

“Prayer”

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I like reading – which is probably a good thing in these times of self-isolation! Some books I just enjoy, but a few have opened my mind to different ways of thinking and made me feel I wanted to capture and share the learning points. In this piece, I will quote three authors on the subject of ‘Prayer’, in the hope that they might stimulate you too.

Long ago, when I was very young, maybe aged 8 or 9, I remember seeing the stars. I was in Malaya at the time, in the tropics. I decided to lie down on the ground on my back to fully appreciate the amazing patchwork of light. Maybe I was a bit of a romantic – even then! But I could almost feel movement as the world turned. And it did indeed make a deep impression on me – as something outside of myself. There were quite a number of bats flying around at the time too, but somehow they only added to the occasion.

I guess that in the olden days people thought it was the heavens turning, rather than our world turning. As a youngster I had learned enough science by then to know otherwise. But that’s the problem with science, because these days, in collectively switching on the lights so that we can manage darkness, we have reduced night to something inconsequential, a pale shadow of the real and true. We no longer see stars. Not in Rickmansworth anyway, so near to the M25! I hope that one day I will be able to re-live that childhood experience of mine - perhaps in a desert, or maybe a Yorkshire moor – once we have got through this horrible situation that challenges us all so much.

But, this loss of what we used to have, makes me think about what we lose when we are too much in control. The fact is that when we manage anything, whether it is a night sky or another person, to fit our own requirements, that ‘other’ is in some way diminished. We are no longer open to see the wonder, mystery, individuality and richness of objects beyond us. We make them what we need them to be - and not what they are. Yet what they ‘are’ is so much more wonderful, maybe more dangerous in some ways, for not being formed by our desires and held in our power. In letting go control, we free ourselves to receive, not what we decide we need, but what the other actually ‘is’.

Ruth Scott was one of the first women to be ordained in the Church of England and was often heard on ‘Thought for the day’ on Radio 2. She died of cancer in February last year, but she wrote a thoughtful book: “Between Life and Dying” after her diagnosis.

She talked about “letting go” of control in her life. She said: *“It has been so important to me, because wisdom often turns out to be where I don’t expect it - prayer emerges when I don’t try to make it, and life reveals so much more when I don’t think I’ve got it all sewn up, particularly it seems, in the valley of the shadow of death.”*

A number of her friends had told her how unfair they felt it was that she had cancer, but she said that she had never felt that way. She said: *“Life happens. We are the products of all the generations that have gone before us, the genetic inheritances, the times and places in which we live, the experiences of joy and grief we have. So why not me? I certainly don’t believe in a God who would give me this suffering. I simply see life as evolving in all its creative and destructive complexity as it has from the time of the Big Bang.”*

She was very grateful for all the people that were praying for her and felt uplifted by the positive energy that prayer creates. But then she said something which I found a bit surprising: *“I cannot accept an image of God who heals me because people pray for that, while leaving millions of others to suffer. When someone offers to pray for me I want to know what they think they are doing.”*

On first reading, I was not at all sure that I agreed with Ruth. Was she really saying that praying for others, or ourselves, is wrong, or a waste of time? Is it wrong to ask God to show His mercy where there is pain or anguish? We recall that Jesus in Gethsemane prayed to God before he was betrayed by Judas: *“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”*

And before that, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:7), Jesus says: *“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find: knock, and the door will be opened to you.”*

So, according to the Bible, it seems that there is nothing wrong with putting requests to God. In fact, Jesus emphasises the need to ‘pray always and not to lose heart’, and goes on to give the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). You will recall that this was about a widow who kept coming to the judge asking for justice against her opponent. For a while he refused, but eventually gave in, to stop her continually bothering him.

“And the Lord said: Listen to what the unjust judge says – and will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.”

I think that perhaps the key to our understanding of all of this lies in how God answers our requests in prayer. The point is that we may not recognise the answers when we receive them.

Many people become disillusioned when the outcomes that they have sincerely and earnestly prayed for, do not happen. It seems to them that God has turned down their requests. To be told that God has His reasons, when our mother may be dying a painful death, and we pray for her release, is hard to take. Many go on to blame ‘religion’ for the perceived failure of their efforts, rather than accept God’s will.

Of course, we see the world only from our own limited perspective. We cannot step outside of ourselves to see the bigger picture. We cannot know whether what we may ask of God fits into that picture, or not. And maybe too there is that hint of a desire to control God, rather than leave it entirely to Him.

I think it brings into question the very nature of prayer. I can only scratch the surface of the subject, but I quote another author, Christopher Chapman, who describes prayer as attentiveness and openness to the presence of God which is always here and now, whether or not we are awake to it or are able to perceive it. Prayer matters because it is consent on our side not only to the meeting but the transformation it will bring in us. But we will not always feel met; sometimes this meeting might even appear to us as separation. Prayer does not have to produce a resultant inner peace or new insight to be worthwhile – it becomes a choice to be with God irrespective of the outcome. The importance of prayer lies, very simply, in the desire to be open to God.

For Ruth, living with cancer had brought her to her own understanding of prayer as being: *“the spontaneous utterances, inspirations and moments of awareness that well up within us and between us, and give shape to our deepest being”*.

She wrote: *“Prayer may arise in anguished or ecstatic souls, and often looks nothing like the formulaic recitations that tend to bear its name. I myself have come to see prayer primarily as lived experience, not set words.”*

I am not sure myself. I believe that ‘set words’ do help to open our hearts to God. But, whatever you may think, maybe we can all accept Ruth’s sentiment that prayer is not just turning to God when we recognise our need for help, or pouring out our thoughts and feelings in moments of joy or sorrow. It is choosing to be present to God as a way of life.

We should also ponder, during the difficult times that we all experience, when life challenges us: Are we able to choose to be with God in prayer - when maybe there is no feeling of peace or enlightenment – or when we feel the activity might cease to reward us?

Will we then go purposefully out of ourselves to seek the God who is ever in search of us? Can we ask ourselves these questions: Can I allow you to be who you are rather than the one who fits into my life conveniently? Am I able to be free enough from my own need to be able to see and respond to your need? Am I generous enough to share what I have with you when there is nothing in it for me? Do I love you that much?

And, of course, these questions apply equally to our relationship towards God, as they do towards the important people in our own lives.

Thomas Merton is another author who was introduced to me recently by a member of our congregation at St Mary’s. In his book, “Thoughts on Solitude”, there was this prayer. I feel it resonates with us at this difficult time:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Finally, there are the words of St Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians: *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”*