

No Time to Pray

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'It's all right for you monks. You live in a monastery, where it's easy to pray. Things are arranged to make it so. But if you live a busy life in the world it's impossible. You're on the go from morning till night. How does anybody think one can pray in those circumstances?' Such is the complaint and one is tempted, as a monk, to point out its false assumptions. That even in a monastery it is not necessarily easy to pray; that it is possible to be very busy even in a monastery; that even in those monasteries in which the pressure of work is less or the conditions more secluded it appears that there is no guarantee that praying will be easy. Whatever the way of life a person leads there would seem to be a strong likelihood that there will be no effective praying unless he is prepared to take vigorous steps to foster it. The cloister no more automatically guarantees a prayerful existence than its lack excludes it. It remains, however, true that there are special problems about praying for those who cannot call upon the helps of the cloister. It is to them that the present writer, although an inhabitant of the cloister, turns his attention. It is for those who dwell elsewhere to pass judgment on what he offers, but, he begs, let them consider that in matters of prayer it is hard to be categorical. One can speak only in relation to one's experiences and to such of the few others as one has been able to hear about. One's assertions must carry the qualifications proper to this kind of knowledge, as the following are intended to do.

WHY PRAY, ANYWAY?

Perhaps one of the causes of prayer being unnecessarily difficult for some people is that they have never considered the reasons for praying. Why, after all, does one pray? It may be simply that one likes praying, or that one cannot desist from praying, and these seem to be excellent reasons. But not everybody would quote them nor does it seem that many would be able to quote them for all their lives. There must, therefore, be other reasons as well. One would be that we crave a release from the encircling and confining world, the world of space and time, of events and uncertainties, from our vain hopes and our useless fears. In prayer one breaks out into a new order of things, freeing oneself from an endless, pointless treadmill of existence, a liberation. A

liberation most of all from oneself, for it is a question of turning away, outward, to someone else and giving one's attention to him, to the forgetting of self. At least this is the aspiration, if only partly the outcome. Yet there may be some to whom it does not come thus. For them no such joyous emancipation, but a prosaic, even a drab, conviction that here is a necessary task and that, come sweet come dry, they must press on relentlessly at the labour. Why for them is prayer a necessity, a necessity at least according to their conviction? It must be because in some way they would think themselves utterly disorientated if they did not pursue it, utterly lost in their bearings with what is true and with what is good. And anyone whose life is lacking such a pole, as seems to be the case with many, would be foolish if he did not seek it and see whether the missing element in his living is not prayer. Nor is it just a question of needing a helping God to call on when one is in trouble, though this we do need. There are also other grounds for prayer. An atheist friend of mine once told me that it was only when he was happy and had no one to thank that he missed God.

KINGDOM COMING

For a Christian prayer is imperative. It is as necessary as breathing. Breathing keeps the natural life going, praying keeps the Christ-life going. 'Your life is hid with Christ in God', yes, but if we cease the communing with Christ and God which is called prayer this life ebbs away and finally comes to an end. 'Pray always', says Christ. So for a Christian prayer is an essential, and every purposing Christian knows it, but is often, so often, perplexed and bothered because he can apparently make no progress in it.

It may be that he is incurring an undue hampering of his prayer by a too inadequate conception of Christ. We shall, of course, never have an adequate conception of him until we see him when he comes again 'to judge the living and the dead', but there are certain inadequacies, as unnecessary as they are gross, with which we can be rid here and now. One of them, and a particularly prevalent and damaging one at the present, is the failure to see the Christ as one who is to come, as well as having come, to see him, as the Bible says, as 'Jesus Christ yesterday and today and the same for ever'. Do we not tend to think of him as one surviving, somewhat precariously, out of the past? But he is rather one towards whom we are moving into the future. He is before, as well as behind, us. We are, all of us, going to see him.

