

Evidence for the Power of Prayer



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In this series

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A recent survey of religious attitudes in Britain revealed that, despite the decline in church-going, over a quarter of the people interviewed asserted that they prayed regularly themselves, and many more believed in prayer as a potent force in the world. As one who is privileged from time to time to lead prayers on radio in the 'Daily Service' broadcast every morning on BBC's Radio Four, I myself can testify to the large number of letters I receive, often from people who have no connection with the Church, but who end their letters with a heart-rending plea, 'Please pray for me!' What do they mean by it and what do they hope prayer will achieve?

Prayer is a form of presence. We keep present in our minds those for whom and with whom we pray and we draw them with us into the presence of God. When people ask for our prayers they are asking for more than kind thoughts or helpful advice; they are seeking a spiritual energy, a sense that they are not alone, that surrounding them there really are arms of everlasting love. And the evidence is that prayer can become the means of making real exactly that experience of the divine presence with people and in places which no other power can reach.

One of the most moving testimonies to that reality came recently from the Russian poet, Irina Ratushinskaya, immediately after she was unexpectedly released from her seven year prison sentence in the Soviet Union. In the strict regime labour camp where she had spent the past four years, she had been severely punished, chiefly for her defence of other women Christian prisoners who became her friends. Cut off from her family, she was told by the guards that she was completely forgotten by those outside, though in fact prayers were being offered and vigils being kept for her all over the world. In a radio interview she gave, when at last she was set free and able to meet for the first time some of those who had prayed for her, she talked

about the conditions in the cold, filthy punishment cells. There, she said, she sometimes felt so weak and lonely that she begged her Lord to allow her to die. But then, in her simple English, she described how she regained her courage: 'In the first part of November I was in the cell on hunger strike and on the eighth or ninth day – I cannot remember which it was – I felt a strange heat and I understood that there was help for me from all the love of different people from different countries who prayed for me, and, thanks to these people, I was still alive'.

Such testimony is echoed by many others who, facing dehumanizing forces of oppression or disease or disaster, have found unsuspected resources of energy released through the solidarity of prayer. Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa describes the prayers of the worldwide Church as being like a 'wall of fire' protecting and 'preventing' (in the old sense of the word: 'going before') him in all his doings.

Prayer a primary instinct

To pray is always to be part of a community spanning all generations and all lands. It is an activity as old as humanity itself, and as widespread as the cultures of the world. I have felt its power among the most ancient of all civilizations, the aborigines in Australia. There, in the Kimberleys for example, still today the wall-paintings of the Wandjina, the ancestor gods, are tended and retouched reverently by aborigine artists. As they work, they converse with the spirits, telling them tenderly how they hope to enhance their picture and at the same time praying them not to send too much rain. Praise and petition are the primary speech of prayer, instinctive cries of the human heart.

One can feel too the compelling attraction of a life given entirely to prayer in communities dedicated solely to that purpose, withdrawn from the world that they might pray for the world. Anyone who has climbed the craggy steps of Meteora in the centre of Greece, where atop every rock stands a monastery or a hermitage, must have marvelled at the sheer determination and dedication of those who, a thousand years ago, scaled that terrain, to build in the mountains hundreds of places to pray. They hoped that, in the

thin blue air at the summit, they would come closer to God. There they soon discovered their need to come closer to one another. So they formed their monastic communities, some of which survive to this day as centres of prayer and worship. Inevitably they have become tourist attractions. But as I clambered up the steep ascent, I could not help feeling that we tourists in a way become modern pilgrims, compelled to acknowledge another reality than that which preoccupies most of our lives.

But what of those of us who are neither visionary artists nor spiritual athletes, but who just occasionally glimpse what CS Lewis has described as ‘patches of Godlight in the woods of our experience’, what evidence is there that prayer can be a reality for us? I believe that learning to pray is rather like learning to play a musical instrument. It requires some talent, a lot of practice and help from those who have mastered the skill. The talent is latent within all of us, a basic human instinct as natural as breathing. The ‘Practice of the presence of God’, as one of the great masters of prayer, Brother Lawrence, called it, can be a lifelong pursuit.

