

SESSION

2

Prayer

SESSION 2: PRAYER

Extract from *Catching Fire*

The simplest description of prayer is one that comes from St Augustine: Prayer is communication with God. And the way we each do this is as unique as we are. To grow the capacity of Prayer is to nurture a personal relationship with Jesus, through the Spirit and held in the Godhead – God the Father. It requires seeking out and regular practice in a personal prayer style that is connective and real. The place of prayer in Jesus' life was non-negotiable, even in the midst of demanding crowds. His deep and nurtured connection to God was his centre, his heart. We too are called into relationship to discover the deep peace and wordless reality of God's ever-present love. There are many forms of prayer and ways to pray. Here, we are giving focus to the personal rather than public forms, and the best place to go to seek a way to pray for yourself is the prayer traditions within our rich Church history. These include *lectio divina*, Christian meditation and the contemplative traditions.

1. Chapter extract: "Personal Prayer" by Bishop James Cuskelly

Personal Prayer

Our spiritual lives begin with faith in a God who loves us. This love is sheer grace, gift of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us. The grateful acknowledgement of these truths is itself a prayer as we open our minds and hearts to the Spirit of God.

Walking the way of Jesus

Faith and prayer are bound together. A living faith naturally expresses itself in prayer; faith needs to be nourished by prayer if it is to remain alive. Prayer is very much a matter of individual choice and personal taste. However, there are some ways of praying which should be part of everyone's prayer life – such as the Our Father, the prayer that Jesus taught us. One of the oldest forms of prayer is called *lectio divina* or 'divine reading' – a prayerful reading of Scripture.

The Church recommends the reading of the Word of God as a source of Christian prayer, and at the same time exhorts all to discover the deep meaning of Sacred Scripture through prayer.

In the Bible, too, we find one of the easiest and most natural ways of praying – the 'Eucharistic' prayer. We all know that 'Eucharist' comes from a Greek word meaning 'to give thanks' and for many Catholics it has come to be identified with the Mass. But Eucharistic prayers existed long before Jesus and generally they contained four steps in an easy and natural method of prayer:

1. The Eucharistic prayer begins with a 'calling to mind'. We recall all that God has done for us – 'the wonderful works of God'. It is most moving to take part in prayer sessions in some countries where the people are very poor. A superficial observer would say that they have nothing for which to give thanks. Yet they spend quite some time in thanking God – for life, for health, for love, for Jesus Christ and all that he has done for us. Then we begin to understand why St Paul so stressed the value of gratitude for the spiritual life.
2. Having recalled what God has done for us, we pass naturally to the further steps of praising the goodness of God, and giving thanks for all that God has done.
3. Furthermore, as we call to mind God's blessings, we are filled with confidence and trust: 'So long thy power hath blessed me sure it still will lead me on'.³¹

4. We then come to the final part of the Eucharistic prayer. As we have called to mind God's blessings, we ask God to keep in mind all the blessed, to watch over us and to help us in our need.

Some prayers, which we learned in childhood, may need to be changed as our theological vision changes. For example, the act of faith that I learned went something like this: 'O my God, I believe all that Thou hast taught because Thou art truth itself. I believe all that the Catholic Church believes and teaches'. In itself, there is merit in this prayer. However, an act of faith flowing more naturally from the vision of God's love would run something like this: 'O my God, I believe in your love, the love that gave me life, the love that redeemed me, the love that guides me.'

Time given to prayer will vary from one person to another. Cardinal Newman gave some advice on prayer, which is still very practical today:

Watch and pray and meditate, that is, according to the leisure which God has given you. Give freely of your time to your Lord and Saviour, if you have it. If you have little, show your sense of the privilege by giving that little. But anyhow show that your heart and desires show that your life is with your God. Set aside every day times for seeking him...I am not calling on you to go out of the world or to abandon your duties in the world, but to redeem the time; not to give hours to mere amusement or society, while you give minutes to Christ.

Taste varies, too, from one person to another. I presume to quote a few prayers that appeal to me. The first three come from the Breviary:

WALKING THE WAY OF JESUS

Lord God, in your wisdom you created us,
By your providence you rule us;
Penetrate our inmost being with your holy light,
So that our way of life may always be one of faithful service to you.
Let your people's cry come into your loving presence, Lord,
Forgive them their sins,
So that by your grace they may be devoted to your service
And rest secure under your protecting hand.
Our heart's desire to love Thee, Lord,
Watch over while we sleep.

