

PRAYER AS PERSEVERANCE IN LOVE

‘As the Father has loved me so I have loved you. Abide in my love’ (Jn. 15:9)

God is love. Love is his very being. Love is not just an aspect of God, it is rather the very essence of his nature. So when we try to grasp in our minds something of God’s love we must all surely hesitate because it is a love that surpasses all knowledge, and yet the love of the Father for the Son is the mirror that Jesus uses to express just how much he loves us: ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you’. As the Father loved the Son and could not live without him, so Jesus loves us, you and me. His love is bound up with us; we are to Jesus more precious than we can ever know. As the Father has loved me, says Jesus, so I have loved you. What a love! It is a perfect love because it gives all and holds nothing back as it reaches out to us in invitation: ‘As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.’

This love is an invitation and yet it is more, for this love surely also suggests the motive, the measure and the means for us to surrender ourselves so as to abide in that love. Because if we reflect for just a moment on the love that Jesus is offering us, it points us to the Cross. Jesus’ love for us, expressed and poured out on the Cross, gives us not only our motive for surrendering ourselves to that love, a love that gave itself completely for us on the Cross, but it shows us also the measure of the surrender that is asked of us. Jesus’ love for us gives all, but it also asks all, simply because He wishes to possess all of our hearts, so that he can fill us completely with his love. Jesus’ love for us gives us then the motive and measure by which we should abide in that love, but it also gives us the only means for abiding in that love. Because it is faith in that love which will enable us to abide in that love. Because if that love of Jesus is divine, as we know it is, and if it is of such an intense nature, as we know it is, then surely we can depend on that love of Jesus for us to keep us close to him.

In his life on earth Jesus knew what it was to be the object of his Father’s love and to abide in that love; and from his life he gives us an example to follow, because his life was one of seeking the Father’s will in all things; it was a life lived in loving obedience to the Father. Jesus was not afraid of losing anything by giving up his life to the Father, because he knew that the Father loved him and had no interest apart from that of his beloved Son. Jesus knew that just as he could say, ‘truly,

truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing', so he must also immediately say, 'For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he himself is doing' (Jn 5: 19-20). So, too, as we reflect on the life of Christ Jesus as the pattern and promise of what our lives may be, we come to learn the truth of how Jesus' phrase, 'without me you can do nothing' is but the forerunner of the proud boast, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me'.

Jesus was not afraid of losing anything by giving up his life to the Father, because he knew that the Father loved him and that he had nothing but his best interests at heart; there is trust and mutual love. Is the same true of our relationship with the Lord?

Story of Blondin – high-wire walker – near Niagara Falls

- we know what God can do
- yet we are afraid to commit/surrender our lives to the Lord
- we are afraid to place ourselves completely in the hands of God
- we draw back

Prayer, then, is the actual process of letting the Lord gradually draw us to himself, into that love of his for us. Prayer then is not so much what we do, but rather how much we allow the Lord to do in and through us. In prayer it is God who takes the initiative – prayer is ultimately God's work in us. Prayer involves the constant tension of letting the Lord more and more possess us, while we become more open and receptive. As we become more and more aware ourselves of God's tenderness, understanding and compassion towards us, so we begin to open ourselves to his love. So prayer, then, is not simply a part of living, a thing that is on our daily schedule of things to get done; prayer is very much about all of living. It is not just a part of our thoughts, emotions and feelings, it is all of them. Prayer is then not just concerned with the saying of prayers, and is not primarily about anything that we do, but rather it is first and foremost about letting God be God in all aspects of our lives; we must decrease so that the Lord can increase.

