

Thoughts on Prayer

In this short piece, I'd like to say four things about the practice of prayer. As people of faith, nothing could be more important than prayer, especially at times like these.

Prayer as an act of alignment

The first thing I want to say is that *prayer is an act of alignment*. Above all, it's an action that shows who we belong to, who we are oriented towards. In our Christian faith we discover that we belong to God. We show that by responding to God's call in the love and obedience of prayer. We align ourselves *to* God and *with* God and *in* God.

How do we align ourselves to God in prayer? For a start, we do it *with our bodies*. I used to think that spiritual concerns like faith and prayer were matters to do with the mind and the heart: but I've come to recognize that faith and prayer are about the whole person, soul *and* body.

One way we embody prayer is by small gestures. We bow our heads: that way, we acknowledge God's greatness and our dependence on Him. We stand up or go down on bended knee. We clasp our hands in front of our chests or we hold them out face upwards. We close our eyes in a turning inwards, away from distractions, or we raise our eyes in a turning upwards and heavenwards. We sign ourselves with the sign of the cross. All of these are external, bodily actions, and they correspond with matters of the soul. For these are actions that signify the bearings of our life. They express and reinforce our ongoing *alignment* towards God.

And we repeat these actions over and over: Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Prayer Cycles, prayer at meals The repetition is not redundant. It is the way we order our lives in a rhythm of *holy timeliness*. For we are creatures in time, and what we do in prayer is, not just give time to God, but acknowledge that *our time is not ours anyway, but God's*, the One who is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

Prayer as paying attention

A second aspect of prayer is that *prayer is an act of paying attention*. It's a way of *making connection* with what is most real. Here we need the language of *the senses*. Prayer is how we learn *to see* at a deeper level, beneath the surface of things. Prayer is how we *hear* God's word of forgiveness and call to holy living. Prayer is how we *taste* the sweetness of God's nourishing word when other conversations have turned stale. Prayer is how we *smell* the incense of God's presence. Prayer is how we *touch* the hem of God's glory and find healing, find ourselves transfigured from one degree of glory to another. *All our senses are involved*, because prayer is about becoming truly attentive and therefore becoming truly alive.

Prayer as protest

Prayer as a practice of alignment. Prayer as a practice of paying attention. Now, prayer as *an act of protest*. Think of Psalm 22: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest.' If prayer is about attending to what matters, then what matters will include pain and suffering, and feelings of abandonment, and fear of the prospect of death. These are part of life: and they are part of Christian life too. They are part of our life in Christ who himself suffered and was abandoned. They are part of our life in God who loves us and cares for us.

But God in Godself is wholly Other, supreme Mystery. Our relationship with God must therefore be one where prayer is a way of *discerning the mystery*. And one way of discerning the mystery is to *ask questions*—profound questions, searching questions, questions with no holds barred. That's why the Bible is full of people arguing with God, questioning God, lamenting their perilous situation, and calling on God to make his presence known. Think of Job, suffering appalling loss and calling on God to justify himself. Think of Jesus in Gethsemane, beseeching God to take the cup of suffering from him; and, from the cross, his cry of God-forsakenness! Think of Paul, asking God three times to take away his 'thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan' (2 Cor 12.7-9)!

We have to be clear about this. To argue with God, to protest about what is going on in our lives or in the world around us, is a proper thing to do. It shows that we care; and it shows that we believe that *God* cares, that God is present to save, whether we feel his presence or not. The prayer of protest is not an act of betrayal, nor is it a sign of unbelief. Rather, it arises out of the strongest faith and the deepest trust.

Growing in prayer

But there is one other aspect of prayer I'd like to talk about. It's *how to grow in prayer*. Here, the most important thing to remember is what Saint Paul says in Romans 8.26: 'we do not know to pray as we ought'! That someone of Paul's spiritual stature can say that is an enormous encouragement to those of us who are only making a start or trying to start again. It's as if Paul is saying that there is a real sense in which *all of us are ever only making a start when it comes to true prayer*. But he's also saying something very important—that *our weakness, our poverty, is God's opportunity*: 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.' And so we are bound to say: 'Thanks be to God!'

Stephen C. Barton.

