

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Teach Us To Pray

We're always being assured that prayer is an essential part of being religious, and that getting our prayer right is a central thing. What do we think about prayer, what does it mean to us?

The Presence Of God

I think a great element in prayer is our trust in the *presence* of God. We have to believe that God is paying us attention. Just getting this fixed in our mind is hard. We know how the presence of another person concentrates our mind and alerts us to what we want to say, how we want to be, in their presence. If the Prime Minister came to ask us what we wanted the Government to do for us, we should prepare carefully and say realistic and positive things. If the person we most love comes to see us, we are instantly on the top line, determined to say and do our best to impress and communicate our feelings as accurately as we can. In the presence of God, we must learn how to open our whole heart honestly, unreservedly. It isn't as if God is a stranger to us. He is our Maker, and he has the power to be our Redeemer as well; he is our lifegiver, and he will be our restorer as well. We can have no plans or hopes that don't concern him; we can have no fears or anxieties that cannot be solved by his power.

Our Whole Self

No-one else more deserves such openness from us; and in this confiding of our whole self, God himself already makes us whole. The act of prayer can only happen because of the working of grace, the actual drawing power of the Holy Spirit. Concealment, or falseness, is entirely foreign to the spirit of prayer; we can find rest in praying, precisely because God is at home with us, and we have our home in him. The infinite power of God to heal us and promise life to us means that all our needs are met, all our longing is quieted, when we are in him and he is in us. This wholeness is vital to us, and it is a gift which no other hand can give. People seek for wholeness in so many places, trying to find it in one or other department of their nature. A philosopher tries to unite his whole experience by inventing a system of thought which will include everything in one act of understanding; an artist will try to create an image which will embrace the whole of life; a politician will try to create a mode of

government which answers all needs....and so on. But none of us possesses the power to unite even one human life in all its facets and potential, all its positive and negative parts. For this, we require something greater than we are, whose power is responsible for our being, and capable of supplying meaning to everything we experience. Our best friend, our most faithful lover can't do this. Only God suffices us in this need. Prayer is our coming to ask for this ultimate meaning, in which lies hidden the way to peace in our actual life, the one we're living today.

Asking And Accepting

In the Genesis story today Abraham asks God to be God. That's one prayer that will always be heard! If you think about the greatest need you have, you might come to believe that, *if God is God*, it will be granted. So it would be easy to turn all our prayerful requests into simple praise: Not *Lord, grant your mercy*, but *We praise you, God, because of your great mercy*. The Lord's Prayer asks for the bread of life to be given, but it could as easily say *Blessed are you Lord, king of eternity, who bring forth bread from the earth*. We say *Do not lead us into the time of testing*, but we could say instead *You lead us beside the waters of peace*. Even Jesus, as he is shown to us praying in Gethsemane, makes his prayer our example: *Take this cup from me: but not as I will, but your will be done*.

No Self-Indulgence

Clearly in prayer there is self-sacrifice. We give over our anxieties, hopes, concerns, and love into the hand of God. It's for him to say which way the future lies for us. There's no place for us to make conditions or to set priorities. You can only lose the burdens if you deliver all things to God, who in any case already holds your life in his hand. Prayer is simply entering into that truth, and finding it a source of utter peace. There's nowhere else safe for you, no other place of rest. I'm always hearing the same thing from people who have learned this: *What do people do when they don't have any faith?* I'm not sure I know. But I'm consoled to think that I can pray for them - pray, that is, on their behalf, pray because they can't pray. God still saves us as a people. Let's do what we can to make ourselves a people of prayer, so that our trust and peace may bless the others. *Fr Philip*