

## **A New Dawn: Renewal in Prayer**

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### **Becoming Love**

What is the goal of the Christian life? What are we aiming for? What does God want for us? I think that the reading from 1 Corinthians, 13 on love expresses very beautifully what God has in mind for us. We are to grow in love until we become love. Another way of putting this is that our vocation is to become like God.

How do we do that? Grit our teeth and get on with it? You can try that but it does not work. The Christian life is not just a matter of will power but of allowing the power of Christ to work within us and to transform us. The very early saints and great figures of the Church often preached and wrote about what they called the "divinisation" of the human being. They said that God became man so that men and women could become God and by this they meant that the Christian vocation is to respond wholeheartedly to God's invitation to new life and in this way become like God.

We live in bewildering times. It seems that religion plays at most a peripheral part in most people's lives. We seem to be always reading about scandals in the Church. The social structures that supported religious faith have, to a great extent, collapsed. Now the choice to follow Christ must be a very personal one and is often, a courageous choice.

### **Prayer: relationship with God**

So the goal of the Christian life is to become like God. However, we know from the story of the Fall in the book of Genesis that this is not something which human beings can grasp for themselves; it is a free gift of grace in Jesus Christ. Our part is to respond to the invitation to enter into an intimate relationship of friendship with God and we do so in a variety of ways. Obviously we try to live as God wants us to, according to the message of Christ. However, Christianity is not principally about what we do but about what God does in us. An essential element for a renewal of Christian life is prayer, understood as a relationship with God. Any relationship takes time to develop and grow. Each human being is a mystery and we never plumb the depths of another person. So, the relationship with God is even more mysterious. Entering into the relationship with God is to embark on a never-ending journey.

The Scriptures use many analogies for God's relationship with His people but perhaps the closest is the bond of marriage. God wants to be united with us. Nature plays a trick on human beings in order to entice them to commit themselves to one another and so ensure the continuation of the race. People fall in love and this perhaps blinds them to the nature of the commitment they are making in marriage. However when the honeymoon phase ends, will the couple continue to grow in their mutual commitment? Falling in love is easy but truly loving is not at all easy; it is the most difficult thing we can do but at the same time it is the most rewarding. In St. John's Gospel, Jesus shares with us the secret of the universe - love. We are to love one another and by this, and no other way, will we be known as his disciples. We will not be known as Christ's disciples

by how many degrees we have, or how busy we are or how many prayers we say. The test is - can we love or not? Love comes from God and only if we are united with Christ as the branches are united with the vine, can we love.

## **Surrender**

Love is a total commitment, a total self-surrender. Obviously it is not just lovely feelings. We are naturally afraid to surrender ourselves totally into the hands of God because deep down we realise that God is ultimately unknowable and we do not want to lose ourselves totally. At first then God usually attracts us very gently and invites us to go deeper. God calls and we respond; if I decide to keep God at the level of an acquaintance, God will not force me to go deeper. You cannot force someone to be your friend. It is sad to see people being more than satisfied with a very superficial relationship with God. We grow only insofar as we allow God into our lives and it would appear that many people do not want to grow. Growing is a painful process with many tears but to avoid the agony is to miss the ecstasy. As we grow we leave behind previous stages and this is a form of dying. We must let go the past in order to receive the present. We all know people who refuse to let go of the past and who therefore cannot enjoy the present moment.

## **Choosing God**

At the beginning of the relationship with God, we focus on getting to know Him. There is never a time when we stop getting to know God but this initial phase centres on this step. I read the Scriptures and think about the person of Christ and his words and deeds. The full revelation of the divinity lives in Christ and therefore he reveals God in a human way. Of course we must always be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that we know Christ - "He is the son of the carpenter surely", some of his contemporaries said. Study can only teach us about God; prayer is the door through which I can actually encounter God. As I get to know God, I also get to know myself better. I begin to see what I am seeking in life. Is God really important to me? I also begin to see how I must change in order to have God in my life. At every stage of the journey I decide whether to go on or go backwards. Standing still and treading water in the relationship with God is not possible. It is possible that I might realise that God is asking too much of me and that I am not prepared to give what God seems to be asking. Therefore I can withdraw from the budding relationship.

