswered prayer. They feel somehow that their prayers should have a magic power to achieve what they ask. They forget the simple fact that some prayers are impossible even for God, either because of the nature of the request or because God loves us too much to grant them. What mother will give her child a knife to play with or let it walk unattended on a busy street, no matter how much the child wants to do so? The truth is that God always answers our prayers with an eye on eternity. He sees beyond the passing need to something deeper and greater. After all, the object of all prayer is to lay hold of God himself and not just his answers. It is not what God gives that we need so much as God himself. 'I am the ground of thy beseeching', God reminded Julian of Norwich.

Someone has rightly said that God answers every prayer – sometimes the answer is 'yes', sometimes it is 'no', sometimes it is 'wait'. And it is the waiting above all that tests our faith.

In the Scriptures there are many examples of unanswered prayers. Moses prayed to enter the promised land and his prayer was not granted. David prayed unavailingly for the life of

⁶ Matthew 6:26-33

⁷ Romans 8:28

his child. Paul too was refused when he asked to be freed from the 'thorn of the flesh'.⁸ Perhaps the strangest refusal of all was in Gethsemane when Jesus asked that the chalice might pass him by. He who said, 'ask and it will be given to you',⁹ did ask and it was not given. At least not then: even Jesus had to wait. Three days later his prayer was answered.

Prayer answered

There are many prayers God wants us to answer ourselves! When we say 'thy will be done', we mean not only by God, but by us as well, here and now. Indeed, many of our prayers are already answered before we ask them. By keeping God's commandments and living our Christian faith we already have the solution to many of our troubles and worries.

It is sometimes said that instead of praying for people, we should do something for them. Instead of praying for the hungry, we should feed them; instead of interceding for the sick, we should nurse them. But one does not exclude the other, and the God to whom we pray is also the source of all food and health and life. At the same time, genuine prayer is always a spur to action. I can hardly pray with full earnestness for another in need if I am not prepared to do everything I can in a practical way to help. St Thomas More expressed this truth very beautifully in one of his favourite prayers: 'the things I pray for, Lord, give me the grace to work for'.

There is nothing too small or unimportant to bring to God in prayer. The golden rule stands: if it is something I can honestly wish for, then I can just as earnestly pray for it. Indeed, it is a good habit to ask God for little things, becoming, as the Gospel invites us, as little children, casting all our care upon the Lord.¹⁰ Often it is our own sense of importance not God's that keeps us from humble, childlike prayer to him.

But in the end, of course, our prayer will be one of gratitude – gratitude that God himself, in his wisdom, sorted out all our requests. For the chances are that, as they stood, they could well have increased our sorrows rather than our joys.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 12:7

⁹ Matthew 7:7

¹⁰ Matthew 18:3; 1 Peter 5:7