The life of the Christian is led in the world of space and time and

human events but its source and inspiration and goal is the transcendent Jesus, risen from the dead, alive. He has withdrawn from our eyes but he is there ever living. Furthermore he is returning to us. All the events of life are leading towards that return. We shall, all of us, see him, whether as the terrible condemning Judge or as the gentle consoling Master. The context of our prayer should then not be that of those who are struggling to keep alive something fading out of the past, but of those who are striving to be alert and watchful to what is dawning to them from the future. 'I say unto you, *watch* and pray'. And because all the events of life are under the control of the Christ—'all power is given to me in heaven and earth'—all the events of life are in some way leading up to his second coming. Therefore it is not so much a question for us, how 'we can get away from things' in order to pray, but how we can so live among the daily tasks as to find in them the path to him to whom all things in some way lead. Is there any way of making the circumstances of life unite us with God instead of, as apparently so often happens, turning us away from him? The following sections contain some suggestions about this.

DEPENDENCE

The first thing we need is one particular conviction and a firm one at that. It is not something that one must necessarily think about often. We may do this, and find it helpful to do so, but we need not, always provided we have it as a real conviction and one in view of which all our actions are undertaken. This is the conviction, held with certainty, that we depend on God and that we depend on him for everything. This conviction some people learn to have in their earliest days. To others it comes, suddenly or gradually, later in life. Others, however, do not easily acquire it. And yet it is really a most simple idea. It is the converse of the recognition that one's existence is contingent, something that need not happen and certainly need not go on happening. It is extraordinary how few people seem to have any sharp recognition of this. So many seem to carry about with them the assumption that things will go on. They know they will die. They know too that there may be a nuclear holocaust of humanity. But they do not seem to doubt that, whatever the future has in store, something will go on existing, even if not they. Yet there is no ground for assurance that it will be so, unless God gives us signs that he wills it. Everything finite in its being depends on him. Without his power creating it it is nothing and it is being created by him all the time that it exists, not just when it begins to be.

With this awareness of total dependence on God one can have no plausible pretensions to self-assurance or self-sufficiency. One must recognise that one is simply in his hands. Fall ill fall well, it is as he disposes. There is nothing one can do about it—except pray. One can beg him and thank him and adore him and remonstrate with him. All this, although we do not know what will come back out of it. But it will be worthwhile, if only to enable us to go on making something of life.

But now, given a conviction of dependence on God, given the sense of a need for praying, what can the busy man do? How do we suggest that he solve his problem about the difficulty of falling to prayer? Perhaps one should here distinguish two difficulties, the first being 'when am I going to find a moment to pray?', the second, 'here I am, kneeling down to pray, what on earth am I going to do?' These two problems are often connected, of course, for one can, consciously or unconsciously, let praying get squeezed out of life because one does not seem to be able to do anything definite with it as with other things. It may seem more profitable to turn to activities to which, we persuade ourselves, we see results. However the two problems are not identical and can best be tackled separately.

'When am I going to find a moment to pray?' Whoever you are, you'll have to make one. It won't just happen. At all events you can't count on that. You'll have to make it and probably keep on making it. Prayer is something which involves choice and often also determination. We don't, most of us anyway, just bumble into it. But again there are different reasons why it is hard to find the moment to pray. One reason may be that one's daily routine is very full, another that it is very empty. In the latter case to omit prayer is just downright sloth. There is no excuse and no use trying to pretend there is. There is nothing for it but to pull oneself together and make an act of contrition and a fresh start, thanking our Lord that he has not yet come, as one day he will, 'as a thief in the night' and caught us wanting. Or it may be that the timetable is very full. It can be too full, leaving no time for necessary things like praying and attending to other human beings. If so, we must change it. Otherwise we are trying to be like machines and it was not for this that we were created. There are periods of emergency when we are rightly 'all out' for a time. If we allow them to become the normal condition of life then we are wasting life. Everyone needs opportunity for refreshment of soul, of mind, of body. That is why the Sabbath is a divine command. But short of this one's timetable may be very well stocked. Often, however, with such people there are, as part

of the timetable, set times for prayer, and if not these can without excessive trouble be created. Of course, as for everybody, an effort, a willingness not to be enticed away by alternative attractions or deterred by even real weariness, is necessary. But if this is forthcoming there should occur a strongly faithful performance of prayer and this will help to make possible the habit of frequent instantaneous prayers during the day as well as, at least in time, a degree of steady attention to God for longer stretches.

