

THE BEGINNINGS OF PRAYER

By DAMIAN LUNDY

I ONCE lived in community with Vince, a canadian Brother, whose supreme compliment for anyone he really admired was 'He's got it all together'. I would like to suggest that praying is about *getting it all together* — connecting the fragmentary experiences of life and bringing them into the presence of God, who creates, redeems, unites, renews, makes holy. I have discovered that if I do not pray, superficially nothing changes, but in fact I remain broken and unhealed, my energies dissipated, my relationships unconnected, my life fragmented, without centre or direction. To get in touch with God in my prayer is to get in touch with my deeper self, for he is the reason for my existence. It is to discover that the humdrum everyday world in which I live, move, relate and have my being is 'holy ground' (Exod 3,5), and to recognize the fields of my experience as 'truly the house of God and the gate of heaven' (Gen 28,17). In other words, I can only 'get it all together' when I see it all as somehow springing from and leading to God.

The raw material of my prayer is my everyday living. The danger is to think of prayer-time as an escape from everyday living. A reason to pray, apart from the fact that God wants me to, is to look for the meaning of my everyday life, by taking time to reflect in stillness, in faith, in the presence of God. But which God do I believe in? Which God do I want to get in touch with when I pray? If I am frightened of God (as many are) I shall not wish to spend time with him. There is no room here to explore some of the common inadequate and damaging substitutes for God (be they terrifying idols which haunt guilt-ridden, fearful memories, or soft 'teddy bears', clutched and fondled selfishly and sentimentally when we see prayer as no more than a method of securing personal favours); but another thing for a beginner (or one beginning again) in prayer is to ask, 'Which God am I trying to get in touch with?'

Praying is listening

For many years now I have been helped by H. J. Richards's simple but profound summary of the bible's presentation of God in

three key verbs: a God who *speaks*, a God who *calls*, a God who *saves*.¹ His speaking becomes real for me when I listen, as his calling becomes real when I respond. He saves by speaking and calling, and I am saved, changed, when I listen and respond. And that can happen to me today: 'Today is born for you a Saviour. . . .' 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. . . .' 'Today salvation has come to this house. . . .' 'Today you will be with me in paradise . . .' (Lk 2,11; 4,21; 19,9; 23,43). Luke makes his point emphatically at different stages of his gospel, taking up the familiar idea of psalm 94: 'O that *today* you would *listen* to his voice! Harden not your hearts!' And the Father's word to the fearful apostles on the mountain with Jesus is, 'This is my Son whom I have chosen. Listen to him' (Lk 9, 35).

It's not that he can't speak;
 who created languages
 but God? Nor that he won't;
 to say that is to imply
 malice. It is just that
 he doesn't, *or does so at times*
when we are not listening, in
ways we have yet to recognize
 as speech.²

To give time to prayer is to spend time consciously listening and responding to God in my life. A mistake which clings from childhood is to spend all my prayer-time talking to God — changing scripture's 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening' (1 Sam 3,9) into a parody of itself: 'Listen, Lord, your servant is speaking!' Expressed this way, the danger seems obvious — but it is a common mistake. I think we must aim to make one such 'oasis' in our busy lives; fifteen minutes, thirty minutes, an hour. Be practical and realistic. And be faithful, so that once you have decided on a time for your prayer, exclude other activities, however pressing. See this, like Mary of Bethany, as time spent in the company of Jesus himself, invited into your house — a time to listen to him, to speak with him, just to be with him instead of ministering to the needs of his Body in the business of everyday living (Lk 10,38f). Your personally annotated bible is your map of the 'holy ground' — the word which can be a lamp for your path and a light for your feet (Ps 119,105). Keep exploring its inexhaustible moods, messages and mysteries. And when you are listening closely to this word, and reflecting in

the light that it throws on your personal experiences of the day, as you try to 'get it all together', you might discover how God has been trying to get through to you today, present and active in your life even when you were not aware of him, even when you have shut him out. Sometimes honesty is painful, as we all know — but prayer must be honest, even if it means acknowledging my superficiality and mediocrity and asking God to change me, to become my salvation yet again.

