

# I CANNOT PRAY

By GEORGE CROFT

**I**T is both instructive and consoling to the sincere christian to note the diffidence which haunted the prophets of the Old Testament as they responded to God's special calling. 'Then Moses said, Lord, have patience with me; but all my life I have been a man of little eloquence, and now that thou, my Master, hast spoken to me I am more faltering, more tongue-tied than ever. Why, the Lord said to him, who was it fashioned man's mouth? Who is it that makes a man dumb or deaf, clear-sighted or blind, if not I? Go as thou art bidden; I will speak with thy mouth, telling thee what words to utter'.<sup>1</sup> Yet even after this reassurance, Moses still fought shy of fulfilling his mission, referring to himself as one to whom words did not come easily.<sup>2</sup> The prophet Jeremias was afflicted with a similar lack of confidence: 'Alas, alas, Lord God (said I), I am but a child that has never learned to speak. A child, sayest thou? the Lord answered. Nay, I have a mission for thee to undertake, a message to entrust to thee. Have no human fears; am I not at thy side to protect thee from harm? the Lord says. And with that the Lord put out his hand, and touched me on the lips; see, he told me, I have inspired thy lips with utterance'.<sup>3</sup>

'I have been a man of little eloquence', 'a man, moreover, so tongue-tied', 'I am but a child that has never learned to speak' or, as the older translation runs, 'I cannot speak':<sup>4</sup> all these phrases were used by the prophets specially chosen by God for the instruction and guidance of the chosen people. They reveal the same feelings of inadequacy and weakness which have prompted the faithful of other times to say 'I cannot', 'I cannot pray', 'I cannot keep the rule' and so on. These thoughts and sayings are not the result of infidelity or indicative of tepidity. Born at once of a growing awareness of human frailty and of the holiness of God's Majesty, they tend to spring to the minds and the lips of persons who have a real desire to advance in the love of God. They reveal that state of mind which Julian of Norwich called 'doubtful dread': 'For even when we begin to hate sin and to amend us by ordinance of Holy Church,

<sup>1</sup> Exod 4, 10-12.

<sup>2</sup> Exod 6, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Jer 1, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Jer 1, 6 (Douai).

there dwelleth in us a dread that is a hindrance to us, through the beholding of ourselves and our sins committed in the past'.<sup>1</sup>

Let us first of all notice how the Lord answered Moses and Jeremias. He reassured them of his continual presence with them; it was by his power that they would do all that they were to do in his service. 'I will speak with thy mouth'. The promise made to the prophets foreshadows Christ's promise to us, that the Holy Spirit would be given to us. It is in that Spirit, freely given to all without exception, that the faithful pray. 'The Spirit helps us in our weakness', St. Paul tells us; 'for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words'.<sup>2</sup> Reassured as we may be by this knowledge, we can still lose confidence, as the prophets did, in our faithful praying and living. In spite of all our efforts, something of ourselves stands between us and the certain knowledge, in faith, that the Holy Spirit is dwelling in us. Something of ourselves comes to cloud our minds and hearts, forcing us to think and even to say, 'I cannot'.

What can it be that makes the child of God want to say such a thing? Certainly the phrase 'I cannot pray' does not indicate confidence either in God or in the christian's own grace-given fidelity. Though he wishes to assent with all his heart to Christ's command to pray always, his desire has become temporarily overlaid with feelings of discouragement. He forgets that the command itself involves resistance to such discouragement.<sup>3</sup> Prayer is no longer anything but a rather desolate, or even fearsome, duty; for the time being, he does not feel at home in his praying; rather he is at odds with himself, restless, uneasy and distrait. It seems to him, also, that there is good reason for his point of view. He takes it for granted that his past experience is the pattern of present and future experience. The memory of his past attempts to pray may offer little reassurance. Since his prayer has so often failed, so he tells himself, in the past, it is only natural to conclude that it is, inevitably, a failure now. In fact, however, such reasoning is faulty, and highly dangerous. There is little to choose between such a judgement and that of the man who says: 'Repeatedly in the past I have not kept the commandments. Therefore I cannot keep the commandments'. For such a person the past has been made more absolute by this wrongly attempted judgement. To the extent to which he believes

<sup>1</sup> *Revelations of Divine Love* (London 1961), p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 8,26.

<sup>3</sup> Lk 18,1.

such a thing to be true, he is living in his past and persisting in it. Only a truer and deeper contrition will make that past truly past for him, detach him from it, and save him from becoming more firmly rooted in the disordered and ungodly tendencies which he and all other men have it in them to foster. He has allowed himself to lose sight of the fact that his present existence (implied by his very ability even to want to judge himself) entails also the enduring possibility of cooperation in grace. By judging his present according to past patterns, he has excluded a possibility that only the present can offer; he has chosen what is past.

