

“PATTERNS OF PRAYER”

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II. PRAYER AND PRESENCE

God, in all that is most living and incarnate in him, is not far away from us, he is not separate from the world about us, the world we see, touch, hear, smell and taste. Rather, he awaits us at every instant, in our action and in the work of the present moment. There is a sense in which he is at the tip of my pen, my spade, my brush, my needle – of my heart and of my thoughts.

Teilhard de Chardin

There is an old Portuguese proverb that says, ‘When God wants to hide something he places it right in front of our eyes’. Perhaps nowhere is this truth more clearly shown than in the mystery of his own presence in the world. God’s presence is a hidden presence – but only for those who do not wish to see.

All religion, all spirituality is in a way a response to, or an awareness of, God’s presence in our lives. Religion is essentially the meeting place of God and humanity, a meeting that takes place here and now in this world of ours, a world he has created and one charged with the grandeur of his presence.

There is no time, no place in our daily lives in which God is not present. There are not even certain times or places where he is more present. God is always the same. He does not ‘come’ and ‘go’ from one place to another. Everywhere and at all times he is wholly and totally present to everything that exists.

God’s footprints

Perhaps the most important thing to remember about God’s presence in the world is that it is not an impersonal force or energy exercising its influence from some remote region of outer space. His influence is supremely personal and immediate. Because he made all things out of nothing, he is continually present to his own creation, distilling existence from moment to moment. It is only through this presence and power that the world continues to exist and that all created things continue to live and grow: ‘in him we live and move and have our being’.¹

¹ Acts 17:28

Creation is one way by which God reveals himself to us. He speaks to us in the delicate beauty of a snowdrop or the awesome majesty of the soaring mountains. Sometimes we can glimpse his presence in the setting sun or sense his voice in the silence of the sea or in the gentle whisper of an evening breeze: ‘The heavens proclaim the glory of God, the firmament shows forth the work of his hands’.² The saints have always understood this: St Francis celebrated it in the *Canticle of the Sun*; St John of the Cross spoke of creation bearing the ‘footprints’ of God, as ‘he passed by in haste, scattering a thousand graces, clothing it in beauty’.

Perhaps one of the most beautiful expressions of this is found in the writings of Julian of Norwich:

He showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind’s eye and I thought, ‘What can this be?’ And the answer came, ‘It is all that is made’. I marvelled that it could last, for I thought it might have crumbled to nothing, it was so small. And the answer came to me again, ‘It lasts and ever shall last because God loves it, for all things have being through the love of God’. In this little thing, then, I saw three truths. The first is that God made it. The second is that God loves it. The third is that God looks after it.

A personal presence

The supreme point to remember is that God’s presence is personal simply because he himself is a Person. He is not the ‘ground of our being’ in some dry, remote sort of way. We are not ‘surrounded’ by God as by air, light or energy – like a fish in the ocean or a bird in the sky. God is a personal God and that is how he has revealed himself; he knows us personally, loves us individually, cares for us uniquely. His eyes are loving and his care is special: ‘I have called you by name, you are mine’.³ ‘I have carved you on the palm of my hand’.⁴

Personal presence is different from physical or material presence. Personal presence is characterised by knowledge and love, by communication and sharing. A casual ‘good morning’ or a brief business call do not establish personal presence. I can be more present to a friend on the telephone than to a stranger on a crowded bus. When lovers meet, the relationship is dynamic and they both respond creatively to the presence of the other. So it is with God’s presence. He is not just physically present to me; he is present to me in love, friendship and sharing.

² Psalm 19

³ Isaiah 43:1

⁴ Isaiah 49:16

Though God is present to all created things, it is only the human spirit that can respond to him. Only the human heart has the power and privilege of being aware of God's presence. We have the potential to know God in a personal way, to love him and to live consciously in his presence. This is the core of the religious experience and the starting point of all spirituality. It is also the beginning and source of prayer. All prayer is in some way a response to the mystery of God's presence in our lives. It is a journey into presence.

A presence within

Yet God is not just present to us, no matter how personal and immediate that may be; he is also present within us. By a special and beautiful gift we call 'grace' he has made the human heart his own dwelling place on earth. This presence is pure gift and pure love. Through it, God dwells in the human heart as in a home. It was the great promise made at the Last Supper and fulfilled at Pentecost: 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him'.⁵ This presence we call an 'indwelling' presence, because God makes the human heart his own dwelling place on earth. He comes as a friend seeking friendship and as a lover seeking a response of love. It is a dynamic presence. It calls us to awareness and response. Above all it is a loving presence and love by its very nature is creative. It is an invitation to share the very life of God, present within, and as St Paul puts it, 'to live through love in his presence'.⁶

Prayer and presence

It is this presence that gives its distinctive quality to Christian prayer and gives meaning to the practice of 'living in the presence of God'. Living in his presence has nothing to do with having a good memory or with some sort of mental gymnastics. It is more a question of awareness and of attention. It comes from a realization that God is close – 'closer to me than my innermost self' is how St Augustine expressed it – and that to find him I have only to look within my own heart. Few have understood or expressed this truth better than the seventeenth-century Carmelite, Brother Laurence of the Resurrection. For him, practice of the presence of God was a way of life as much as a way of prayer.

I have given up all non-obligatory devotions and set prayers and I concentrate instead on always being in his presence. I keep myself in that presence by simple attentiveness and a loving awareness of God. As for the set times of prayer, they are only a continuation of this practice.

The first principle of prayer is that God is open and accessible. He knows me, not from a distance, but from within. Prayer is sharing that presence. It is a meeting of two presences. Indeed a good description of prayer is 'being present to Presence'. In prayer we don't have

⁵ John 14:23

⁶ Ephesians 1:4

to make God present. We have only to be aware that he is there, within what St Teresa calls the ‘second heaven of the soul’, or what Brother Laurence refers to as ‘the oratory of the heart’.

When Jesus told his disciples to ‘pray always’⁷ he was not asking the impossible. For he was not talking about ‘saying’ prayers as such, but about prayer as a way of life. To live a full Christian life is to live constantly in the presence of God and that is just another way of making a prayer out of life itself. It is not a duty one is forced to perform, but a Christian birth right.

A saintly monk once went on a pilgrimage to a sacred shrine. As he approached the town he lay down tired and exhausted at the side of the road to rest. He was rudely awakened by another pilgrim who told him it was time to pray and that he should turn his face towards the shrine. ‘I will indeed’, replied the monk, ‘but first do me the honour of turning my feet where they will not be pointing to God!’

⁷ Luke 18:1