

Prayer

In discussing the possibilities for this retreat, we came to the conclusion that to talk about prayer was the first necessity.

I discover that I don't do this easily. Prayer is the most intensely personal thing, and there is no way, I think, in which anyone could be *trained* to talk about it. When I listen to other people attempting to do this, I am filled with unease, because I am afraid they might be talking for the sake of talking, that they might be forced into dishonesty by the need to say something, anything, even if it is simply what people want to hear, or what they personally think ought to be true. It's often said that people who are always talking about their sex-lives probably haven't got one, and I guess I feel the same about people who are always talking about their prayer-life.

Having said that, it's obvious that a priest who is tentative about saying anything on prayer is a useless priest, and particularly a useless Chaplain, so here goes!

Prayer is an act of the real person

There's a line in Pope's famous poem about a great eighteenth-century house which sticks in my mind. He is describing the way in which every reality in the estate is recruited in order to express the wealth, taste, and splendour of its noble proprietor. He is not very sympathetic to this magnificent man; but nowhere is he more cutting than in his description of the religious provisions.

*And now the Chapel's silver bell you hear
That summons you to all the pride of prayer.
Light quirks of music, broken and uneven,
Make the soul dance upon a jig to heaven.
On painted ceilings you devoutly stare,
Upon the ceiling's gilded state you stare,
Where sprawl the saints of Verrio and Laguerre,
On gilded clouds in fair expansion lie,
And bring all paradise before your eye.
To rest, the cushion and soft Dean invite,
Who never mentions Hell to ears polite.*

Prayer is a carefully-engineered piece of personal and communal theatre, a contrived piece of theme-park "experience", which shares in the same meretricious falsity of the whole expensive sham.

The thought is not original: a more august voice warned us against "the pride of prayer" in these words:

In your prayer do not imitate the hypocrites who love to say their prayers standing up in synagogues and at street corners for people to see them. In truth I tell you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.

The first point I want to make is therefore about the *sincerity* that is necessary for prayer. Prayer is an experience which is interior; and it is therefore susceptible to any distortions that plague our inner life. In the privacy of our own mind, we can

distort horribly: we know how imagined insults or slights can fester, how wrong opinions and ridiculous judgments can take possession of us, safe as they are from the winds of truth that blow in the external forum. We are free, if we want, to embark in our minds on a voyage of fantasy, that takes us away from the realities of our life.

Prayer is never such a fantasy-trip, but a journey into complete honesty – if necessary, brutal honesty. We have a tremendous capacity for self-deception, and it is at its most dangerous in the realm of prayer. The god who meets us in that fantasy-world is a figment of our own imagining, and such a god is known as an idol, and the worship of an idol is forbidden by the first of all the commandments.

Real prayer is, by contrast, the most strictly *truthful* experience we have. In it we face up to the worst and the best things in us and in others and in the world. I reckon you could say that the first condition for real prayer is the determination to face truth, to tolerate no hint of deceit or circumlocution in the experience. This is not a picnic, and we have to recognize that it may be draughty and uncomfortable, even painful, to do it. We do not enjoy unwelcome truths, and the world sometimes forces them on us with tears and sweat. Learning to *choose* truth, welcome or unwelcome, in the privacy and freedom of our own mind, has to have a powerful motive behind it.

The one reason we can afford to do this painful thing is the presence in the experience of the loving God who made the universe, and who has called us to be in it, and to live in his presence by this prayer. I think that every experience of prayer should be envisaged as our response to a specific invitation from God; it is he who calls us to pray, it is a grace from him that we even think of doing it, and the fact that we have come to do it is a sign that he has invited us.

Let's consider what prayer can be like, in the light of that idea, that God is asking us, here and now, to pray, to come into his presence.

A great question is, *who is the person that God is inviting?* What is the quality of the person, what sort of life, what state of mind and heart? Let's think of some actual situations: suppose someone is in a state of great happiness, having discovered a great treasure: suppose someone in love, who has discovered their love is welcomed and reciprocated. It is the end of the day, and there is nothing more to be done, except to turn to rest. The Lord's invitation to prayer is received and understood, and suddenly all this happiness and hope is lifted into the sight of God, who shows us his face in the people we learn to love. The knowledge that it is God who draws us to love gives to prayer at this moment a tremendous intimacy, as the love for the creature is shared with the Creator. No-one is involved in the way God is involved; indeed, the experience of love is the experience of God, because God is love. This is therefore an archetypally appropriate place for prayer, and we can truly say that an experience of loving which does not include prayer has failed in its primary purpose, and missed out on its most precious gift. To love the creature, and *not* go from there to loving and being loved by the Creator, would be only half the journey.