Christian contrition certainly involves the sinner's rejection of his past sin; but it does not involve any rejection of himself as a person in the present. Such self-rejection is that of Judas Iscariot who, realising his past sin, went and hanged himself with a halter after publicly expressing and displaying his remorse.<sup>1</sup> While the sinner yet lives, God is not rejecting him. The sinner therefore has no right to reject himself as a person. For him to do so would be to make a judgement that God does not make; what God does is continually to invite the sinner to return to him. The christian must renew his acceptance of the divine invitation at every moment. He must not try to make past infidelities absolute and enduring by judging their continuance to be inevitable.

Though there is no necessary connection between a felt inability to pray and formal sin of any kind, there is a similarity between the despair of the habitual sinner, described above, and a state of despondency over prayer. When a person gives way to self-rejection – whether it concerns his prayer or his fidelity in grace, rule, or commandment – he always tends to judge where God does not, and by his judgement to make absolute a disorder which is past and done with. Whatever else such self-disparagement may imply, it indicates an unreadiness to live in the present, the only time when grace is in being and the human being is in grace. It indicates also a preoccupation with past failures (which, in fact, may not be failures at all). The past is being allowed to smother the person out of his present: the present which is the choicest, most intimate and personal of God's presents to each of us.

All this is not to say, of course, that we have nothing to learn from the past, or that we should retain no awareness of past sins or failures. Nor is it a recommendation to concentrate exclusively

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 27, 3-10.

on the inviting and 'consoling' aspects of the present moment. Christian optimism is not to be confused with the euphoria of the happy extrovert, who appears to suppress any awareness of a personal history and that God-given sense of responsibility for past and present alike. The true fruit of the past in any person is present vigilance in discernment, and a healthy (and humorous!) wariness of the remains of unregeneration that still persist. Sin and disorder remain possible for any living person. But this possibility is no basis for judgements of self-rejection. Any temptation to such utterances might well be countered by St. Paul's triumphant cry: 'No judgement stands now against those who live in Christ Jesus'.<sup>1</sup> All the same, the heart of every christian remains to some extent divided. This is what the Ignatian meditation of Two Standards also touches on. Our adherence to Christ and to his standard is indeed effected in baptism, and the beginning of his life within us. But the remains of disordered allegiance are still to be found in our moment-to-moment experience of temptation, in our weakness in the face of temptation, and the making of temptation our own.

What temptation is it, though, which leads us to want to say hard things about ourselves and about our praying? We need to note first that, while it is in the make-up of every person to have expectations of himself, there is at the same time an immature way of having these expectations. It can happen that one part of a person has assumed, from childhood, a task-mastering rôle towards the rest of himself. This task-master unwittingly impersonates those with authority over him (parents, teachers): the authority being self-assumed. It is the impersonation that tends to say 'I must (because I can)', and which tends to do so with emphasis, display, or even the attempt to influence others. The task-master often assumes also that his views are representative of the whole, the real, person. The deviations of the rest of him (his 'lower' self, as the task-master would say) are taken to be unfortunate accidents which cannot really be accounted for, and which are disowned with revulsion. There is an unforgiveness, intolerance, and meticulous tit-for-tat justice in the task-master. There is at the same time a weary unreponsiveness on the part of the criticised 'lower self' to the exhortations of its opposite number. This form of self-management, which can disguisedly persist long into adult life, is clearly one which is based on an unhealthy and unproductive cleavage within a person

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 8,1.

between a fictitious prosecution and a fictitious defence. With such deadlock persisting, there cannot be peaceful progress in the Lord.

It may also happen that the assumption of the taskmastering or prosecuting rôle is supported by seemingly-devout reflections. Such a person might say of himself that after all he is only asking of himself what he knows God asks of him concerning fidelity in prayer, the commandments, or a particular way of life sanctioned by the Church. The disorder of such thinking springs from the presumptuous supposition that any good action can be required of ourselves by ourselves. Whereas, the Lord says, 'Without me you can do nothing'.<sup>1</sup> Only the memory of our complete dependence on God for any good action, and the frequent and effective recall of divine mercy, can whittle away in us that childish mock-conscience which would, if we let it, try to be holier than God and attempt, as if it could, to outwit him. We need the constant awareness, as well, of the repeated opportunities which time itself affords the disconsolate and the contrite to turn again to God. The presumptuous expectations a person may have formed for himself have to yield humbly to the truth of fact and action. *Praesumptio cedit veritati*. Hypotheses remain hypotheses until the facts are gathered in to verify or falsify them. This, the first condition of any scientific endeavour and indeed of any human thought, applies no less to human thoughts about the thinker himself.