Car keys - passenger seat

The paradox in our relationship with the Lord is that the more we surrender, give up our independence, as it were, the more we actually come to know true freedom. Not the freedom to be whoever we want, but the ability to freely become the people God is calling us to be; not the freedom to do whatever we

want, but the freedom to love others as we have been loved. When we experience that profound sense of being loved totally and unconditionally for who we are, just as we are, we are in fact truly set free. Such trust develops only out of time spent with the Lord on a regular basis each day, in spite of how we feel, believing that, in spite of dryness in prayer, or emptiness or restlessness, the Lord is there working in us his loving purpose. In prayer, then, we are not trying to prove anything to God, or to win brownie points for being faithful. What we try to do in prayer is to experience deeply and constantly the totally undeserved, ongoing and ever-faithful love of God for us. To try to give time to the Lord in prayer each day is to enter into a relationship that gradually makes us conscious of how we cannot really live without him. Just think for the moment of times when you do not pray, is it not true that those are the times that we find ourselves too caught up in and preoccupied with ourselves, struggling to reach our goals by our own efforts. But, by contrast, when we do pray we realise and come to know more clearly our need of God, our need of his power and strength.

Prayer, then, must have time; but, you protest, we are busy people, we can never find the time that we would like for prayer, we say. But nobody, however busy their day, goes through the day without here and there a five minute pause, a ten minute coffee break. Sr. Wendy Becket has this to say about our use of time for prayer:

‘If you do truly want to pray, well then, pray. Take these times, poor crumbs of minutes though they may be, and give yourself to God in them. You may not be able to feel prayerful in them, but that is besides the point. You pray for God’s sake, you are there for him to look upon you, to love you, to take his holy pleasure in you...we should be misers in prayer, scraping up these flinders of time and holding them out trustfully to the Father.’ So she encourages us to use any small slots of time we have for prayer. But she also goes on to say, ‘we should also watch out for the longer stretches of time which may be missing because we don’t want to see them. Many things that are pleasant and profitable, TV programmes, books, conversations, may have at times to be sacrificed. But you will make this and any other sacrifice if you hunger and thirst for God to possess you, and this is my whole point. There is time enough for what matters supremely to us, and there always will be.’

So, says Sr Wendy, ‘when you set yourself down to pray. What do you want? If you want God to take possession of you, then you are praying. That is all prayer is. There are no secrets, no shortcuts, no methods. Prayer is the utterly ruthless

test of your sincerity... if you desire to stand surrendered before God, then you are standing there; it needs absolutely nothing else. Prayer is the last thing we should feel discouraged about. It concerns nobody except God – always longing to give himself to us in love – and my own decision; and that too is God's who works in us to will and to effect. In a very true sense there is nothing more to say about prayer.' (Clergy Review, Feb. 1978)

I recognise, as I'm sure you do, the painful stark truth of what Sr Wendy is saying, but nevertheless I also know that there can be causes that can account for periods of dryness or difficulty in our prayer, and indeed there may be on occasions no 'cause' for our difficulty in prayer, but rather it may be a matter of God inviting us to a new and different kind of prayer. Because so many of us struggle at times in our prayer I should like to spend now a little time sharing some thoughts which I hope may resonate with your own experiences. A word of caution first! There is no sense in comparing our own prayer with anyone else's, because we will often pray as no-one else prays. We should value the uniqueness of our relationship with God in prayer and not be tempted to compare our prayer with that of others. There is of course value in listening to others talk about their prayer because it can help us to gain new insights into how God works in our lives and that of others, and it often encourages us to persevere in our prayer. So let's look briefly at two possible causes of dryness or difficulty in prayer.

1. Trying too hard.

There can be the temptation to try too hard in prayer. When I first started to keep a prayer journal, to jot down phrases of scripture or helpful thoughts that had occurred during a time of prayer, I regularly used to get a little anxious as the prayer time came close to the end and I still did not have any wonderful insights to write down in my prayer journal. This was especially true as the time came near for me to meet with my Spiritual Director, and the temptation was to give God an ultimatum, you've got 2 more days to give me some brilliant thought or insight, something please to share with my Spiritual Director! The need, as I saw it then, to have something in my journal, something to share with my SD was a great distraction and I believe now a cause of my anxiety and my feeling and experience of dryness in prayer. I was trying too hard! The great Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton, was very aware of this problem in prayer, of trying too hard, and he uses the example of an apple to remind us of some home truths. He asks, How does an apple ripen? He answers, It just sits in the sun! A small green apple cannot ripen overnight by just desiring to do so, squinting its eyes, and tightening its jaw, in order to find itself the next morning miraculously

