

Prayer

I am always a little reluctant to give advice about prayer because, by definition, it's an expression of our personal relationship with God. Because most of us were brought up learning by heart the formal prayers of the Church, the legacy is that we are reluctant to move beyond that, as if it wouldn't be praying properly if we made up our own prayers. I fall into this trap myself and every morning, in addition to praying the Office, I always say the same five or six prayers every day. In my defence I have to say that I say them because they are things I feel I should pray about at the start of the day, things not contained in as many words in the Office.

And yet if we stop and think about it, at its most basic prayer is simply conversation with God. If I met you in the street every morning and said the same five or six things to you every day you would think there was something wrong with me - even our compulsory conversations about the weather change from day to day! And yet I am aware that every morning I say the same things to God and can't help wondering if maybe he thinks there's something wrong with me. But I continue to do it partly because, yes, I would feel strange if I didn't say those prayers, but also because they are about things that I consider to be an important start to my day and if, over the years, I have evolved a formula that seems to best express what I want to say to God, then why change it just for the sake of change? (If it ain't broke...etc.)

At the same time, though, our formal prayers recited by heart can become very mechanical and we can experience a certain emptiness in our prayer life as a result. This is what I hear so often from people in confession when they mention concern over their prayers. Whether we pray silently in our heads (and hearts) or out loud if we are in a situation where we can do that, we know only too well that we can have finished our prayers and not remember a word that we have said. And it seems as if the more we try to concentrate the worse it gets because concentrating itself becomes a distraction. Does any of this sound familiar to you?

I have this problem all the time with the 'Benedictus' and the 'Magnificat' in the Office - we say them every day, we know them by heart, and our mouths just go into "auto pilot" while our minds can be miles away. Sadly it can be the same with the 'Our Father' - a prayer that Jesus taught us but which, as a result, we say so many times every day that we don't even need to think about it - and yet we should. I mentioned this recently in connection with the Rosary - the fact that it would be better to recite just one decade meditatively than five decades mechanically.

I think I should first say that the fact that we are praying at all is important. How we feel about our prayer is perhaps less important than how God feels about it and he would surely be happy that we are spending time in prayer. Having said that, if we are not happy about how we are praying, if our minds are not on what we are saying to God, then we may well wonder how God feels - in the same way we would if we were talking to a friend but our minds were miles away, or worse still, if a friend was talking to us and our minds were miles away.

Perhaps we need to experiment with different types of prayer even though we may feel a little guilty at first because we haven't said what we normally say. Try using your own words rather than formal prayer - talk to God in a natural way just as you would chat to a friend. In more meditative moments when circumstances are a little more conducive to this sort of time with God, try some spiritual reading or reading from scripture, with perhaps a candle or an icon or a water feature as a focus for your reflection. Get away from distractions in a quiet room, turn off the phone and don't answer the door. And don't feel you have to read all of what you set out to read - stop and reflect on thoughts that strike you as you go along.

And in any and all prayer we have got to learn to listen to what God might be saying or how he might be responding to our prayer. Typically we are not comfortable with silence but how else are we going to be able to hear? And how much will it take to discipline ourselves to do absolutely nothing for however long it takes because this is time for God - for me and God?

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In St Luke's gospel (11 v 1-13), the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray and so he teaches what we have come to know as the 'Lord's Prayer'. He then goes on to tell them a parable about the man who wakes his friend in the middle of the night to ask if he can borrow some bread so he can offer hospitality to another friend who has just arrived at his house. Jesus then goes on to teach: "Ask and it will be given to you...knock and the door will be opened to you" etc. The lesson of the gospel is that we should approach God in prayer with faith and trust, but also that we should be persistent in our prayers, almost pestering (though not quite nagging) God for what we want or, at least, what we think we want.

In a later chapter of Luke's gospel (18 v 1-8), the lesson Jesus teaches is almost identical as he tells the parable of the widow who keeps pestering what he describes as an unjust judge until he finally gives in and listens to her petition. There are, however, a couple of aspects to the parable that make this particular lesson on prayer slightly different.

In both parables the person doing the asking symbolises ourselves and the one being asked symbolises God. While in the second parable Jesus calls the judge “unjust”, that is only for the purposes of the story. The suggestion is that, as was no doubt the practice at the time, the judge could be bribed to give a more favourable hearing to petitioners and that is why Jesus calls him unjust. God, of course, isn’t unjust; he is completely impartial. Luke writes in Acts: ‘The truth I have now come to realise is that God does not have favourites.’ God does not need to be bribed and we should never get into making rash promises to God in an attempt to persuade him to give a more favourable hearing to our prayers.

The other aspect of the parable brings us back to the question of persistence. St Luke introduces the parable by saying: ‘Jesus told his disciples a parable about the need to pray continually and never lose heart’. The word “continually” implies doing something regularly and often, even incessantly, and that aspect of persistence is central to both of Our Lord’s parables. But in this second story, the question might well be asked as to why it was necessary for the widow to keep on pestering the judge – why did he delay in answering her request?