However if such persons are to make progress they must face our other question, 'How, when I do get down to it, am I to pray?' It is likely that they will need to adopt some definite method to help train themselves to attend effectively to God. Some form of meditation seems likeliest to be most suitable, the filling first of the mind with scenes from the life of Christ or the saints or of Bible events in order to have a basis on which to make to God those acts of faith and love and sorrow for sin which form the prayer itself. But any method which seems to stimulate devotion would be suitable. There is it seems no universal rule here. Each must try to find the way best suited to him. But, whether it be by the use of a set meditation book, or some other book, especially the Bible, or by thinking about scenes of sacred history or by looking at sacred images, when once the necessary occupying of the mind has been achieved, care must be taken to see that it always issues into some sort of devotion of the self, of the will; otherwise it will not have been true prayer but only a more or less pious bout of day-dreaming.

ON THE GO ALL DAY

But the great problem seems to be for those whose timetable is uncontrollable and open to an indefinite number of calls; housewives, those who look after children or the sick, those who are seldom alone, those whose services may be called upon at any time, such as doctors and the pastoral clergy. The latter, of course, should make unremitting efforts to secure those essential times of prayer, without which all the efforts of their ministry will be largely or wholly useless. With them we are not primarily concerned but with the others. What are they to do?

The first thing they must do is to make sure of a practice which is likely to be of inestimable importance to anyone who is seeking to pray more intensively. They must see to it that the first and the last moments of consciousness in the day are given to God in prayer. It is

not a question necessarily of long periods of, or of elaboration in formulating, the prayers, but of an utterly complete and sincere handing over of oneself, in whatever words or sentiments come most naturally, to God. We all need to do this, but those whose days are intensely busy need it absolutely. It requires that we seize hold of our consciousness at those delicate moments of its birth or passing away for the day, and give it to God. In this way the chances of our being able to seize on available moments of prayer during the day or of our using them well are immensely enhanced. There is a disciplining in this which is bound to give us strength. Moreover, to have its best effect it must be coupled with self-discipline in the matters of going to bed and getting up, that is, of performing these acts without hesitation at the times when we ought to do them. We suffer great reluctance in this, many of us, but the effort to overcome it, even if not always successful, will help us to pray. For prayer needs self-denial if it is ever to get off the ground. Otherwise it is like a bird whose wings have been clipped. It merely hops about impotently.

But supposing the busy person has adopted this practice or is striving to do so, has he thereby done all he needs to do? Well, he has made a good start and, even if he normally does not manage much more, he does well, provided he is faithful to this essential foundation. But there is more that he can reasonably be expected to do. He can carry out his job for God, his daily work, and try to offer it when he begins and ends a piece of work. At moments when his attention is free he can give his work, and himself through it, to God. This may well be very costing in effort but its results will be of immeasurable value. It brings about an increase of union with God which can in time deepen into something far greater than is at first believed possible. He can make what are called 'arrow' prayers, the shooting of a thought, a desire, a dedication, a sentiment, at God, swiftly, instantaneously. None of these things need be, in fact can hardly be, elaborate or complex. The simpler and purer the glance, the better. But the aim is to foster as habitual an attention to God as can be maintained. This cannot be won quickly, it seems, or easily, by some at least, and it cannot be forced. But it can be quietly and determinedly worked for. A busy friend of mine told me, 'It is this lifting up and staying near God all day which is so important and it is helped by set prayer times if they can be found. This seems so easy that anyone can do it, however busy, if educated or not, and even ill people can do it'. If some are sceptical of all this, let them at least try before they reject, even if they have tried before. There may be some-

thing to encourage them in what comes in the following section. What can be said for all, is that any attempt at recollection, the gathering and focussing of one's powers, is not going to be at all easy, if even possible, when attempting to pray, if there are no other occasions in life when one tries to discipline and concentrate one's thoughts, one's images, one's desires.