Ruth Burrows explores this aspect very powerfully. We are afraid to *trust* ourselves to love. We do not really believe in God's groundless, unmerited, eternal love for us. This must be the rock, the solid rock beneath us. God loves me, not because I am good but because he is good.³ 'I feel', she writes, 'that I must leave no stone unturned to get across the major cause of mediocrity — lack of trust, and the reverse of this, self-trust'.⁴ Let me not allow my consciousness of my own superficiality, mediocrity and failure to put me off prayer. Everyone's life needs a contemplative dimension: when I am most active and involved, I especially need to take time away from the bustle and be still with Jesus — not hiding my active life, with all its problems and anxieties from him, but opening the doors to him (in Pope John Paul's evocative image), and inviting him to step inside. There are three ways I can do this:

(1) to take Jesus on a tour of my life (or some part of it) today (or yesterday, last week, this year), with its different events, characters, problems, joys, disappointments, successes and failures;

(2) to let him take me on a tour of some part of his life (using the gospels) with its particular concerns and situations, with which I can compare my own experiences;

(3) to let him take me on a tour of my life (or some part of it). All three ways are valuable forms of prayer, but the third is the most daring and demanding, as it is a bumper version of all three tours and quite unpredictable since he may take me 'where I would rather not go'. And yet the destination is not unknown, for this unpredictable journey is in fact the way to the Father, and it can change the direction of my life. As John Paul II told the young British church at Cardiff:

It is through prayer that Jesus leads us to his Father. It is in prayer that the Holy Spirit transforms our lives. It is in prayer that we come to know God: to detect his presence . . . to hear his voice . . . and to treasure his gift to us of personal responsibility for our lives and for our world. . . . We begin to see things his way. Prayer

transforms our individual lives and the life of the world. Young men and women, when you meet Christ in prayer, when you get to know his gospel and reflect on it in relation to your hopes and your plans for the future, then *everything is new*. Everything is different when you begin to examine in prayer the circumstances of every day, according to the set values that Jesus taught. . . . In prayer, united with Jesus, you begin to breathe a new atmosphere. You form new goals new ideals. Yes, in Christ you begin to understand yourselves more fully. This is what the Second Vatican Council wanted to emphasize when it stated, 'The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). In other words, Christ not only reveals God to man, but he reveals man to himself. In Christ we grasp the secret of our own humanity.⁵

Prayer is looking

When I take prayer seriously, I discover that the way I pray affects the way I see my life's meaning, purpose, value and opportunities. Earlier I used the metaphor of listening to describe a person's relationship with God in prayer. I now use the metaphor of seeing or looking, recalling a passage of St Augustine (A.D. 354-430):

Our whole business in this life is *to restore to health the eye of the heart* whereby God may be seen. To this end are celebrated the holy mysteries; to this end the Word of God is preached; to this end are the moral exhortations of the Church made. . . . To this end is directed the whole aim of the divine and holy Scriptures so that the *interior eye* may be purged of anything which hinders us from the sight of God.⁶

Augustine recalls Adam sinning in paradise, hiding himself from the face of God: 'after that eye had been wounded by sin, he began to dread the divine light; he fled back into the darkness and the thick covert of the trees, fleeing the truth, seeking eagerly the shade'.⁷

The gospels offer us stories of Jesus restoring the sight of blind Adam. For instance, Luke 18 tells how, as Jesus comes near to Jericho, a blind beggar, hearing that 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by' cries out: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me'. Jesus's response is a question: 'What do you want me to do for you?' which might be addressed to me, another blind beggar, who takes time to sit by the roadside calling out to the Master (who is always 'passing by'). I know what I want: 'Lord, that I may see!' Will I with my sight restored, follow Jesus, giving thanks to God? (18,33).

Looking in

It may help to regard the way I spend part of this time as four ways of looking: looking in, looking back, looking forward, looking out. Let us examine each of these. To look in is to contemplate my personal experiences. It may sound too introspective, too self-centred, nothing more than a form of navel-gazing; but this is to regard the activity too negatively. There is in each of us a need to get in touch with our deeper selves, to tear off the masks we wear to impress others, to fool ourselves or to protect our vulnerability. We can learn to love ourselves and to accept ourselves as we are, when we start to appreciate God's love for us, his dear children, made and restored in his own image. I must not be afraid to invite Jesus to make himself at home in my heart however flawed or 'scruffy' it may be. Like W. B. Yeats, never content,

Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.⁸

Sometimes I am ashamed, regretful, anxious, depressed, unclean: or in a sceptical, ironic, critical spirit, disillusioned and doubtful, aware only of the pockets of atheism in my life (to quote a phrase of G. W. Hughes S.J.) which disillusion and scare me, threatening like black holes to suck in and destroy all that is good and living in myself. At other times, I may be awed by the sense of God's power, presence, love; or simply worn down and exhausted by the tedium and boredom of my everyday existence. But, especially when I am in a negative mood, I must look bravely into the real me, pray as I am, not as I would like to be. I was struck by a paragraph in H. A. Williams's book *Tensions*:

