

GROWTH IN PRAYER

By RUTH BURROWS

AS SOON as we would talk or write about prayer and growth in prayer we are faced with huge difficulties. We are talking and writing not merely about the deepest thing in human life but about its very essence — more, about the mystery of God himself. We are daring to use terms such as ‘intimacy’, ‘friendship’, for that we are called to such is beyond doubt for the believer. We find a breathing of it in the first pages of Genesis where, it is intimated, God was wont to walk with his man and woman through the garden in the cool of the day. Though sin came to rupture this blessed state, still, throughout the pages of the Old Testament with its history of humans as they really are — sinful, blind, obstinate, hard of heart — there shine stars, ‘friends of God’, who in some measure attained or were granted intimacy with the awful mystery. Such intimacy is still possible. Amidst a perverse and corrupt people ‘Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him’ (Gen 5,24). Here, it is suggested, was someone for whom God meant so much that he was swallowed up by him. Enoch disappeared, only God shone out. In this pregnant phrase of scripture we have a summing up of holiness, of the perfection of a human life.

Moses spoke with God face to face and through this terrible exposure was transformed in such a way that he became ‘God’ for the people at large, a people too sensual and selfish to want God himself. They were not prepared to pay the price.

We have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire; we have this day seen God speak with man and man still alive. Now, therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire, as we have, and has still lived? Go near, and hear all that the Lord God will say; and speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you; and we will hear it and do it (Deut 5,24-27).

This is an authentic human cry. If we use the term ‘friendship with God’ then we must know what we are doing, we must speak with

utmost seriousness and with deep awe. There is no place for 'lightness', for trifling. What did it mean for Enoch, what did it mean for Moses — and, we shall ask, what did it mean for Jesus — to be a friend of God, to be on that lonely, dreadful mountain exposed to we know not what? And yet intimacy with God is the blissful fulfilment of us all. It is what we were made for and for what we endlessly yearn. It is to this that we blindly reach out in our human search for friendship and intimacy, but whereas even the richest human friendship, even that which has truly made of two one flesh, is only part of an existence and life; our relationship with God is our very meaning as human beings. Man — and that means you and me — is, by definition, a relation to God. We become human, become what we are meant to be, in the measure that, like Enoch of old, we are lost to ourselves and taken up into him. Prayer, on our side, is a conscious affirmation of this truth, an effective desire and willing that it be accomplished.

How do we attain to intimacy with God or rather, how do we enter into the intimacy offered? We must be certain that no wooing is necessary. We do not have to find ways of attracting the divine partner, of getting him to notice us. Here is someone who is love itself and the very fount of our own existence, enfolding us, inviting us to receive him, drawing us to his heart. All these human expressions are totally inadequate. Scripture and mystical writers have used the different modes of human love and friendship — parent/child, husband/wife, brother, friend — to tell us something of the reality of God's love and desire for us. Each is inadequate. All together they are inadequate. It is not easy to speak properly of a deep human relationship, how much more so when one of the partners is God. And even if one were able, through profound experience and intensive thought and effort, to give what seems as close a proximation to the truth as is possible, its understanding depends on the heart of the recipient. Truth must find an echo in the one who hears if it is to be recognized. Put it another way, a heart must be really listening, really wanting the truth, really wanting God. The difficulty is that we do not want him. We want our own version of him, one we can, so to speak, carry around in our pockets rather as some superstitious people carry around a charm. We can hold endless, loving conversations with this one, feel we have an intimate understanding with him, we can tell him our troubles, ask for his approbation and admiration, consult him about all our affairs and decisions and get the answer we want, and this god of ours has almost nothing to do with God.

Most of us find it almost impossible not to think of prayer as a special activity in life, as an art that can be taught or learned rather as we can learn to play a musical instrument, and so some of us are quick to feel we are proficient and others that we are painfully handicapped, are missing out on some secret or have some lack in our nature which makes prayer difficult if not impossible for us. We feel there are certain laws governing prayer, and techniques to be mastered, and when we have got hold of these we can pray. Thus we tend to look around for the guru, for the one who has mastered the art and its techniques and eagerly look to be taught. When we take up a book or article on prayer, we shall probably detect, if we stop to think, that we are looking for the key, the magic formula that is going to put our prayer right, enable us 'to make a go' of this mysterious activity called prayer. We may feel that others seem to take it in their stride but somehow it does not work for me and anxiously I look hither and thither for someone who will hand me the secret. All this is proof enough that we are overlooking the fundamental facts: that prayer is not a technique but a relationship; that there is no handicap, no obstacle, no problem. The only problem is that we do not want God. We may want a 'spiritual life', we may want 'prayer', but we do not want God. All anyone can do for us, any guru can teach us, is to keep our eyes on Jesus, God's perfect, absolute friend.