The power and intimacy of a realization like that has implications for the dark side of human experience too. When our nature is at odds with our experience, and we are in pain, disappointment, frustration, senselessness, confusion, even total personal paralysis, there is a sense in which God is the only place we can go. The experience is too sharp to be ignored or circumvented; we have stumbled across the terrifying fact that our life can lose its way, we can forget how to be ourselves, we can lose the sense of our value. The ordinary relationships are not working, and we have lost our appetite for the game. To return to the Author of our being, to ask for God's word to be spoken to us, is the *only* appropriate course. The ability of the bereaved to

understand this fact is well-known. I may say that from personal experience: again and again I watch people who have been dreading a funeral, for instance, discovering that once they have dragged themselves across the threshold of the Church, the burden seems to lift, and they realise they are at last in the right place, the only place that can help them to make sense.

I can also say that life in the seminary can get pretty frustrating and negative. Seminaries have to lead their members to pray, as part of their essential work. The seminary student has to face himself, and lay his life open to the judgment of God, if he is to get any sense of what God is asking of him. This is a terrific thing to ask of anyone who's been used to finding meaning in other people, in measurable achievements, and so on. In a community that can get uncomfortably close and challenging, the temperature of the process can become quite oppressive; and the act of leaving behind the arguments, spats, disagreements, to say nothing of the accompanying sheer plod of scholarly work, and to get inside the church and kneel is one of the most liberating, relaxing experiences. Here the questioning can give way to simple presence of Father to son. It is not that the tension is no longer there. It is only that the gaze of God is peaceful, and this peace becomes a gift which makes bearable the tension.

People who do not have faith assume that our coming into the presence of God is a negative or fearful business. They are showing their ignorance. It's true that, for imperfect and timebound creatures, the contemplation of God's eternal perfection can be a huge strain on self-esteem. But we come to God, not so that he can find us guilty, but so that he can tell us why we are as we are (whatever that may happen to be). After all, God is the one who actually chose us to be as we are. No-one else did. If we want to receive unqualified affirmation of our *being* (as opposed to our opinions, our prejudices, our actions or omissions) no-one else can give us what we are seeking except God. Others may love us for our opinions and even our prejudices; for our personal qualities, talents, or looks; they can't give us the affirmation that the Creator can. If we come to accept ourselves in his presence, we can then be freer to acknowledge the shortcomings in the voluntary sector of our living. God may have reservations about our choices, but he never repents of *his* decision to create us. This makes his presence the most positive of all environments for us to be in. To enter his presence with an open heart is to bathe in the unconditional favour of his eternal love. This does not require words or concepts, any more than a pair of lovers require them; the presence of each to the other is all.

Furthermore, when our deeds or omissions require to be judged, this too is done without the need for words or concepts. Accepting the underlying, overriding love which God has for us could never get us off any hook about justice or truth upon which our lives have impaled us. We do not go to God for any false absolution, any covering-over of our difference from him. But the fact that God loves us and will always love us is a far greater fact than any of the weaknesses or failures we experience in living the life he gives us in love. When we find the courage to get the basics, face the utter truth, and accept hard realities, there is no factor more basic or more relevant or more vital than the love of the Creator. That is why proper prayer, far from letting us escape from the truths that upset us, is the surest way to enter the heart of our reality, and take sound decisions about the way forward.

Therefore I think that, if prayer has to be utterly truthful *within*, it has to bear fruit in truthfulness that is *external*, expressed in deeds and words that change the world through me. Prayer has to turn real wheels in my life, and it is the arena of the most personal changes that can happen to me. This change is on a great scale, at the deepest place, because there is no relationship more basic to the personality –

whether we know it or not, or acknowledge it or not – than our relationship to the Creator. The changing that happens, once we have begun to give time to the Creator, is called *conversion*. And that is the factor we have chosen as the subject of our retreat.