

PRAYER AND HISTORY

By JOHN FOSTER

EVERYONE has his own history: and everyone has his own history of prayer or response to the word of God. This response is inevitably uttered within a person's own history: but also within the history of his own times and of all time.

Part of the difficulty people have with prayer today is in listening to the voice of God in the voice of our own times. His word, in creation, in the bible and through the Church often appears to come to us as from another age. The current desire to escape from the city and return to the countryside is not unconnected with the modern problem of prayer: a forgetfulness that the city is man's highest achievement and a source of real communion with the divine Workman. There is, too, a rationalization of history, which prevents us from feeling history and tradition as it is felt in the bible, and hinders us from praying with that lively sense of the immediacy of God in his dealings with us.

A gnosticism has crept into prayer which reduces its objectivity, turns it into something abstract and unrooted in the human condition and contemporary situation. Not that we should be surprised at this phenomenon, only that we should be aware of it. We affect to hear God better from the vault of past history, and avoid the possibility of that vault being in fact a tomb.

Prayer should by rights tell us more about ourselves than anything else. It is often said, for example, that in adult life we continue to pray in much the same way and in much the same words as we did as children. Recently, in a plea for retaining well-loved hymns in liturgical singing, it was suggested that the average Catholic grown-up is still a child in mind and heart and that the content of certain of these hymns suits all his requirements. Perhaps it would be truer to say that few if any of these hymns have ever fulfilled the requirements of children; one doubts whether they ever experience in them the call from deep to deep which is the essence of prayer. It is one thing to say that the spiritual age of the average member of the Church is in the seven-year range, but it is another to ask how genuine is this seven-year spirituality as given to seven-year olds in Catholic homes and parishes.

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Child psychology is at an advanced stage, and one of the most interesting things going on in the Church today is the application of its findings to the religious education of children. The kind of spirituality that answers the needs of differing age-groups is being worked out scientifically in modern catechetics; and it is being questioned whether the spirituality given to them in the past was a genuine spirituality. Often one meets people in their teens or twenties who have rejected the 'faith' of their childhood, only to find, on examination and discussion, that what they have rejected is not faith at all but some spurious version of it foisted on them by adults in their early years: a 'faith' that was neither organic nor historical, one bearing no relationship to the child's own truth. Religious formation has so often taken place in the abstract, outside the context of a person's own truth and history.

The approach to prayer still all too common today is similar to the way the saints used to be proposed to us as models of sanctity. The saint's excellence in a certain virtue would be commended without qualification, taken completely out of the historical context in which it had been attained, and be expected to flourish in exactly the same way in someone else living a completely different life and in a completely different time and age. The way we are accustomed to pray often shows the same kind of abstraction. To take the prayer of petition as an example. In England it is still the rule to say publicly on Sundays a prayer for the conversion of the country. This prayer was composed possibly a century ago, when the doctrine about the Church, *de Ecclesia*, was summarised in a minor thesis hidden in a short apologetics course. The situation has changed considerably during the century, with a great deal of enriched thought about the Church, authority and the human conscience, circulating among Catholics. We pray as we believe, it is said. How far, one might ask, does the present prayer for the conversion of England summarize this enriched thought? If it is true, as Gustave Thibon claims, that there is no lie more disastrous than a truth that is no longer opportune, might it not be possible that certain para-liturgical prayers used in the Church today no longer promote the cause of truth but rather impede its circulation?

The examination of prayer in terms of history highlights the need of prayer to be in accordance with truth. Truth, naturally, is not an abstraction: it exists only in things and persons. Truth only possesses a person in an earthly condition in so far as the requirements of that earthly condition are fulfilled. Labour, work, art,

politics, leisure are such normal requirements. In so far as he satisfies them, the human person grows and develops, comes into his own truth, expresses his own self. In his response to the word of God, man can only respond in accordance with his human condition. The more he fulfils the requirements of this condition, the more fitted will he be for the response. His prayer will be more personal, more real, to the degree that it is more historical, more in tune with the events, happenings and meetings through which he grows and which is his history.