If we look at the gospels we shall find that Jesus never speaks of us as being friends of God. He teaches us to call him Father. Friend implies equality of status, child or son a total dependence and absolute obedience. When Jesus gave us his own privilege of calling God, *Abba*, that word certainly carried with it everything we understand of the unbreakable, utterly reliable, tender, compassionate, infinitely involved fatherly/motherly love of God. Of this we must be sure to the marrow of our bones. But equally we must remember what the father-son relationship was in the Jewish culture of Jesus's time. We can go so far as to say that the son was considered as having no life or even existence of his own. He owed absolutely everything to the father: we might say a son was his father's 'thing', and the son owed him total, unconditional obedience. When Jesus tells us that we must call God, *Abba*, and live as his children, he is demanding of us this decentralization, this 'ex-stasy', this standing out of self, in order to transfer our existence, our meaning, our importance, our weight, to the Father. It is a summons to the most radical self-denial.

On the other hand, Jesus gives us the title 'friend', his friend, in that we have opened ourselves to and received his revelation of the Father, that we trust him with our lives, obey him as Jesus did. To become the friend of Jesus means to identify with his living for his Father. This alone is prayer, this alone is intimacy with God. Its blissful fulfilment remains hidden from our sight and experience as it was for Jesus in his earthly life. All that concerns us here and now is what concerned Jesus: that God should have just whatever he wants. Jesus has become our Way, our Truth and our Life because he declined to have any way of his own, any truth or reality of his own, only the Father's. He declined to live from his own well-springs but only from the Father. This is what we have to do; this is how we must live.

Jesus is with us always not so as to pillow our weary heads on his breast and murmur words of solace in our ears continually, but to share with us his vision, his passionate dedication to the Father's will. He is with us to brace, reinforce, underpin us for our life's great task. True, he lifts from our shoulders the crushing yoke of an alien master, the god we have fashioned in our own likeness, by revealing the true face of the Father. He breaks off self-made shackles of bondage and sets us free. Thus his companionship gives us rest and real happiness. Nevertheless there remains a yoke and a burden that has to be carried with courage and love.

Life-giving, joy-giving knowledge of Jesus and the Father he reveals does not drop into our lap from heaven. We have to work for it. 'Come to me', says Jesus, and we must go to him, and the prime way of going to him is by intent, loving absorption of scripture, particularly the New Testament. Put simply, we must strive to acquire an intellectual knowledge of him, of his attitudes, values, teaching. This intellectual knowledge is certainly not intimacy, certainly not a 'knowing Jesus' but it is an indispensable ingredient for intimacy and real knowing. It is work we have to do, a practical expression of earnest desire to get to know our Lord. Moreover, it supplies, so to speak, the matter into which spirit can be infused, or in more homely words, we laboriously gather the faggots to build the bonfire which only God can set alight. But it has to be there for him to set alight. And we must realize that it is not a case of our having to labour all by ourselves until the bonfire is a good size and everything well-dried out and then we can hope for God to set fire to it. No, we are never working alone. When we search for him in the scriptures we have already found him. He is with us, at a level we do

not perceive and cannot perceive, touching our inmost depth and working within, infusing light, inflaming the will. From time to time we may be aware of enlightenment and a stirring of desire but it is utter folly to conclude that, if we do not feel those things 'it has not come off' and 'I am getting nowhere'. That might be so were we engaged in secular study or even in sacred scripture in a secular way, but it is certainly not so when we are 'listening' to the word of God be it in our private reflection or in the communal 'listening' of the liturgy. We are engaged in a sacramental action. Something is happening as it happens in the eucharist and other sacraments. But as with them, our part is essential. We must bring our elements. 'Seek and you *will* find', Jesus assures us solemnly. Our seeking in scripture must be like that of the bride in the Canticles, all heart, never a merely intellectual effort. Our heart must infuse our minds with trust, desire, resolution. Our heart must be in our eyes as we read and in our ears as we hear. Most certainly we shall find him.