The closer I allow God to come to me, the more clearly will I see myself. However real self-knowledge costs. We cling to our illusions because we find them more comfortable and comforting than reality. Our Lady is the model of the Christian disciple. One of her great virtues is humility. The one who commits himself or herself to this journey into intimacy with God will have to learn humility very quickly. Humility means knowing and accepting the truth about oneself. If I continue in my relationship with God, I will learn the truth, i.e. I will learn who and what I am. I will begin to see my motives, which I had always assumed were as pure as the driven snow. I will see that at best they are mixed with all sorts of other less pure elements. Can I accept the truth or will I seek to escape the brightness of the light? Will I prefer the darkness to the light?

## **Unselfish love**

This of course is a very early stage in the relationship with God. It is like the courtship stage in a human relationship. If I persevere, accepting what is revealed to me about who and what I am and who and what God is, then I will normally

enter some sort of honeymoon phase. This is a stage of conversion where I fall in love with God. Prayer at this time is easy and a joy. We gradually leave behind thinking about God and move on to simply being in the presence of God. It can seem that we have arrived at this stage when in truth we are in a sense only at the beginning of the relationship. There is still a great deal of growth required because the love I have for God is still shot through with self-love.

The honeymoon phase ends in any human relationship and it is the same in the relationship with God. Then I have to get used to all the ordinary, unexciting times when perhaps I do not feel so good about the relationship, when it no longer gives me a "buzz". I can leave this relationship and go looking for another in order to bring excitement back into my life but the pattern will repeat itself. At their wedding, the couple vow themselves to each other for better or for worse. The young couple usually do not think of the "worse" because in a sense their love blinds them. However the "worse" will come and these days will teach the couple what it means to love. When things are difficult, I will learn to love the other because of who and what she is and not just because she happens to fulfil my needs. I will then learn to love in an unselfish way.

In our relationship with God when the honeymoon phase ends, we enter a critical moment. I remember one person who complained of monumental boredom in her prayer. I asked her whether she loved God and she said "yes". I then asked her whether she was willing to put up with this boring prayer for the rest of her life. Are we prepared to be faithful to God even when it is boring and unattractive? Most people who pray will enter what John of the Cross calls the night of sense after a fairly brief time. The dark night is not something to be frightened about; it is a normal stage of growth and usually happens in and through the events of daily life. Some people, however, seem to always want God to do their bidding and when they begin to discover that God is not as they first imagined, they are not quite so eager to get involved. Usually such people will not abandon prayer altogether; they will continue to pray and they will be "good" people who are quite satisfied with themselves but they will have stopped growing. They will still love but not too much; they will have settled for comfortable mediocrity.

The Pharisees are a salutary example for us. They were not at all bad men; they were good men, obedient to the law of God. They searched the Scriptures, gave alms to the poor and prayed on a regular basis. Yet they are the ones who are condemned by Jesus, not the public sinners. They had substituted human rules and regulations for the will of God. They refused to recognise in Jesus the one of whom the Scriptures spoke and therefore they refused to go to him for life because as Jesus himself said, "you cannot bear to hear my word" (Jn.8,43).

## **Encounter**

To make of religion a thing of rules and regulations is a tragedy; it is a relationship with the Living God. But to encounter the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, the Father of Jesus is an earth-shaking event. At first God may approach us very gently through part of creation but there will be a time when we must come face to face with the awesomeness of the Living God. In that encounter all our self-deception and illusions are swept away from us. But my self-deception is comfortable; I do not want to stand naked before God. "The man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the

Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?' he asked. 'I heard the sound of you in the garden;' he replied. 'I was afraid because I was naked so I hid.'"

Usually there will be a gradual process whereby God helps us to let go control. We must learn that we cannot control God like the hot water tap and so our experience of prayer may be dry from time to time. The initial stages of this process are often marked by unpredictability. The dryness comes and goes and we never know whether our prayer time is going to be dry as dust or a really good experience. Letting go control is not at all an easy matter. It is one thing to say that we abandon ourselves to God and quite another to live this abandonment out in practice. There are so many subtle ways we have of deceiving ourselves. We can filter everything and so we only hear what we want to hear. I can be like the obvious alcoholic who flatly denies having any problem with the drink. I may not "hear" a sermon which calls for me to repent; I can search the Scriptures like the Pharisees but not be open to the Word of God. I can refuse to accept God's word because it does not come to me in the expected package or from an acceptable person. The spiritual journey requires tremendous honesty but our honesty produces a reward beyond anything that we could conceive of.