Prayers of thanksgiving

‘One of the hardest things about being an atheist’, I once heard someone say, in an argument about Christian belief, ‘must be having no one to say thank you to.’

‘I just thank God I’m an atheist,’ his antagonist replied.

Both remarks, the once sincere, the other ironical, acknowledged that human beings feel instinctively that they are on the receiving end of God’s gifts, which come to us in many forms, from the wonders of creation, to courage in bad times, to the love and kindnesses of others which help us along our way. The mother who patiently teaches her child to include in its earliest vocabulary that simple, but strictly unnecessary phrase ‘thank you’ is not merely instilling a social grace which will help to smooth life’s path. She is also recognising that a mature person needs to acknowledge dependence upon and therefore gratitude to others, a need most fully expressed in gratitude to God. Few people can have experienced the glory of a magnificent sunrise without feeling within them that response.

Our thanksgiving is, as it were, our responding 'Yes'. It is like the Yes of the Magnificent, the hymn of thanksgiving which Mary sang when she knew she was to bear her Son, the world's Saviour. That hymn of praise has found an echo in the heart of many a woman who has held in her arms her own newborn child and marvelled that out of all the pain and travail has come this miracle of a new, perfectly formed, healthy human being, for which the only sufficient words are 'Thank God!'

But that brings us straightaway to one of the problems about prayer. What if the child is deformed or diseased? What if life's sky is threatening a storm? Our sense of dependence on forces beyond our control is none the less, but our response is of anger or fear rather than of praise. I find it comforting that one of the oldest books of prayers, the Book of Psalms, permits us to express our fury as well as our thanks, to pour out our agony as well as our ecstasy, to question God as well as to adore him. The psalmist who cries exultantly on occasions, 'Bless the Lord O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name,' also utters the cry Our Lord himself prayed from the cross, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?'

Prayer is a profound reality, in times of dereliction as well as of delight, for it comes from the depths of our being. The important thing is that all prayer should be sincere. 'He that lies in his prayers,' wrote St Augustine, 'loses the benefit he seeks: he that lies in his prayers both loses his cause and finds his punishment.'

The opportunity prayer gives of pouring out from the soul both joy and grief, both gratitude and anger can release all those pent up emotions. It can help to quieten the spirit and enable us not so much to submit to circumstances as the inevitable will of God, but rather to see how to cooperate with God even where it would seem that the purpose of a divine and loving Father is being thwarted.

In his *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, CS Lewis writes: 'One of the purposes for which God instituted prayer may have been to bear witness that the course of events is not governed like a state but created like a work of art to which every being makes its contribution, and in prayer a conscious contribution, and in which every being is both an end and a means.'

Prayers of penitence

Another simple, basic lesson a wise mother teaches her child is how to say, 'I'm sorry'. Again, this is no mere social convenience, but a growth in self-awareness and ability to ask for forgiveness. This is another essential element in human maturity. In one of the earliest models of Christian prayer, one which Jesus himself taught his disciples, the formula is equally simple. Jesus describes two men going into the temple to pray. One makes long prayers, building up his own confidence in the presence of God. The other repeats simply, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' There is no doubt which Jesus commends as a pattern for prayer (Luke 18:9-14).

It is not surprising therefore that, though there is little evidence of set liturgical prayers within the earliest Christian communities, one of the forms of prayer that has continued unchanged at least from the sixth century until now is that known as the Jesus prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.' In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, this prayer has become a focus for meditation, being repeated over and over again, enabling the one who prays to savour as it were the very name of Jesus, drawing from it all the sweetness and succour which Christians of all generations have found within it. But it is never treated simply as a mantra, a repetitive chant of the divine name alone. It is thought of as a way into a kind of prayer without words, a prayer of inner stillness and silence. It was compared by one of the early Church Fathers, Diadochus, writing in the late fifth century, to the instinctive cry of a child 'calling for his father even when asleep'.

