

A VOYAGE ROUND MY PRAYER

I think that the first task before me today is to take a hard, sincere look at the way I pray, and I invite you to do the same. When we've done this for a while, we might have the privilege of hearing the experience of others, and of letting them see something of ours. So there will be time after this short talk to think, and then a time to talk together in small groups. I'm the person who has to talk in a big group, and that makes me feel, as always, very exposed.

Variety

You haven't come away this weekend without some kind of taste for prayer. No-one is here who is indifferent to the possibility of meeting God. Having said that, I do not think any denomination of Christianity more deserves the name "Catholic" than this one; we are a people of extraordinary variety. The eleven nations represented here are only a tiny tranche of the almost one billion Catholics who are in communion with us; but even here you will find people united in faith who are emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, physically, and socially quite extraordinarily diverse.

This is truly wonderful, a source of great joy and fruitfulness. If we could be granted to taste the flavour of each person's prayer, we would see the face each turns towards heaven, and we would be filled with love for these praying people, as God the Father is moved with such tremendous compassion when our own prayer reaches him. Has anyone ever spoken to you from the heart without moving you deeply?

But one in Christ

The variety between people flowers in their prayer, and it is an especially marvellous thing to notice how prayer can be thoroughly *Christian*, in its obedience and attention to Christ, and at the same time thoroughly *personal*, expressing the life in which it is flowing with perfect exactness. This is certainly because all people are created in God's image, refracted and mingled so variously in each, and because Christ is the perfect, the full image of the unseen God. John tells us that

Through him all things came to be: not one thing had its being except through him.

All that came to be, had life in him
life that is the light of men

So in seeking to know the quality of my prayer, I am simultaneously asking to know my self. I turn my face to the Father, and he sees in me what he sees in Christ. Reflecting Christ-in-me means coming to the Father as his son - or daughter - and this should be readily possible for us: since it is God who calls us into being, we should find it not unnatural to respond to him, who chose us before we were, and wanted us to be in his presence. His wanting our existence and his wanting our presence are one single thing. Our acceptance of the gift of life and our acceptance of the gift of the Father's love can

be one thing too.

Reading: Ezek 47:1-12

Think of the image of the stream I don't think of Baptism as a bath or a pool in the past. I think of it as a stream in the present. To know and love God is the purpose of our *making*; we have to make God the purpose of our *being*; and I think that is something greater than making God the purpose of our *living*. To live in the presence of God today is important; but that ought to flow from a deep consecration of ourselves to God, not dependent on the decisions of one particular day or time. This consecration has happened in our Baptism, which is called a *rebirth*; and we might like to think of praying as an entry into the stream of our baptismal life, It doesn't stop flowing in us, it is ready to give life and refresh our strength, and it is ready also to seep uselessly into the sands of the desert.

To find this spring of living water we need to recognise our daily thirst for what it really is. Every day several times we are thirsty; but deep down we are always thirsting. Perhaps the stream is flowing underground. It runs deep, below the droughts and floods of our superficial experience; it can never run dry, because it is sourced in the depths of the love of God for us, which is our stake in eternity.

In his vision, Ezekiel sees this stream flowing from the sanctuary of God. He is asked to *wade across* the stream - to immerse himself in it again and again, until he senses that it is not the small stream he first saw, but a river too mighty for him to control or conquer. In this there is a depth and glory of imagery: the power of the stream is not for him only, but to give life to all the others - to all the world - and medicine to the nations. When we approach God, we do not leave behind us the fate of the world, or its needs. Instead, we carry them with us, to the place where they, and we, belong. There is something about praying that cuts out the trivia, and brings us where we ought to be.

All that I am saying to you demands your faith. These are realities in which I believe, and which I can identify from my real experience. But I'm not asking you to believe in me and my experience, but to *test* the truth of the promises of God for yourself, to commit yourself to them and see if he is faithful to his promise. Perhaps you have received a sense of God's faithfulness that comes with, or through, other things; we are struck by the eternity in the images of the world, in beautiful music or art, in the wonder of a human being. But these are mediated experiences. Prayer is the attempt to find God himself, in an encounter, in a journey undertaken for him alone. We can call it a search, a pilgrimage, the entry into solitude, the offering of sacrifice, a retreat. In all of this we encounter *God Alone*, as opposed to God in his works. We could explore the idea of purity, of freely giving ourselves to God without any admixture of selfish motive. When you seek to give your life to another person, this kind of purity is essential. You must trust each other; you can't survive on mutual jealousy. You must be generous: you can't replace that with shared greed. You must long for, and suffer for, the happiness of the other person, and it is no substitute to think you can simply share your selfishnesses and hope for the best. Prayer, all the more, demands an attempt to relate perfectly; this is the one situation where at least one side of the relationship will not fall short!

May I suggest that in your thought about prayer today you find the things which make relating to God *different* from all the other relationships? In our faith, we necessarily

speak in human terms about God. We call him Father, we speak of his closeness and friendship, his care and faithfulness, and these are all things we love in one another. But God is not another one among many other persons we know. God is the One who founds us *and* all we know, he is the reason for us and all we know, and he is our final destination.

Accordingly, prayer ought to welcome and treasure the things which mark this relationship as *unique*. Our language, of course, remains the fallible vehicle it always is. I am always expecting to hear in hymns and sermons the language of commercial promotion (*God, you are soft, and strong, and very long can't be far away*). We have to find in ourselves a language for the one we worship, to whom we pray. It has to be at once a way of relating that is deeply personal - absolutely *me* - and capable of conveying the sacred, the utterly holy.