THE SPIRIT OF GOD

'The raising of the mind and heart to God', so the Catechism defined prayer in a phrase that seems simple but, the more we seek to pray, becomes more baffling. This is right. Prayer is mysterious, for it is supernatural. We cannot knock on the door of eternity and expect to hear the echo. As supernatural, prayer is scarcely going to be without difficulty. We should console ourselves thereby. But let us do more. Let us remember that in prayer we are not operating alone. God is in it. He starts it all off in fact. It is the heavenly Father who sends his divine Spirit into our hearts, conforming them to Jesus Christ and putting us ever in mind of him. In and through Jesus we have our prayer. Its worth is derived from his, for he is 'the one mediator of God and man'. Does this imply that we must always think of Christ when we pray? It does not seem so, and Christian practice would appear not to require it. Nonetheless it is often a very great help to have a conscious reference to him in our prayer and especially to practise that loving, watchful expectation of his second coming that has been mentioned.

But it is in the power of the Holy Spirit that we know Christ now and this divine Spirit guides us effectively in proportion to our sensitivity to his gentle touch. We need to become supple to his prompting, as Mary the mother of Jesus was—'Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to thy word'. With this she accepted, fully and eagerly, the Christ in all his power. Perhaps she did not see clearly all that was to follow, but this would show more surely the completeness of her self-abandonment to God's plan. Our last glimpse of her on earth is of one joining with the disciples in prayer, prayer for the Spirit to come, as he did at Pentecost. We need a like fidelity, a like waiting on the Spirit of God.

Moreover it is commonly held doctrine that Mary seconds all our prayers, at least that she begs for us all our supernatural helps. This does not imply that we always have to address ourselves to her when we pray or that we ever have to do so. Many say that they do not find it easy to pray to her. If this is so, it is better they should not force a

practice that must be spontaneous if it is to be genuine. It is worth trying it, however, from time to time. The effect may surprise and reassure them. For anyone who wishes to make his prayer often, or even usually, with the Mother of God in mind, he need not fear to do so. It is an excellent way and has the Church's blessing. Nor need there be any hesitation on the ground that there lacks a theological basis to such devotion. It is on the contrary well founded in Christian faith. Our redemption is effected in Jesus Christ becoming man, living, suffering, dying, rising from the dead, and ascending to heaven for us. This catena of mysteries forms the totality of the act of Christ, the great redemptive act, the *economy* of salvation. What gives it its force is his resurrection, in view of which all else is done. This totality of the mystery of Christ is one single divine-human act and Mary is God's instrument when he sets it in train. She is the willing furtherer of his purposes in consenting to become the mother of the Christ, however much or little she may have seen their outcome. Her complete dedication to and involvement in her Son's redemptive act, including her own early share in the resurrection as assumed into heaven, constitutes her a permanent and universal agent in the establishment of the kingdom of God, subordinate indeed to the Saviour of the world from whom all her merits come, but above all the other members of the kingdom. There is no reason, therefore, why we should not always make our access to it through her. There is no obligation to do this, just as there is no need to refrain from doing it, if we are so minded. It is in such matters that true liberty of spirit is to be maintained.

Our final thought on this matter of prayer might be the cheering one that in prayer, as in few other matters, to try is to succeed. It remains, therefore, for each to try.

THE CONSCIENCE OF THE SIXTIES

'Blackfriars' and the London Circle of the Newman Association announce a series of lectures on the above theme, to be given by Fr Kenelm Foster, Professor J. M. Cameron, Peter Benenson, Maryvonne Butcher, Elizabeth Jennings, Patrick Reyntiens and others. The lectures will take place at 31 Portman Square on Thursdays at 8 p.m., beginning on September 27th. Admission will be free for subscribers to 'Blackfriars' and 'Life of the Spirit' and for members of the Newman Association, otherwise 2s. 6d.