Bishop Kallistos Ware, writing about the evolution of the Jesus Prayer in *The Study of Spirituality*, tells us that already, even by the sixth century, this manner of praying had become a matter of debate. He quotes extensively from the writings of two hermits, who produced between them some 850 questions and answers about the effectiveness of this kind of prayer. There is evidence of how carefully even the mystics examined their methods of meditation. And it was an Egyptian monk, Abba Philemon, writing some years later, who emphasised the need to add to our silent devotion the words of true penitence for our sins.

All this has a contemporary ring about it. We need periods of stillness as we need expressions of penitence for our inner health's sake. A psychiatrist was telling me not long ago that he found great wisdom in the devotional hymns of Charles Wesley, particularly the penitential verse which reads: 'Show me, as my soul can bear, the depth of inward sin.'

Prayer can be a merciful, gradual process of self-revelation which helps to heal a soul's disease. For we find in practice that the prayers of penitence that lead us into self-examination and confession help to liberate us from all that suppressed sense of guilt that can be so paralysing. In daily receiving God's word of forgiveness we are able to start anew in our attempt to live a life that is not self-centred but centred on God and his purposes for us and for his world.

Prayers of petition

Prayers of petition, when we say, 'Please God', are the commonest forms of prayer in the New Testament. In most of Jesus' teaching about prayer he refers to this simple asking of God for what we need. He urges us to be as uninhibited as a child approaching a parent, trusting totally in that parent's goodwill, but ready also to accept the wisdom of the response (Matthew 7:77-79). He advises us to pray persistently, patiently, apparently refusing to take no for an answer, until we are able to understand how the answer that does come is the best for us (Luke 11:5-7; 18:2-4).

He suggests three safeguards against the possible selfishness of our prayers. Firstly, that we ask them in good faith (Matthew 21:22); secondly, that they are offered in the name of Christ (John 16:23), which surely means that they must be in accord with the message he taught and the methods he used. And thirdly that other believers would agree with our petitions, (Matthew 18:19), however secretly they are made (Matthew 6:6).

Certainly, the evidence of the Acts of the Apostles is that the early Christians faithfully followed this advice and brought everything to the Lord in prayer, whether it was for guidance in choosing a new apostle (Acts 1:24), for the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15), or for release from jail (Acts 12.12). On that occasion, incidentally, they seemed as surprised as we are when we

do receive exactly what we have prayed for! And there were clearly times when their prayers did not achieve the desired result.

St Paul prayed persistently that he might be delivered from some 'thorn in the flesh' (whatever he meant by that), but he allowed God's apparently negative answer to lead him into a deeper understanding of true divine grace (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). Nevertheless, the confidence of the early Church in the efficacy of prayer was unshaken. 'This is the confidence we have in him', writes the author of the Epistle of John, 'that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.' (1 John 5:14-15).

This unquestioning confidence in the immediate efficacy of prayer did not however go unchallenged in the following centuries. As early as the third century, Origen begins to raise in his treatise, *On Prayer*, some of the questions which many people raise today. If God already knows our need, and wills what is best for us, why should we ask for it? Is it only so that he may change our will to his? And is it right that we should ask for things for the body as well as for the soul?

I remember when, as a young person, I first started struggling with these kinds of questions myself, two simple illustrations were of great help to me. One was based on the parable Jesus taught about bread and stones. A preacher brought into the pulpit stones which looked exactly like small brown loaves, and among them was a real loaf of the same size. He asked a group of children to choose which they would have, but his own small son was not to be fooled. 'You choose for me, Dad', he said, 'you know which is the right one'.