Presumptuousness must give way to truth, but never to desperation. The task-master is not to be removed by the assumption of the opposite rôle of rebelliousness. Mastery in grace over the remains of disorder in us does not, of course, come from giving way to that disorder; nor does it come from going through the motions of giving way to that disorder, either in defiant admission to the rest of ourselves, or to other men, that we are fallen creatures and readily acknowledge it or, as a dubious sort of humanism might phrase it, in order to 'discover ourselves', 'develop our personality' and so on. The first alternative (the seemingly defiant one) is like the behaviour of the compulsive law-breaker. It is the behaviour of the certainly mischievous, but often doubtfully malicious, member of any society who is apparently constrained to affirm his liberty, individuality or righteousness by a public departure from law and order. Such a person would be a religious counterpart of many a youthful delinquent. 'I cannot pray', 'I cannot keep the rule' or 'I cannot keep the

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 15:5.

commandments' is the attempted utterance of the interior task-master; and in order to throw down the task-master, these very things are done in a spirit of seeming rebellion. He does not pray; he does not keep the rules; he does not keep the commandments – at least in their material and visible aspects. The second alternative (the dubiously humanistic one) entails compromise, and the abandonment, at least for a time, of the effective desire of a desire for the more perfect following of Christ.

Our reflection so far has dealt with the diffidence that may make faithful persons want to say 'I cannot'. It has considered some aspects of christian contrition, and has briefly examined an immature form of self-control which may forcibly lead to presumptuous thoughts and words and other connected mischief. It was also noted that interior dividedness, sometimes supported by seemingly-devout reflections, is often related to presumptuous self-criticism.

Whenever our devotion is divided, whenever there is unease in prayer, it is more than likely that we are making an unconscious selection and rejection in our relations with God. So some will habitually consider God as far away or as a stern judge; whilst others will think of him as an over-indulgent parent. This indeliberate tendency to personal heresy – to make our own choice of what we are going to believe in fact and action – extends itself not only to God himself and his attributes, but to his gifts to men and to our response to those gifts: to the theological virtues, and every aspect of human life in grace, as it is known to and lived by the christian. It will be appropriate for us to try to indicate by examples how we are to counteract this personal heresy: to show that a more complete acceptance of all that the Church teaches will help to bring unity and peace out of disruption and unease. The mysteries of the faith, God's revelation of himself in the Church, constitute a unifying principle; God makes himself known to us in a way that is to be our life itself.

Christ our Lord was always very severe in his words about the pharisees, the hypocritical task-masters of the chosen people. His parable about the pharisee and the publican is his most precious lesson concerning the truly prayerful attitude. As far as mere talking went, the pharisee far outdid the publican. The latter (the model of our redeemable, incarnate, and yet imperfect selves) prayed his prayer in and for divine mercy. He made no judgements save to acknowledge that in the past he had sinned. His prayer was one of

hopeful unknowing. 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner'.<sup>1</sup> It is this prayer which has become, in at least one tradition within the history of the Church, the constant utterance of faithful hearts, and has been proposed as the starting point of a more united personal prayer.<sup>2</sup> The Pharisee gives way to the publican: *praesumptio cedit veritati*.

The memory of the possibility of divine retribution, and of the frequent statements of our Lord concerning it, is tempered in the Church's teaching by the equally certain memory of divine mercy. This is the attitude of all the great penitent sinners, typified in the publican. It is also a highly reasonable attitude: St. Thomas says that God is not offended unless we go against our own good.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, any over-emphasis in the christian memory on God's retribution, untempered by an equally vivid memory of divine mercy, is often the result of childish image-making. The frightened child's image of an over-stern, implacably unjust father who punishes severely, frequently remains the framework of the adult's thoughts about God. Thus the interior task-master brings in 'the God of the Old Testament' to reinforce his disorderly self-criticism.