What I wonder, is whether we can truly love God unless from time to time we disbelieve in his existence. I suspect that to love God with all our heart will sometimes, perhaps often, involve us in being atheists. We must not evade the conflict of our atheism. We must be ready to accept the tension of our discovery at certain times that we think the whole christian bundle of tricks is a lot of bloody nonsense.⁹

If you feel attracted to explore forms of prayer which take as starting-points your own moods and feelings, you may find help in Louis M. Savary and Patricia H. Beirne's book *Prayerways*,¹⁰ which is creative and often startling in its suggested 'ways of prayer . . . for

those who feel discouraged or distraught, frightened or frustrated, angry or anxious, powerless or purposeless, over-extended or unappreciated, burned out or just plain worn out'. To some ears, this form of prayer sounds self-indulgent, but the authors remind us that:

In christian language, to be in burnout can be an experience likened to being poor in spirit, carrying one's cross and sharing in Christ's passion. 'Come to me, all you who are weary, and I will refresh you', said Jesus. Those who are suffering from extreme pressures can invoke God with an urgency possible to no one else. While burnout is a time of woundedness, anguish and helplessness, it can also be a time of openness to the Spirit and to grace'.¹¹

I have spent some time dwelling on these negative feelings because they constitute a big obstacle to many people, in my experience, who having lost their childlike faith and practices feel they would like to start praying again but wonder where to start. Start right where you are, I suggest — there is no better, indeed no other place. If you feel this type of prayer is for you, you will find that it offers new ways into the powerful poetry of the Psalms and other Wisdom literature of the bible as well as into anguish and longings of many of the prophets, like Jeremiah. It can also be a way into once familiar, now discarded devotional practices which you abandoned as childish, stale or superficial. Try exploring again, with new eyes, the different moods and mysteries of human life presented in the rosary's meditations on the lives of Jesus, his mother and the early Church; or the different stages of Jesus's own painful way to the Father in the stations of the cross.

These are of course simply ways of praying the gospels. And I can see my needs spelt out boldly in the pages of the New Testament, when I read this with fresh eyes, sensitively and honestly, looking for Jesus and looking for myself. What does Jesus *give*? And what does he *take away*? Who *is* he?

John 20 shows the risen Jesus meeting with his disillusioned followers: with Mary Magdalene in the garden, as she looks for a missing corpse in the empty tomb and does not recognize the living Lord — he takes away her grief and gives her joy, not just for herself but for others: 'Go and tell my brothers. . .'. Then unexpectedly he visits his disciples, locked in the upper room for fear, which he takes away and gives them peace, the power of his Spirit, which they must pass on to others, as they go out to forgive sins instead of staying

locked up in themselves, retaining the sins he came to take away and now relies on them to take away; and, eight days later, to the unbelieving Thomas, Jesus comes, taking away doubt, giving a new faith which the Fourth Gospel expresses as its climax: 'My Lord and my God'.

I offer these as examples of what can happen when, using the gospel as a light, I look into myself and offer hospitality to Jesus, inviting him to look in, to enter under my roof. Jesus's most notable gift is that of healing, so I can pray, 'Heal me, Lord Jesus, in the symptoms and in the causes'. Then I can just be quiet and let the Spirit of Jesus move over my life, move into every part of me, conscious and unconscious, renewing and strengthening me, changing me, enlightening me, being the salvation of all my relationships, all my emotions and intentions, all my thoughts and actions, my omissions and my words, whether or not I can remember or own them.

Looking back

Often he will bring these to mind in prayer. Memory plays a key role in the experience of personal prayer, as it does in all forms of celebration and liturgy: 'Do this in memory of me'. In *looking back* (the second of my four categories) I need not always concentrate on the negative experiences of my life, on the neglect and failure which afflict me. I have much to be thankful for, when I look back into my childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and see the faces of friends and relatives, and re-visit the places and times where I have known joy and peace, where I have been loved and appreciated. This kind of prayer is another exploration of inner space; it involves looking back gratefully, becoming a child again. A wonderful image of a person at prayer in this mood is given in Psalm 131, which became real for me as the theme psalm of a retreat I made in 1982:

Enough for me keep my soul tranquil and quiet,
like a child in its mother's arms,
as content as a child that has been weaned.