The other illustration which helped my understanding was an experience when I was an adolescent. I had been pestering my parents to allow me to leave school, but they urged me to wait at least until I was eighteen, when, they said, I could be free to choose for myself. When I did reach that age, I begged to be allowed to go to the University. Only then did my father tell me that that was what he had been saving up and planning for over many years. But he had felt powerless to do anything, not wanting to use coercion, until I myself expressed the desire to receive what he wanted to give. It reminds me of the prayer Plato is said to have prayed, 'God, grant us the

good whether we pray for it or not, but evil keep from us even though we pray for it'.

So prayer becomes a means not of coercing God, but of cooperating with him as we seek to fulfil his purposes for our lives and for his world. In that understanding, no prayer goes unanswered. Even that agonised cry of Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, that the cup of suffering might pass from him, is gloriously answered, in a way quite other than that envisaged in his prayer. For every time we receive that cup of suffering, which has been passed from him, it becomes the cup of our healing and of the world's salvation.

Prayers of intercession

If prayer is a way of discovering (in the literal sense of that word) what it is we really desire and, more important, what it is God desires for us, how does this affect our prayer for others? Evelyn Underhill, who wrote about Life as Prayer warns us that to take on a ministry of intercession can be a costly vocation:

Each time you take a human soul with you into your prayer, you accept from God a piece of spiritual work with all its implications and all its costs... you are offering to take part in the mysterious activities of the spiritual world; to share the saving work of Christ... Real intercession is not merely petition, but a piece of work, involving perfect, costly self-surrender to God for the work he wants done on other souls.

The answers to our prayers for others can therefore sometimes be as surprising as the answers to our prayers for ourselves. St Augustine, who always attributed his conversion to the patient prayers of his mother, tells in his *Confessions* how anxious his mother was when she heard that her profligate son was leaving home to go to Italy. In a seaside chapel, on that North African coast, she prayed earnestly that he might be prevented from going. But the ship sailed, to the place where he was to meet Ambrose through whose teaching he became a Christian. So Monica's prayer was answered, but not in the way she had expected.

Prayer and healing

So, with our intercession, as with our petitions, it is the intention to which God responds, not so much our instructions as to how that intention is to be achieved. I find this a helpful way of thinking about one of the most baffling of all the problems about prayer – the answer to prayers for healing. There is much evidence of times and occasions when people do seem to have been healed of bodily ailments through the ‘laying on of hands, with prayer’, a practice that has come down to us from the earliest days of the Church. Healing appears to be among those gifts of the Spirit with which some people are especially endowed. But if we take too literal a view of this, and try to suggest that in some way ‘spiritual’ methods of healing are more properly an answer to prayer than those we would call ‘scientific’, we are limiting divine activity to one particular area of life.

This came home to me most forcibly in the Chapel of the Royal Marsden Hospital, as I prayed with all the energy I could summon for my sister, who was in a nearby ward in a terminal stage of cancer. I prayed that God would intervene in some miraculous way, believing deeply that disease is the enemy of his will. That I could pray ‘In Jesus’ name’, for he had shown himself again and again to be opposed to the forces of disease and death. And then I saw over the altar of that simple room, in the centre of a hospital which wages constant war against disease, the words of the Psalmist, ‘The Lord taketh my part with them that help me’ (Psalm 118.7), and I knew that all the nursing care surrounding her at that moment, even though finally it could only ease her into a quiet and peaceful death, was part of God’s answer to my prayers, and that in some way my praying was helping to undergird that skilled activity.

To undertake to pray for other people is to forge bonds between our lives and theirs which experience shows can deeply affect the relationship between us. It will often lead to action which we can take on their behalf. We can hardly, for example, pray for someone who is desperately lonely without being moved to visit them or write to them or do something to ease their plight. But action ought never to be a substitute for prayer any more than prayer should be a substitute for action. The one undergirds the

other, with prayer the profounder of the two, reaching depths of relationship which action alone can never reach. Dr Frank Laubach, the missionary-apostle of literacy, claimed that prayer worked through a kind of telepathy which still so far eludes our scientific understanding. Be that as it may, the evidence would suggest that praying for people does change things, both in the people who pray and in those who are prayed for, in their relationship with one another and in the relationship of all of them to God.