Each year in some english-speaking countries a special mission Sunday is kept in every parish: a day of prayer for the Church's missionaries and missions; its purpose being to foster daily solicitude for this aspect of the Church's apostolate as the guiding light of all christian life and action. Pius XII developed the idea by equating the terms catholic and missionary. The recent document issued by the Fathers of Vatican II has further clarified the nature of the Church as the people of God and all that this implies.

The fact that for so many years so many Catholics have been exhorted to pray for the missions has not, one imagines, convinced the average member of the Church that being a Catholic christian is synonymous with being a missionary, nor with the truth that he himself is at every moment in a missionary situation. The kind of prayer that he has been saying for the missionary work of the Church has not been consistent with his status in the Church. The history of the Church in the newly-developing countries of the world has not, in short, become progressively interwoven with his own history as a member of the Church.

What many are aware of today is the anomaly existing between their prayer and their life in the world. This is probably because they underestimate their worth as a partner in the dialogue of prayer. In everyday conversation or discussion, a man can be aware of his deficiencies and lack of skill, be at times incoherent or inarticulate; but with the passing years and with experience he learns to hold his own with his equals or superiors. This is seldom true in the average person's conversation with God, notwithstanding the fact that God is continually intimating to us that we have something to contribute to the conversation, and that by his deliberate choice he has chosen us to be a living partner in a joint enterprise. A jewish convert went to the heart of the matter of prayer after being rebuffed by a priest to whom he was commending the apostolate to the jewish people. 'But surely', he said, 'one who

offers the same sacrifice as Christ must have the same ideals and ambitions as the Master'. If mission Sunday has failed to make the catholicity of the Church the catholicity of each of her members, it is because we have failed to see that prayer to God as an invitation by him to cease misunderstanding ourselves and re-claim our proper status in his sight as kings and priests of the earth. The man of prayer is also the man of faith.

The parable of the pharisee and publican at prayer suggests the wrong and the right way of meeting God. There is a hidden grandeur and nobility in the publican's prayer, merely an arrogance in the pharisee's. The words of the *Magnificat* and the form of the covenant-ceremony of the hebrews convey the same thing: the acceptance of the fact that nothing can alter the innate dignity of the relationship between Creator and creature. The pharisee was replacing a higher value with a lower, something genuine with something spurious. Holiness for him was of his own making, a do-it-yourself holiness, not that infinitely superior divine product built into human nature from the very beginning, fitting a human being for his daily life with God.

'They flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues'.¹ In this famous psalm, human emotions are lent to Yahweh in order to convey something of the intimacy of the relationship between him and his people. Here is no abstract picture of God, but a God of deep emotions and feelings, as he identified himself with his people, and lived a day-to-day existence with them. Yet he is always God, paramount, supreme, transcendent. Nothing like this could ever be conveyed unless those uttering these words were entirely convinced of their own exalted position as God's inheritance. Real contact could be made with God because he had made it a reality. Their history was his history, because he willed it that way and had chosen to intervene personally and positively in the everyday events of their lives. It was only when his people forgot the covenant he had made with them, lived their lives outside the covenant, that he became as though absent from them, and they began to speak to him in a new way, with flattery and with lies.

God, for jew and christian alike, is a person completely interested in the work of his hands. Not only are the hairs of a man's head numbered by him, but the smallest, insignificant actions of ours are regarded by him as of the utmost significance. It is this concern of

¹ Ps 78.

God for his own in the smallest details of their lives which makes the prayer of the jew and the christian the source of true human nobility. The freedom of the sons of God is something one is intensely conscious of whenever one prays to God.