First of all, in the context of the story, the widow was perhaps too poor, or was simply unwilling, to offer a bribe in order to “facilitate” matters. But Our Lord was telling us to be prepared for the fact that sometimes our prayers won’t be answered quite as quickly as we might hope. The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* suggests Jesus was saying that a delay offers us an opportunity to make ourselves a little more worthy of the answer we are hoping to receive, even, perhaps, ensuring we are as serious, as convinced, about our petition as we should be. St Augustine explains in his *Treatise on the first letter of St John* he writes:

Suppose you want to fill some sort of bag... You know how big the object that you want to put in and you see that the bag is narrow so you increase its capacity by stretching it. In the same way by delaying the fulfilment of desire God stretches it, by making us desire he expands the soul, and by this expansion he increases its capacity.

There may also be another aspect to a delay in our prayer being answered. We are asked to pray continually, a word which might also imply “consistently” – in other words that our prayers should be an expression of our on-going relationship with God. It is not at all unusual for people who ordinarily have no particularly active relationship with God to turn to him when they are in trouble or in particular need. Suddenly they expect things of him, but the rest of the time what does *he* receive from *them*? Where is the faith relationship on their part that they are suddenly calling on God to show them? It’s not that God is going to be petty about it as, perhaps, we might, but it’s something along the lines of that other lesson in the gospel: ‘ “We ate and drank with you”, but God may answer “I don’t know who you are” ’. God loves us and will always hear

our prayers, but might we need to reflect a little on how consistent is the relationship from our side? Are there things that need to be put right first?

St Augustine in his long pastoral *Letter to Proba* offers some advice on the subject of our approach to prayer which I think may be helpful to what we are saying here. He writes:

Why does the Lord advise us to pray, when he knows what is needful for us before we ask it of him? This can puzzle us, if we do not understand that our Lord and God does not want our wishes to be made known to himself, since he cannot be ignorant of them; but he wants our desire to be exercised in prayer, thus enabling us to grasp what he is preparing to give. So we are told: 'Widen your hearts; bear not the yoke with unbelievers.'

We shall have the greater capacity to receive it, the more trustfully we believe, the more firmly we hope, the more ardently we desire.

We pray to God at fixed intervals of hours and times, and in words, in order to remind ourselves by these symbols of reality, and to be aware how much progress we have made in our desire. Thus the apostle's saying, 'Pray without ceasing', means: without ceasing (in) desire. This we do to prevent what had begun to grow lukewarm from going quite cold, and being completely extinguished: the remedy is to rouse it often into flame. (And) the apostle's saying, 'Let your requests be made known before God', must not be taken as though they become known to God, who undoubtedly knew them (already), but that they become known to us in the sight of God as we practise forbearance.

Intensive prayer means beating on the door of him to whom we are praying by long and devout stirring of the heart. Often this task is carried on more by groaning than by speaking. We need words to help us recollect ourselves and see what we are asking for, not to make us suppose that the Lord must be given information or swayed by words.

St Augustine then goes on to look at the various sections of the 'Lord's Prayer' and how it is, as Jesus taught, the perfect form of prayer. It's interesting to reflect on how often we say this prayer – at least once a day for most people, perhaps far more often than that for others. Isn't that precisely an example of being persistent in prayer: not how often we say the prayer so much as how often we therefore make the same petitions to God that make up the prayer? How often we ask that his will be done, that he give us our daily bread; that we be forgiven as we forgive. Do we stop to reflect on how often and how faithfully he answers that prayer? We can be quick to question why particular prayers seem to go unanswered and yet we can take for granted how many *are* answered and how many of our unspoken needs are provided for because God knows them even without our mentioning them.

This then brings up the whole issue of why our prayers are not always answered in the way we hoped. We might pray quite sincerely that God's will be done and yet we can be so convinced that our will and his must be the same that we just don't understand why our prayers appear not to have been answered – especially when they are about illness and suffering and so on. Back to St Augustine (to Proba) again:

In afflictions that can both benefit and do harm, we do not know how to pray as we ought. But we owe this much trust to our Lord God, that if he does not take them away, we should not suppose ourselves to be neglected by him, but should rather hope with devout patience for good things greater than the evils.

If something happens contrary to our prayer, we should bear it patiently, give thanks in all circumstances, and have not the least doubt that it was more opportune for God's will to be done than our own. The Mediator gave us this kind of example. When he said, 'Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me', he then changed the human will that was in him and immediately added, 'But not what I will, but what you will, Father.' Hence deservedly by the obedience of one man many are made righteous.

There is a call to humility in all of this: that, as Isaiah said, God's ways are not our ways, his thoughts not our thoughts. Sometimes some things are beyond us and simply lie within the realms of 'mystery'. God does always hear our prayers and those that are offered worthily will always be answered - perhaps not always in the way we hoped for, but in ways that God knows to be better whether for us or for his universal plan of salvation.

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