This search for the beloved in the revealed word means that our times of silent prayer have content. We have strong motives for perseverance. We have a growing though obscure knowledge of the Father before whom we are trustfully exposed. We can recognize him as he comes to us in our daily lives, quickly discern his demands and with ever growing depth and clarity. We have his own vision by which to interpret the revelation of material creation and human history.

Jesus draws us to himself not for himself but so as to take us to the Father. The Father has asked him to be our friend. He has confided us to him as a cherished possession and Jesus considers us more precious than the whole world and his own life. Jesus was unimportant to himself. We are only his friends in truth if we allow him to share his Father with us. Friendship with him entails absolute loyalty on both sides. He, most readily, most devotedly, lays down his life for his friends. On the other hand, his friends never let him down. They are at his side in all his trials, never desert him whatever happens. They stand up before 'men' and acknowledge him, never allowing the opinions, fashions, ridicule or persecutions of 'men' to lead them to betray or deny their friend. And when we are his friends, how confidently we can approach the Father.

Jesus teaches his friends a prayer that enshrines all he wants to teach them, all he asks of them. It is addressed to *Abba*. We are to say 'Our Father'. We know he is Father, not because we have proof, because, in the course of our lives we detect a fatherly care or because we often feel a warm loving presence; not because we see

him granting our little wishes. No, we acknowledge him as Father for none of these reasons but simply because Jesus guarantees him. As with Jesus himself, everything can seem contrary to what we normally mean by father-love and care. By staking everything on Jesus's guarantee, and trying to live always in the faith that God is Father, we come to know that he is; that he is our ground, air, our encompassing, the source of what we are and do. If we reflect carefully we shall find that we catch ourselves out in attitudes, words, actions, doubts, fears, scruples, that belie our notional belief. In actual fact, if not in 'belief', we are assuming that he is difficult to approach, that he is not concerned with us and has to be won over onto our side.

A friend told me recently of a little girl who was afraid when she woke up alone at night and frequently disturbed her parents by going along to them. 'But you are not alone', the mother reassured her, 'Jesus is with you'. 'I know', her daughter replied, 'but I want someone with skin on'. This heartfelt, vivid declaration echoes our own yearning. We find it so hard to 'live by faith alone', as we say. We too want someone 'with skin on'. The danger is that we try to put skin on. Misleading things are often said and written about the development of prayer and probably the outpourings of the mystics have been misinterpreted. Certainly one picks up the idea that sooner or later we shall realize the presence and love of God almost as though it were on the same level and mode of perception as human love. This is to overlook that our *Abba* is 'in heaven'. These are Jesus's words. *Abba* though he is, he is completely other, transcendent mystery. Between him and us there lies an unbridgeable gulf which we could never cross. He himself has thrown the bridge, his Jesus. Only because he has done this can we know him and the breath-taking truth that he calls us to intimacy. Our approach to him must always be with awe. 'O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our maker!' Our whole being must be bowed in worship all day long. And we must renounce the desire to have a God we can handle. We can be like people at a seaside resort who prefer the man-made swimming pool with its easy temperature, safety and amenities. After all, it is sea-water! And a little beyond is the open sea, untrammelled, untameable, over which we have no control whatever. But it is to this sea that we must commit ourselves and let ourselves be carried away. It is terrifying, this immense sea that is God. What will he do with us? Where will he carry us? He is *Abba*, says Jesus. Fear not, trust him.

Faith is not a thing of the mind, it is not an intellectual certainty or a felt conviction of the heart, it is a sustained decision to take God with utter seriousness as the God of my life; it is to live out the hours in a practical, concrete affirmation that he is Father and he is 'in heaven'. It is a decision to shift the centre of our life from ourselves to him, to forego self-interest and make his interests, his will our sole concern. This is what it means to hallow his name as Father in heaven. Often it may seem as if we only act 'as if', so unaffected are our hearts, perhaps even mocking us: 'where is your God'. It is this acting 'as if' which is true faith. All that matters to faith is that God should have what he wants and we know that what he wants is always our own blessedness. His purposes are worked out, his will is mediated to us in the humblest form, as humble as our daily bread.