Once again I pray this now, looking back over my retreat notes and recalling two more scripture references: Isaiah 30,15 and Matthew 18,1-4:

For thus says the Lord Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel:
Your salvation lay in conversion and tranquillity,
your strength in complete trust;
and you would have none of it.

So Jesus called a little child to him and set the child in front of them. Then he said: 'Unless *you* change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'.

And I might also have difficulty entering not only the kingdom of heaven, but the classroom or the living-room or street — wherever children are. Gordon J. F. Rowland quotes the psychotherapist, Alexander Lowen, in this context: 'Deep within the personality of every adult is the child he was. His maturity is only a surface layer which too often rigidifies into a structured façade. When this happens, a person loses touch with the child within him'. And Rowland adds: 'And with the child before him'.¹²

Personally, I prefer to pray at night, at the end of the day, sometimes setting off on a journey with Jesus to explore the landscape of my day, peopled with characters and situations and events I may have barely thought about but which are now a part of me. It can take a few minutes; it can take half an hour or more; it is a more positive and open alternative to the 'examination of conscience' familiar from childhood. I can invite Jesus to lead me, by the power of his Spirit, to re-visit in my prayer the pattern of today, however blurred or confused, starting from the feelings I have as it draws to a close. I can ask that I learn from it as I offer it, unfinished but authentically mine, to the Father through Jesus my brother. And I can look to tomorrow, praying that where the Lord leads I shall follow, more alert, more ready, more aware.

Looking forward

Looking forward is the obvious corollary to looking back. A favourite film of mine is Franco Zeffirelli's *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. In my room I have a poster of the open face of that film's Francis of Assisi, whose famous, difficult prayer is printed underneath: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' This is the prayer of hope and expectation, of searching and uncertainty, of openness to God's will. It presumes not just a readiness to ask the question but a willingness to act on the response he may give, an answer which may be only very gradually discerned. This is a lifetime's work, which may cost more than I am prepared to give at this moment (or even dare to think) but it is also a task for each day, to be examined in my prayer, faced in God's presence, so that when he does call clearly, I will be ready to respond.

To pray a gospel passage like chapter 21 of John, one of the most beautiful resurrection stories, helps me see how in this unexpected

meeting of Jesus with a group of his disciples, and in particular with Simon Peter, the different forms of looking back and forward are symbolically represented. Jesus sees his (former) disciples fishing. They have passed the whole night, wasted it, you might say, catching nothing. As the sun rises, there stands Jesus, unrecognized at the lakeside, calling out to the men in the boat, who at his word cast their net on the right side and to their surprise take a great haul of fish. This unexpected delight is followed by the moment of recognition. 'It is the Lord!' cries the beloved disciple, and Peter dives into the water in a gesture of great enthusiasm. When the boat reaches the shore and the fish have been landed, Jesus invites his friends to come and have breakfast with him around the charcoal fire he has prepared. They know it is the Lord. In this very familiar and friendly scene, Jesus is revealed as the Lord of the unexpected, and of the present as well as the past. (The scene recalls other such meals shared with him.) But the near and painful past is also present like a shadow, symbolized (for Simon Peter at least) in that charcoal fire; for in John's Passion account Peter's denial of Jesus is set around just such a fire — at night. It is now the early morning of a new day and the conversation between Jesus and Peter which follows breakfast is a sacrament of reconciliation: it involves looking back, as the threefold denial is recalled and forgiven in a threefold confession of love (rather than sin); it also involves looking forward — the change of job from fisherman to shepherd of Jesus's 'little flock' will take Peter away from the familiar lake to a new and painful ministry, a call to follow Jesus.

Any meeting with Jesus will involve some looking back and some examination of our relationship in whatever state it happens to be. And there will always be some looking forward. It happens without softness or sentimentality: always his acceptance of me as I am right now, and always a challenge to follow Jesus more faithfully and to live out a fuller, more costly relationship with him in the service of his people.

Looking out

One of the classic dimensions of prayer is intercession, a *looking outwards* in loving concern for others, bringing them to the Lord in my prayer, as Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus (Jn 1,41). Let me now remember especially the sick, the troubled, those with whom I have lost contact, those I have hurt, neglected, failed, wanted to help, those who have hurt me or caused me pain, those I need to

forgive, those recommended to my prayer. I name them to the Lord in my prayer from time to time, asking him to come into their lives with his healing, reassuring love. I can do this on a bus, at work, whenever I have got a bit of time . . . doing the ironing, driving the car, walking along. St John Baptist de la Salle urged his first idealistic brothers, who were trying to cope with the very difficult and awkward pupils they were attempting to educate, to pray very often for those students who proved most resistant to their efforts. This has the double effect, as any teacher who has prayed in this way will tell you, of bringing the Lord's love in a mysterious way not only into their lives but also into mine, especially into my relationships with these people who so try my patience; my attitude to them will become more positive, more tolerant and forgiving, since it is bound to reflect the love and prayerful concern expressed in my intercession.