I call as my witness of this evidence not a mystic nor a miracle-worker, but Mary Walsh, a woman I never knew but whose story I heard told by Father Brian Mullen in a radio service from Belfast. Mary was bedridden, old and without any relatives. There seemed little purpose in her life and she was longing to die. Then one day she was visited by a friend who gave time to listening to her as she complained of her sense of uselessness. All she could see out of her top-floor window was the tip of a yellow crane working on a building site.

‘I sometimes worry about those two men up there’, she said, ‘and pray that God will keep them safe’.

‘But, Mary, isn’t that a good enough reason to be alive?’, her visitor asked. ‘Maybe your job is to help them by your prayers’.

So Mary embarked on a daily vigil of intercession for the two men she could see, with such enthusiasm that her visitor, unknown to her, went across to the building site and told the foreman. From then on, a relationship grew up between the labourers and Mary. They let her know their names, so that she might pray particularly for them; they sent her flowers, and even gave her, as a memento, a ‘hard hat’ helmet, signed by all the workers on the site.

Then came the day when the building work was finished, the crane dismantled, and the men departed. Within three days, peacefully and contentedly, Mary died. The men were distressed, and spoke of how sure they were that her prayers had protected them during their perilous tasks. Whether that was so or not no one can prove. But what is certain is that the life of an old, bedridden woman and the lives of two tough labourers had been mutually enriched through Mary’s ministry of intercession.

Prayer for the world

Prayer has become in recent years increasingly seen as a weapon to be used in combating the evils of our world. We are frequently called to special vigils of prayer, organised by movements such as Amnesty International, Anti-Apartheid, Christian Aid, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and so on. All these campaigns recognise prayer as a valuable part of their armoury. Though we have to be on our guard against using prayers as a kind of public relations exercise, or as a way of disseminating information, there is no doubt that raising an issue as a matter for prayer does heighten people's awareness of it, and puts it into the context of Christ's own model prayer, that the Kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven.

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer that never goes unanswered. The very praying of it is in one sense the response to it. If we pray that God's name may be hallowed we are in fact already hallowing that name in the praying. And if we pray 'Thy will be done' we are not merely assenting to the operation of God's purpose, but committing ourselves to the fulfilling of it in everything we can do. Praying in the plural, as Our Lord has bidden us do, commits us to our fellow human beings even as we pray with and for them. Thus, when we think of the word 'us' as referring to all the people in the world, the prayer 'Give us this day our daily bread' takes on a new poignancy, and the prayer immediately following it for the forgiveness of our sins suggests that the sins needing the greatest repentance may indeed be the corporate sins in which we are part of the world's greedy injustice, and through which we are heavily in debt to others.

The temptations of our world demand steadfastness from us (James 1:2-15) and the evils from which we pray to be delivered are the evils ravaging our earth – famine, war, disease and death, but we end with the affirmation of the confidence that the Lord reigns and that the power and the glory are his forever.

Such a prayer, which dates from the first century of Christian history, and which is used in every Christian tradition, is itself evidence of the abiding reality of prayer as a potent force not only in our personal lives but in the life of the world. And today the embrace of prayer reaches out beyond the

Christian community, as all people of faith are bidden to add their prayers to the great human chorus of supplication to God for peace in the world. So it seemed entirely appropriate that, in an attempt to find the ways to peace, the world's spiritual leaders were recently called to Assisi, to pray.

There is one prayer that we can and do all share, a prayer that is both a personal petition and a corporate intercession, a prayer that pierces through to a greater reality than the shadows of this world, a prayer that adds all the strength of concentrated thought to the pursuit of peace. It is the Prayer for World Peace:

*Lead me from death to life, from falsehood to truth,
Lead me from despair to hope, from fear to trust,
Lead me from hatred to love, from war to peace.
Let peace fill our heart, our world, our universe.
Peace, Peace, Peace. Amen.*

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