large, red, ripe and juicy! So with ourselves, the birth of the true self takes place in God's good time. We must wait upon God. We must trust in his hidden action within us. We must sit before him in the light of his love. We very often forget, as I had done on that occasion, that prayer is a gift; it is primarily what we allow God to do in us, and not something that we simply do by ourselves. Once we hold on to this truth, it frees us to relax, to take the pressure off ourselves, and to wait upon God, allowing him to come to us as and when, and in the manner, he chooses. St Francis de Sales also often spoke in his writings of the folly of our anxiety about our spiritual growth. So, when writing to a woman called Madame Brulart, one of the people to whom he was Spiritual Director, he advised her in this way: 'Trees only bear fruit in the presence of the sun. Let us dwell in the presence of God which will help us, sooner or later, to bear fruit.' To be overly concerned about our own spiritual growth in prayer was, for St Francis, a sign of being dominated by our own ego, of letting love of self supplant love of God. He would argue that true spiritual growth occurs only when we want only **what** God truly wants for us, when he wants it and in the **way** he wants it; anything else is the ego's desire to be in control, to be at the centre, and to see emerging a satisfying image of the 'spiritual person'. Patient perseverance is the necessary element that St Francis speaks of so often in his letters.

2. Separating prayer from life (2nd possible cause of dryness in prayer)

In prayer we are invited to be responsive to God's initiative. Prayer is concerned not just with the saying of prayers. It involves opening up to the Lord all that touches our lives, all the day to day ordinary and extraordinary events and moods of our lives. Henri Nouwen has this to say:

'To pray does not primarily mean to think about God in contrast to thinking about other things, or to spend time with God instead of spending time with other people. Rather it means to think and to live in the presence of God. As soon as we begin to divide our thoughts into thoughts about God and thoughts about other people and events, we remove God from our daily life and put him in a pious niche where we can think pious thoughts and experience pious feelings.' (Clowning in Rome, p.70)

The activity of prayer cannot be divorced from the events of our lives. Remember King David? At a certain point in his life he was wallowing in guilt and self-pity, unhappy with himself and everyone around him. The prophet Nathan, you will recall, told him a story (2 Sam. 12). It concerned a poor man who had only one lamb, and a rich man who had many. The rich man had some friends

come over for a party and, instead of taking from his own flock of sheep for the meal, he stole and killed the poor man's only ewe. We are told that when King David heard this story he was angry and cried out, 'show me the man and I will punish him. The prophet Nathan replied, 'you are the man!' David was able then to recognise and admit his sin, his stealing of the lovely Bathsheba and his killing of her husband. David repented of his sin and his prayer journal – the Psalms – began to flourish again. According to scripture, it is the heart that prays. If our heart is far from God, or clouded with sin, the words of prayer are in vain. Psalm 51 is David's entry in his prayer journal after the prophet Nathan has helped him to see the connection between all aspects of his life and his relationship with God in prayer.

'Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your compassion blot out my offence. O wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. My offence truly I know them; my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned; what is evil in your sight I have done.' (Psalm 51)

When even one aspect of our own life is not quite right, we can experience difficulty in prayer. It need not be something along the lines of David's sin of lust, adultery and murder. Any breakdown in relationship, any clinging to some hurt or our grudge against someone, any unwillingness to forgive or to admit our faults, any ignoring of another's real need, anything, really, that is not right in our lives will usually affect our prayer.

Have any of you read any of Carlo Carretto's writings on prayer and the spiritual life? He was a little brother of Jesus who spent some of his time living in the desert among the Toureg tribe, a nomadic tribe. He tells the story that a reasonably well off lady told him about her own experience of going out to his place in the desert to deepen her prayer life. (tell the story) The story reminds us that love of God and love of our neighbour are intimately connected. They are two sides of the one coin.