Sheila Cassidy, headline news after her experience of imprisonment and torture in Chile, has shown how I can pray through newspaper headlines or through the television news, as I watch it reflectively, making the appropriate response to God in these situations — anxiety, concern, gratitude, intercession.¹³

Another way of looking out is to go for a 'prayer-walk'. Let me describe one such walk in Easter week this year — just forty minutes in our local park on a surprisingly sunny evening. The park was full of people and dogs, not overcrowded, but alive with different age groups enjoying the spring evening — groups of lads playing football, a few young couples happily spending time together, older folk chattering or exercising their dogs, a few like me taking a solitary walk. They looked like characters from an L. S. Lowry painting, only instead of in terraced streets or blocks of flats, they were in the park on an Easter evening, with the daffodils in full bloom and some birds singing. And my head was full of the words and music of the previous Holy Week's services still touching my imagination. I thought of John and Sean who had made their lifetime religious profession at the Easter Sunday Mass, and of Gerry and Liz, whose wedding service and reception had filled all their friends and family with joy the previous day. That was a wonderfully happy occasion. Thinking of it, still enjoying it, I thanked God for friendship, and for the new life of springtime and Easter, for a new marriage and renewed religious commitment, for all these people enjoying this sunny evening in what seems to be usually a very wet, grey Salford. That walk was an unexpectedly exhilarating prayer-experience.

Starting or starting again

I have wanted to share something of my inner world with you. A few years ago, I read Mark Link's book, *You — prayer for beginners and for those who have forgotten how*,¹⁴ finding it stimulating and imaginative; so I wrote a similar (certainly derivative) book to help the young people in England I was working with on retreats to develop a richer, more regular prayer-life.¹⁵ It was written for teenagers and young adults; some older people have told me they found it helpful. But there are as many methods of prayer as there are people and no one style of prayer suits everyone. Finally, if you are serious about 'getting it all together' by developing a richer life of prayer you might do six other things:

1. Make some time for prayer each day.
2. Search for a suitable space where you can go to be with God, perhaps with a few helpful symbols, on which you can focus: I use a certain chair in a particular corner of my bedroom which I try to keep uncluttered and where I keep my bible at the ready.
3. Arrange to make a retreat, where you will receive some personal ministry.
4. Start to collect your own methods, materials, texts, symbols, notes, which you can keep in or near your bible.
5. Get a 'soul-friend' to support you in your spiritual journey.
6. Arrange to be a 'soul-friend' to someone else, someone you can teach to pray — perhaps a young person. One of the Fathers of the Church used an expressive image to describe spiritual direction among Christians as 'one beggar telling another beggar, whom he meets on the road, where good food is to be found'.

NOTES

¹ Richards, H. J.: *A.B.C. of the Bible* (London, 1967), pp 90ff.

² Thomas, R. S.: 'Nuclear', in *The way of it* (Ceolfrith Press, 1977).

³ Burrows, Ruth: *Guidelines for mystical prayer* (London, 1978), p 62.

⁴ Burrows: *op. cit.*, p 68.

⁵ John Paul II, Ninian Park address, Cardiff, U.K., 2 June 1982.

⁶ Quoted in *An Augustine synthesis*, ed. E. Przywara (London, 1936).

⁷ Przywara: *op. cit.*

⁸ Yeats, W. B.: 'The circus animals' desertion', in *Collected poems* (London, 1967).

⁹ Williams, H. A.: *Tensions* (London, 1976).

¹⁰ Savary, Louis and Beirne, Patricia: *Prayerways* (Dublin, 1981).

¹¹ Savary: *op. cit.*, p ix.

¹² Rowland, Gordon: 'The lost child', in *The Tablet*, 13 March 1982.

¹³ Cassidy, Sheila: *Prayer for pilgrims* (London, 1976).

¹⁴ Link, Mark: *You — prayer for beginners and for those who have forgotten how* (Argus, 1976).

¹⁵ Lundy, Damian: *To grow in Christ: a plan for prayer* (Kevin Mayhew, 1980).