It is perhaps not too difficult to see God's providence in certain areas of our lives but it is likely that hour follows hour, full of little events, decisions and choices that are, in fact, divorced from him. If so we are denying him as *Abba*. We do not allow him to reign over us totally and we can excuse ourselves with the illusion that in our case the requisite conditions for total loving are not present. It would be different if such and such were different. Our situation is far too distracting and worrying. The truth is devastatingly simple and we are tempted to shirk the stark, overwhelming reality that God is giving himself to us in the stream of ordinary, mundane events of our ordinary, mundane life. This is where he is for us, here and not elsewhere. Here, precisely here, must we hallow his name. Nothing is wanting to us. 'Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose'. It is not for us to judge whether they are fresh and green and sustaining. If he puts us there, even though they seem to us barren and hard, a place of struggle rather than repose, they are the pastures we need and in which we shall grow. We pray 'Give us this day our daily bread'. When you pray, Jesus tells us, you have to believe your prayer is already heard. We cannot judge results. We are certain that everything that comes to us is our daily, nourishing bread. This is what it means to believe: to take that daily bread and eat it with love and gratitude no matter how bitter the taste. By nature we, as it were, stand on the viewpoint of self and judge other people, things, what is happening from that stand. Faith demands that we deliberately get off that stand and move to another, the viewpoint of Jesus, and then, how different everything looks. This needs constant effort, constant readjustment. Unless we undertake this battle against our subjectivity, how we feel, how things look to

us and so forth, and choose to stand on Jesus and live our lives in his vision, we shall never get anywhere. And yet, how few do this day in day out until it is second nature, their own nature. These indeed, have put on the mind of Christ.

Jesus bids us say 'Our Father' and to hallow his name must mean taking very seriously that everyone is a child of this Father and my brother. As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, we must put on compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forgiving one another . . . we must show constant, unconditional love and goodness to all no matter how they treat us because this is what God is like and does. He is forgiveness — a love always on tip-toe to give. As soon as we are there to receive he gives himself. We must be like this, we must respond to others like this. Unless we do so, we cannot receive God's love. We have turned away from him. Nowhere, except when he is quoting the *Shema* does Jesus speak of our loving the Father. He tells us we must believe in the Father, trust him, obey him, and love our neighbour. It can seem presumptuous to speak of loving God — as though we can! We love Jesus and he has spelt out for us what loving him means — keeping his commandments. This surrender to Jesus in keeping his words, immediately puts us in the Father's waiting embrace. 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him' (Jn 14,23). A loving fellowship is established. Jesus loves the Father. The Father loves Jesus. Only in Jesus can we love the Father and receive his love. We love the brother we see and his brothers living with us in our mortal life, and in doing so, we are loving the unspeakable mystery, the Father.

O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these have known that thou has sent me. I have made known thy name to them and will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them (Jn 17,25-26).

Sometimes we can feel as if life is just too hard, or just too uninteresting and drab. It can seem that the obstacles within ourselves are mountainous and insuperable. Jesus's own unwavering faith must be ours. Everything is possible to him who believes, was his humble boast. When everything seemed to be going wrong for him, when the 'no' of human hearts had congealed into hard rock which threatened to grind him down, he was certain that his Father could and would move that hard mass and drown it for ever.

He died in hope, not in hopes realized. The picture of him asleep in the violent storm, when others were frantic, and angered by his seeming indifference, reveals his inmost heart in its perfect trust. If we would be his friends we must live like that. A friend of Jesus dares all and never says such and such is too hard. If God asks something then it is possible of accomplishment. They evade nothing, be it trying situations, uncongenial people, difficult duties. They take each day as it comes with its pleasures and joys, its disagreeable things and pains, shoulder their cross and go with Jesus. The significance of the cross is not suffering but obedience — doing the Father's will regardless of whether it is easy or hard.

For the true friends of Jesus evil does not exist. Everything is turned to good. Death itself, the epitome of all that is evil and destructive of man, is transformed. In his wonderful riposte to the Sadducees who denied the resurrection, Jesus, himself still in faith and not in sight, gloriously affirms our everlasting future, simply because he knows his Father and he knows this Father could never abandon his friends. The idea is unthinkable. You are quite, quite wrong, he emphatically declares, and closes the issue.

Friends of God? Can it be? Yes, but there is only one way: to become 'son'; to accept the friendship and companionship of Jesus so as to learn sonship from him, share in his sonship. In practice this means being utterly unimportant to ourselves, becoming selfless, empty, nothing but an echo — like Enoch disappearing. This is the paradox: the one who has consented to be nothing but an emptiness for the Father's love, becomes — and only now, in this context of nothingness, dare we breathe the word — somehow 'equal' to God, raised up to be his friend, his beloved. 'The Father and I are one', says Jesus. Lost in his *kenosis* it can perhaps be said of us.