This brief analysis indicates how necessary it is to broaden and deepen our knowledge of the God who is revealed to us and his dealings with mankind, in the Old Testament as well as in the New. The God of the Old Testament is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; and the Father's treatment of the chosen people (and of ourselves) is portrayed in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Of God's gifts to men in the theological virtues, it is perhaps appropriate to point out that in the interior struggle between pharisaic presumptuousness and unprayerful desperation, it is the virtue of hope that is not yet fully operative. Hope is adherence to God by God's own gift; adherence to him as not yet possessed. True christian hope does not claim to possess by judgement, statement, or action, what God is or finally desires us to be like. Hope moderates a person's expectations of himself, not by caricature or compromise, but by tempering them with endless patience, and by detaching the person from such memories of the past as might, by prompting hard thoughts and sayings, depress him in his present or future action. Hope is content with unknowing; it is willing to accept the pain of

<sup>1</sup> Lk 18,3.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Déchanet, J.-M.: *A Christian Yoga* (London 1960), Appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Contra Gentes* 3, 122.

mind which this unknowing may involve, in things which God has not revealed to us about himself. Hope does not try to fill in, with presumptuous imagination, the silences of holy scripture, nor those of revelation (about times and seasons, for example)<sup>1</sup> with knowing guesses or unfounded expectations. At the same time hope gratefully acknowledges that the light God has given to men is both necessary and sufficient. Hope is not superstitious; task-masters often are.

The immature christian's interior task-master sometimes also claims angelic status. The task-mastering self not infrequently sees itself as the 'spiritual' and the 'immortal' in the person. It castigates the 'lower' self which is identified with the body and is seen as a corrupt and corruptible hindrance to higher aspirations. It can follow under such circumstances that the rooting out of sin from a person's life becomes confused with a steady and rather savage suppression of physical nature and its legitimate needs in recreation, ordered enjoyment, exercise, relaxation and so on. In this case, the temptation to say 'I cannot pray' might not be as strong as the urge to say presumptuously 'I can pray'; there is an attempt to escape from one's disordered past into a false futurity – a sort of disembodied heaven-upon-earth of one's own fashioning. Such temptations are often provoked by an unduly disincarnate, disembodied notion of what the Church teaches concerning the life of grace as it is known to and lived by the christian.

There can be no doubt that any prayer which assumes a set character of withdrawal from the concrete embodied world of things, other persons and the Church as a whole, and which does not consider each of these along with the order and disorder, improvements and deteriorations of concrete existence, is not yet one in mind with the Church. The devout follower of Christ does not aspire to be less incarnate than he, nor to avoid the pain, suffering and death which he first shared with us for our sins and because of his love. Without the body there is no fully human life; without the world of people and things, no enduring life; without the Church, no salvation; without Christ incarnate, crucified for us, and risen from the dead, no life everlasting. Not for the christian, then, to regret that he is incarnate, slyly to pretend this in his devout living, or to refuse to be fully and responsibly human. The things that are concretely given to each person, his bodily and personal make-up, his family and his work, his life in the Church as one of the faithful,

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1,7-8.

in a parish, in a diocese, in an order or in orders under Christ's vicar, and his membership of the Church suffering and triumphant as well, provide, each and all, opportunities for prayers of thanksgiving and of desire to make over, for God's taking and receiving, what comes from God and belongs to God. This truth is what the Ignatian contemplation for obtaining divine love also touches on: the christian's embodiment in grace.

Closely connected with thanksgiving is reverence in prayer. Reverence entails the christian's recognition not only of all things in the world and of other persons as being truly God's gift, but also that the person's own self, and above all his own prayer, is also God's gift. Not for him, then, to come to prayer or to come to adore our Lord in the blessed Sacrament as though it were in his power to adore simply by willing it. He must first recognise, in his approach to prayer and adoration, that if he is brought to do either, it is only by the gift of God. Hence the renewed need for some preparatory prayer and a recollected approach in mind, heart, and even in body, to the place of prayer. A genuflection may express this approach better than the over-eager and perhaps presumptuous words of the mind. When they are genuine, words of love say themselves; too much thinking about them beforehand does no good.

The christian prays reverently, then, in his embodied self, in the concrete world of space and time, in the Church, and in Christ. The christian's present, all that is here and now given him in the Spirit by God the Father, includes his very prayer as well. In the same Spirit he renders thanks for all and generously desires to become, in his prayer and service, and in the suffering these may entail, a living person given to God the Father, even as Christ is given for us. The christian's hope guards him from that desperation which sullenly clings to a disordered past and reckons divine love insufficient to make him holy. Hope guards him too from presumptuousness, which impatiently grasps after a promised future and reckons divine love unnecessary to make him holy. Either of these temptations might take the christian away from God's true presence to him and likewise impede his own present of himself to God. Hope strengthens the christian in labour, suffering and even death, because God's fidelity to his promises is stronger than death itself. Hope prepares him for perfect union in charity with Christ and all that Christ possess in the love of the divine Trinity.