The relevance of time, and the times we live in, to man's response to God's word was emphasised by Paul VI, when he was archbishop of Milan. Referring to the scientific way of life today, he mentioned how science, which had dethroned the moon goddess, the medicine man, the sorcerer, had also purified the sentiments of the christian in his relation to God. So often God is an ogre, the conglomeration of fears that is part and parcel of our human condition, and prayer to him an undending placation.

The scientific approach to truth today has helped to expose the illusions in these distortions. Our task is to re-instate God in our prayer in a way that is not shown up by the critical sense of exactness and sober realism which characterizes our scientific world. Much can be achieved by analyzing the prayer of the hebrews, which remains the pattern of christian liturgical prayer. In hebrew prayer, particularly in the psalms, God was praised because he could do things which were worthy of God. The things he achieved for them in their own history were worthy of him because of his promises to them. He had his plan which he had revealed to them, and, whilst these achievements had no supernatural significance for those not 'in the know', for God's chosen people the ordinary, as well as the extraordinary, were sign-posts pointing to the fulfilment of the promises he had made to them exclusively.

Nothing in hebrew or christian prayer has any validity apart from this gift of faith bestowed by God on his people. God was continually revealing himself to the jews in the realities of life and in the visible world. In the same way as morality in the Old Testament was synonymous with fidelity, and sin with infidelity, so prayer was a kind of tête-a-tête concerning a project about which God, in his merciful love, had given his people inside information, and the opportunities to partner him in its implementation.

'Truth in the bible was not the sense of logical exactness (tell the truth) but rather that of fidelity (I am a man who can be relied upon). God is true because he is faithful, he can be trusted. His law, his revelation, his Messiah, are true because in following them one can be sure of choosing the good way . . . God's faithful people are true insofar as their faithfulness is uncompromising'.¹ Probably

¹ Maertens, Th., *Bible Themes* (Bruges, 1965), A 14.

because of hellenistic influence, this aspect of truth ceased to be felt so much after the first centuries of christianity, but it is one that is coming to the fore again today. Many feel that the excessive cerebration of our times needs to be balanced by a greater regard for the feeling faculty of the human spirit. 'Feeling is a rational function; one does not normally feel a thing is valuable one moment and worthless the next; feeling types have an ordered scheme of things, a hierarchy of values to which they hold, and a strong sense of history and tradition. It is a discriminating function and where there is little or no feeling, you find – as in extreme cases of extraverted thinking – a tremendous accumulation of facts, some of value, other completely worthless'.¹

Where people do find a real difficulty today in praying with a biblical mentality, is that they fail to feel the immediacy of the divine action in their everyday lives. Bishop Robinson remarks how his first inclination on boarding an airplane is to offer a prayer for a safe flight; then he realizes that it is a much worthier prayer if he remembers the skill of the pilot, places his trust in modern scientific discovery and technological advance, and praises God for human effort and achievement. It is all very well speaking of God as the God of history and praying to him as such, but in an industrialized society it is not all that easy to see God's hand in history.

But, says Pope Paul, 'If in the past nature was the intermediary between God and the human mind, why may not the work of technology and art be this today?'² Our particular difficulty is in bridging the gulf between the sacral and the secular in civilization. It is easy enough to begin a class in a school with a prayer, or to use fifteen minutes of one's lunchbreak for a group rosary in order to sanctify a factory; but when it comes to consecrating the whole life of the world it is a different matter. To make this attempt in terms of a sacral age would be an anachronism, a policy of despair, out of true with a God who is faithful and true.

The scientific age in which we live benefits prayer to the extent that it forces a man to build his prayer on sober reality, not on naivety. Prayer in the modern age should be a more mature prayer because it can be more enlightened about the situation which calls for prayer. Prayer should not imprison us in an unhistorical situation: it should liberate us and release those tremendous energies

¹ Fordham, Frieda, *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology* (London, 1956), p 40.