There are very many good, sincere people but it seems that there are few who are prepared to pay the price of complete self-surrender to God. We know that we can do nothing without grace but we seem quite prepared to construct our own way to God, our own path to holiness. Yet this is impossible. God knows what we were created to be and only by allowing God full freedom in our lives can we arrive at our destination, which involves us in a total transformation.

### **Trusting God**

The goal of the Christian life is totally impossible for human beings to achieve. For this we need a desire to trust God without limit. If we are to be transformed in God, we must let go of everything. At the beginning we can be so attracted by God that letting go of gross sin is not too difficult. But then we must let go of our desire to control our own life, other peoples' lives and finally even God.

If we really desire God and try to co-operate with God's will and are not just playing at being spiritual, I believe that there will come a time when God will really respond to our desires to have Him at the very centre of our being. God will do so by removing any rivals for the centre spot. But of course there are no rivals to God in my life! Can I trust God, radically trust God when what I hold most dear is cut away and removed? What I am called to let go of at this crucial time is any disordered attachment, which remains in my life. The problem is that by this stage I think that I have let go of everything I consider to be a disordered attachment and only healthy ones remain! However God thinks differently.

St. John of the Cross wrote that it matters little whether a bird is tied down by a stout cord or a slender thread. It depends on what the bird wants to do. If all it desires is to scabble in the dirt round about it, then being tied does not matter. However if it wants to fly, the cord or thread must be cut. The problem is that at this time we may only be tied by a thread but we may consider that the thread is not tying us down at all but is in fact pulling us up to God, i.e. we may consider the thread to be a very good thing to which we are quite rightly attached. For example, after much experimentation and struggle I may have discovered my way of prayer. I really want to encounter God and I have found that a particular way of prayer really helps. So what is the problem? I may be attached to my

understanding of what is right, to my memory of how God has acted in my life and to my desire to encounter God. These things can seem to be wonderful and at a certain stage of our journey they are indeed wonderful but there comes a time when they can block further growth. The problem is that the word "my" qualifies them. There is still a very subtle struggle for control. Who will lead the dance and who will follow?

Very subtly I want God to conform to my ways of thinking. Is my God an English, Scottish or Irish Catholic? That is a ridiculous question ... or is it? Think about it. Do I try to mould God to fit what I think God should will or am I really and truly open to have my mind and my little world blown apart?

There are some obvious disordered attachments and the self-love contained in them is equally obvious but at certain points things can get quite subtle because my search for self-gratification is camouflaged by my desire for God's glory.

### **Listen**

Prayer is a relationship with God. God invites each of us to an intimate relationship with the Trinity. Friendship can never be forced. We have the awesome power of putting limits on God. When we think of God we should think BIG. God wants to do so much more for us than we could ever ask for or even imagine. So how can we respond to this invitation? We can learn from the way we relate to people. There are people we meet only rarely and never think much about them. We can hardly call them friends. Then there are people with whom we are quite friendly but who do not really impinge on our lives. Then there are others who really know us and love and accept us for what we are. These are our friends. How do we relate to them? Do we always batter their eardrums with words or are we also prepared to listen to them? We have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen twice as much as we speak. There are times when it is good and right to use many words in prayer but there are other times when we need to listen. God speaks to us above all through the Scriptures but also in our daily lives. Listening is a difficult art to master. As soon as we try to be quiet, our minds are filled with a host of distractions. What can we do? One way is to fight them but then we are turning away from God and focusing on the distractions. Another way is to use a method of prayer like centering prayer, which is a prayer of intention, not attention, i.e. we desire to consent to the presence and action of God and we renew this desire by using a simple word whenever we become aware that we are thinking of something.

Above all, if we are going to grow in our relationship with God, our prayer must be honest. We will know whether our prayer is honest only by how honest we are outside the time of prayer.

### **Dancing to new music**

So, who is going to lead the dance? If I have always led and am used to leading, it will be difficult to change my ways. However, if I do change, God will teach me to dance to new music - the silent music of love, as John of the Cross calls it. At first the music will seem extremely strange and I will stumble and not be at all my usual confident self but as I gradually learn the steps and become more confident in following God, a whole new world will open to me. Do I want to explore the strange islands? Do I want to hear the silent music? Or do I want to remain safe? The choice is mine.