From the Mass for Australia Day comes an inspiring Australian prayer:

*God, powerful and gentle,
You love this southern land
And all its peoples, old and new.
As the Cross shines in our heavens
So may Christ bring light to our nation,
As the waves encircle our shores
So may your mercy enfold us all.
May the God who formed our southern land
Be for us a rock of strength.
May the God who rules our southern seas
Keep us safe in every storm.
May the God who made our southern skies
Turn our darkness into light.*

Those looking for a prayer to the Holy Spirit could hardly do better than the Canberra meeting of the World Council of Churches which proposed this prayer:

Spirit of light: let your wisdom shine on us.
Spirit of silence: make us aware of God's presence.
Spirit of courage: dispel the fear in our hearts.
Spirit of fire: inflame us with Christ's love.
Spirit of peace: help us to be still and listen to God's Word.
Spirit of joy: inspire us to proclaim the Good News.
Spirit of love: help us to open ourselves to the needs of others.
Spirit of power: give us your help and your strength.
Spirit of truth: guide us in the way of Christ. Amen.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that 'the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him.'

One well-known prayer that stresses the presence of God is this:

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouths of friends and strangers.*

2. Article: "Mystic or Unbeliever" by Ron Rolheiser

A generation ago, Karl Rahner made the statement that there would soon come a time when each of us will either be a mystic or a non-believer.

What is implied here?

At one level it means that anyone who wants to have faith today will need to be much more inner-directed than in previous generations. Why? Because up until our present generation in the secularized world, by and large, the culture helped carry the faith. We lived in cultures (often immigrant and ethnic subcultures) within which faith and religion were part of the very fabric of life. Faith and church were embedded in the sociology. It took a strong, deviant action not to go to church on Sunday. Today, as we know, the opposite is more true; it takes a strong, inner-anchored act to go to church on Sunday. We live in a moral and ecclesial diaspora and experience a special loneliness that comes with that. We have few outside supports for our faith.

The culture no longer carries the faith and the church. Simply put, we knew how to be believers and church-goers when we were inside communities that helped carry that for us, communities within which most everyone seemed to believe, most everyone went to church, and most everyone had the same set of moral values. Not incidentally, these communities were often immigrant, poor, under-educated, and culturally marginalized. In that type of setting, faith and church work more easily. Why? Because, among other reasons, as Jesus said, it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.

To be committed believers today, to have faith truly inform our lives, requires finding an inner anchor beyond the support and security we find in being part of the cognitive majority wherein we have the comfort of knowing that, since everyone else is doing this,

it probably makes sense. Many of us now live in situations where to believe in God and church is to find ourselves without the support of the majority and at times without the support even of those closest to us, spouse, family, friends, and colleagues. That's one of the things that Rahner is referring to when he says we will be either mystics or non-believers.

But what is this deep, inner-anchor that is needed to sustain us? What can give us the support we need?

What can help sustain our faith when we feel like unanimity-minus-one is an inner centre of strength, meaning, and affectivity that is rooted in something beyond what the world thinks and what the majority are doing on any given day? There has to be a deeper source than outside affirmation to give us meaning, justification, and energy to continue to do what faith asks of us. What is that source?

In the gospel of John, the first words out of Jesus' mouth are a question: What are you looking for? Essentially everything that Jesus does and teaches in the rest of John's gospel gives an answer to that question: We are looking for the way, the truth, the life, living water to quench our thirst, bread from heaven to satiate our hunger. But those answers are partially abstract. At the end of the gospel, all of this is crystallized into one image:

On Easter Sunday morning, Mary Magdala goes out searching for Jesus. She finds him in a garden (the archetypal place where lovers meet) but she doesn't recognize him. Jesus turns to her and, repeating the question with which the gospel began, asks her: What are you looking for? Mary replies that she is looking for the body of the dead Jesus and could he give her any information as to where that body is. And Jesus simply says: "Mary". He pronounces her name in love. She falls at his feet.

In essence, that is the whole gospel: What are we ultimately looking for? What is the end of all desire? What drives us out into gardens to search for love? The desire to hear God pronounce our names in love. To hear God, lovingly say: "Mary". "Jack". "Jennifer". "David".

Several years ago, I made a retreat that began with the director telling us: "I'm only going to try to do one thing with you this week, I'm going to try to teach you how to pray so that sometime (perhaps not this week or perhaps not even this year, but sometime) in prayer, you will open yourself up in such a way that you can hear God say to you - I love you! - because unless that happens you will always be dissatisfied and searching for something to give you a completeness you don't feel. Nothing will ever be quite right. But once you hear God say those words, you won't need to do that restless search anymore"?

He's right. Hearing God pronounce our names in love is the core of mysticism and it is too the anchor we need when we face misunderstanding from without and depression from within, when we feel precisely like unanimity-minus-one.