We have considered some possible causes of difficulty or dryness in prayer, but there may also be other occasions when, in our prayer, God is inviting us into a new and different kind of prayer relationship. Perhaps, over a period of time, our own private devotions, once so consoling to us, can become dry and apparently empty. Faced with this, there can be the temptation to try to enliven our prayer with more activity, perhaps saying more rosaries or making more Stations of the Cross, or spending more time reading the scriptures. But this dry, desert experience in prayer can sometimes be an invitation from the Lord just

to be there, to wait upon him empty-handed , not saying or doing anything. Sometimes, what appears as a blockage in prayer can be God inviting us into a new and different kind of prayer, but, that said, I know that it can feel a bit frightening and worrying when we feel no consolation in prayer, no sense of God's presence, no little insights to help us, just dryness and emptiness. This experience can, however, mark the beginning of prayer in which we find, not the consolations of God that we had perhaps formerly known but rather the God of consolations; God who is often found in darkness, difficulty and apparent emptiness. This apparent remoteness of God in prayer has to be understood as an invitation to greater abandonment of oneself to the Lord, to greater trust, an invitation, perhaps, to yield to God something of our tight control over prayer, and instead to wait upon the Lord.

I think the Welsh poet and Minister of God, R.S. Thomas describes well this state in prayer, of persevering in love, when in a poem he writes:

'Prayers like gravel flung at the sky's window,
hoping to attract the loved one's attention.

But without visible plaits to let down for the believer to climb up,

To what purpose open that far casement?

I would have refrained long since

But that peering once through my locked fingers

I thought that I detected the movement of a curtain.

Here again it is important to examine what is going on in our lives at this time, and not just in our prayer; for often, when prayer seems dry we can come to see more clearly God revealing himself in other aspects of our lives, in ordinary everyday ways that we had not noticed before. The painful time of growing in trust, of abandoning ourselves more freely in prayer, can help us to see more clearly the God who abides with us, is close to us. This is important because it reminds us that we are to judge the fruitfulness of prayer, not by how we feel in prayer but by how we live. If we are agreed that prayer is not so much what we do, but is rather primarily about what we allow the Lord, the God of love, to do in us and through us, then there should be some signs of this in our lives.

So, as we open ourselves to the Lord, we will gradually learn to let go and let God be God in our lives. We learn to trust and to believe deeply in Jesus' love for us: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.'

As we abide in his love we will find ourselves becoming more mellow, more gentle and compassionate with ourselves and with others. We become ever

more aware of our weaknesses, of our need for God's healing forgiveness, but we also become more aware that we are loved, chosen and redeemed; we are God's beloved sons and daughters. There is a better outlook in our lives now. Before, when praying through a scripture text we might have been very conscious of our sinfulness, but not so conscious of God's overwhelming love for us. For example, we might read and pray through the story of the Prodigal Son and find ourselves grovelling with the Prodigal Son in the pigsty, instead of being overwhelmed by the amazing no-strings attached love and forgiveness of the Father. We might meditate on the Passion of Jesus and focus only on our sins, instead of focussing on the One who laid down his life on the Cross, out of love for us. As we focus less on ourselves and more on God's overwhelming love for us, so we begin to allow the Lord into the painful areas of our lives which are so in need of healing.

As we become more aware of our own sinfulness and shortcomings, and of God's merciful love and acceptance of us, so we find ourselves becoming more accepting of and merciful towards others, and working more out of God's strength and with his power and grace, rather than relying, as before, on our own efforts alone. So I wish to end by thanking you for taking on this great ministry of prayer, compassion, healing and encouragement of others, which is such a part of being an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion and to make this prayer of encouragement from St Paul my own prayer for each and every one of you:

'This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name. Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.' (Ephesians 3: 14-21)