² Walsh, James, S.J. (ed.), *The Mind of Paul VI* (London, 1964) p 149.

within us of faith, hope and charity for the situation in which we find ourselves. As that great hunter of the gnostics, St Irenaeus, put it: we hear God best in the voice of our own times. Prayer is as much a listening-in to the times in which we live as it is a listening-in to the word of God.

There are two lines of thought which can help us towards a solution of the problem of prayer in a scientific, technological civilization. The first relates to the difficulty of recognizing the immediacy of God's action in our way of life. A sacramental view of the world where everything that happens is shot through with the divine light belongs, one feels at times, to a different world than ours. This is rather the world of the primitive, of agrarianism, of a rhythmic, slow unfolding of the year, spring following winter, and autumn summer. In such a world, history as we regard it today does not exist. There are no sudden changing patterns, no great discoveries of nature, no great upheavals or changes in the course of human existence; God is present in his world as a quiet abiding presence. Today he is being described as the God of the gaps.

The present-day call to the laity to be witnesses to christian mystery in the modern world, and to recreate mystery in our techno-scientific society, means that a deeper dialogue has to take place between the two orders of the divine and the human. The christian's ultimate aim will be to 'raise up valid signs which will give to actuality the resonance it possesses as a creaturely echo of the word through which it comes into existence'.¹ To find a way of turning the reality he experiences into symbols which have value in the context of an industrialized society, his manner of prayer will depend a great deal on the degree of his love for his times.

It is precisely at this point that one finds a clue to the difficulties many experience both in liturgical and private prayer today. God is not immediate in the life of the world. His word appears to have no relevance in such a world. Response to his word lacks the urgency and a sense of the occasion called for. This can be righted only when the christian is so much in love with his world, and has such an understanding of its real problems, that he knows that nothing can be done for it without the divine intervention.

The question then is: how does God intervene today? In the Old Testament, God was praised because he could do things that were worthy of him. He had revealed his plan of salvation which his people could see being worked out in their own history. Today the

¹ Jones, David *The Anathemata* (London, 1952) p 17.

christian has to do the same thing. He has to see God's action as worthy of him, and recognize the gaps in human effort and endeavour crying out for such intervention.

This should be the manner and the content of all christian prayer. The first stage in acquiring it is to find the natural stepping-off point for any entry into the divine order of things. The modern christian has to find within him the proper emotions and feelings for the world in which he lives, in order to feel for that world so much that he recognizes the points of entry for divine action.

A second line of thought, which could lead to a re-vitalizing of the life of prayer, has reference to the community aspect of prayer. The covenant God makes with each one of us, he makes with each one of us as a member of a community. It is in the community that the individual person learns to listen; for it is the community which is the primary educator. Since prayer is always initiated by God and is primarily a response to a call from him, a special competence is required in such times as ours for hearing the word of God.

This problem in Old Testament times was simpler. There was always the mediator, the prophet, sent by God to reveal his message to his people. Until recently, in the Church as well, one was content to accept a similar mediatorship in the person of the Church herself, speaking through her hierarchy. Nowadays, however, society has become something so complex and bewildering that to interpret God's message to our times needs the co-operation of the whole people of God. It is easy, as the pope said recently, to study the problems of modern man: it is very difficult to make decisions on these problems. To arrive at a decision on birth control that will bring a christian solution to a human problem, the wealth of a world's theologians, doctors, psychologists, social workers, assembles to enable the word of God to be interpreted in our times in such a way that it will be understood by the people of our times.

All this must influence the prayer of the Church. The human ear must accustom itself to hearing the word of God speaking to it in the voices of a multitude of people and peoples. We are no doubt on the threshold of a new pentecost, when we shall hear God our Father speaking to us each in our own tongue. For if we believe we are a kingly people, a royal priesthood, we can also believe we are a prophetic race, each of us richly endowed with the gifts of the Spirit, and each necessary for the full revelation of the word of God in our own times. The mystery of prayer is indeed the mystery of the Church and the mystery of the people of God.