

PRAYING DIFFERENTLY

Dennis H. van Lier

WHAT I HAVE TO SAY is not based on theological argument—that would be beyond my competence. What follows is, rather, the fruit of experience, reading and intuition.

Like many others of my generation—I was born in the 1920s—I was brought up with a set of classical prayer practices. Since I am Roman Catholic, these included the rosary, morning and night prayers, grace before and after meals, and later the breviary. But gradually I was led into something deeper.

This process started early. But let me begin with the experience of this kind that I have found particularly moving. On a Sunday afternoon in August 1980, I was in the auditorium of the Adler Planetarium in Chicago. I was watching a documentary about the origin of the universe, the so-called Big Bang. The presentation concluded: 'you are all made out of stardust'. Those words brought tears to my eyes. They revealed to me a whole new world. A month later I had to undergo surgery and I was dreading the procedure. But then I remembered the words I had heard in the planetarium. I imagined the sun, the Milky Way, and all the galaxies surrounding me, holding me and sharing with me their unimaginable energy. I became very calm and the fear disappeared.

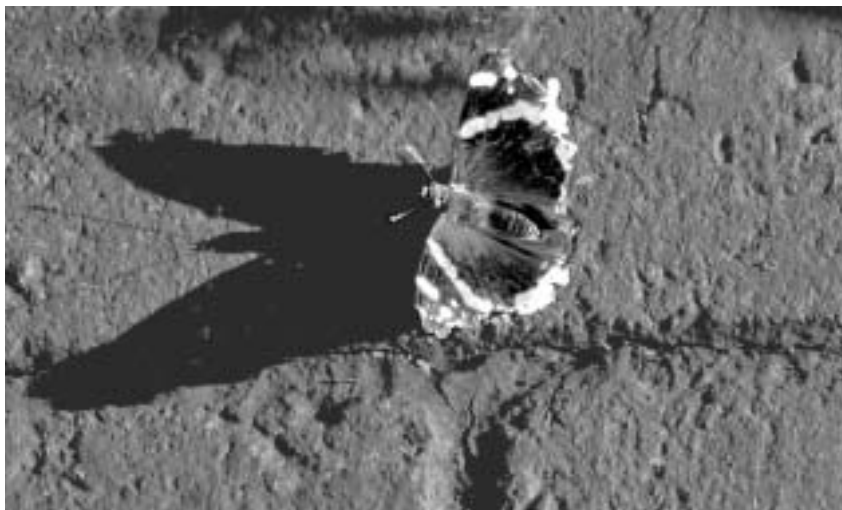
This experience of comfort built on other experiences going right back to my childhood. Of course the Catholicism of that period came across as a strict set of rules and observances: if one was receiving Holy Communion, one had to fast from midnight on the day in question, without even drinking water. But I can still remember being taken as a toddler to Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel of a boarding school that was near our home. The Brothers there sang a shortened version of Vespers; and the hymns for Advent—*Conditor alme siderum*—and for Christmas—*Jesu Redemptor omnium*—evoked something in me which remains alive. I still play and sing them with deep emotion.

The Way, 46/2 (April 2007), 37-47

My later formation as a Jesuit religious was rather different. When I entered the noviciate of the Jesuits in September 1945, we were inducted at once into the *Exercitia spiritualia*, the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. And this process involved many talks, much explanation. I found myself protesting to someone in authority, 'this is not prayer—this is thinking'. The answer was a firm one: 'Brother, this is prayer'. I acquiesced at the time, but I have never been convinced.

In time, I found myself going outside the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, and instead practising Zen on a daily basis, without a guide—in that school I am, so to speak, a layperson. But I have come increasingly to see that revelation is more than a matter of mere words, more than the testimony which came to an end with the death of the last apostle. Revelation is God's self-expression. As such, it is not limited to particular places; rather it continues to happen throughout time and space, as an irresistible dynamic impelling us to fuller humanity, greater mercy, and deeper sources of life.

Even now, I have experiences which confirm this conviction. On the Saturday before Pentecost last year, I interrupted the preparation of my sermon for the next day, and went outside to sit in the sun. As I was sitting, a butterfly alighted on a warm brick near me, moving its colourful wings intermittently; after a few minutes it flew off. The sight of this butterfly left me deeply moved. It was as though old parts of my brain had understood something too sublime for me to take in all at once.



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The Dutch journalist Annemiek Schrijver has well expressed what I would like to say here. In a discussion of an Aramaic Gnostic text on the 'source of being', she said:

It was then that I discovered a difference. Not, 'In the beginning was the Word', but 'in the beginning was emotion'. What happens first is that something touches us. Only once that occurs do we name it. First comes the experience; then comes 'God'.

Prayer Directed Above and Prayer from Within

The traditional understanding of prayer is of an action, an activity in which we speak, frequently because we have something to ask for. Petition has an important place. Our prayers are directed to God, or often to an intermediary—a saint or an angel, or, above all, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The Middle English word *bidden* (from which we get 'Bidding Prayers') meant to beg or request; and in modern Dutch it means to pray. The association of prayer with begging is marked. The same is true for the German *beten* and *betteln*. In Latin there are two significant words: *precari*, comparable to our *bidden*, and *orare*, which refers to the Latin *os*, mouth. *Orare* I understand as 'to open my mouth'—to speak, of course—and also to be 'open-mouthed': when I am amazed, surprised, astonished; when I am being moved or touched; when I am startled by joy; when I cannot speak because of pain or sadness. When I am standing open-mouthed, for example at something very beautiful, then I am not just observing that reality; I am also opening myself to it. What is it that is able to overwhelm me? Is it *me* using my senses or is it *another*—something other—that appeals to or stimulates my senses? In the latter case, prayer takes on a wider meaning: it is *another* who has the initiative. With good reason: if it is God who takes the initiative, He has much more to say or to show than I do!

Traditionally we think of prayer as *lifting up our hearts* to God. Robert Frost's 'Afterflakes' puts it strikingly:

I turned and looked back up at the sky,
Where we still look to ask the why
Of everything below.

We are used to thinking of God as being *above*, in a world far away, beyond the vault of heaven. Christ, Mary and our beloved ones who have passed away live in a place of perfection, of eternity, of stability: the goal of our existence after our life here on earth, *below*. And, for the sake of good order, there also exists a parallel eternity, a Hell for people who do not belong in heaven.

God has been fixed within an ancient Greek system of thinking

This talk of heaven above as another world derives from Plato's vision of a world of Ideas, or Forms. Our life here below is in motion, formless, unstable, imperfect, ultimately ending with death. The world of Ideas is the place of total perfection and full rationality where every being comes to its fullness. And for those who believe in the Christian God it is also *the* place where God belongs. God has been fixed within an ancient Greek system of thinking. In Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, Socrates asks if he can offer a libation, as a way of asking the gods 'to prosper my journey from this to the other world'.¹

In this context, it is already quite surprising when Luke's Paul comes to Athens and, quoting the Greek poet Aratus, says:

He is not far from each one of us. For 'in Him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are His offspring'.²

For in general, all knowledge of God and of how to live was given *from above*.

There is an old adage from scholastic theology: *lex orandi, lex credendi*—the law that rules faith also rules the way we pray. Definitive Christian prayers such as the familiar creeds are expressed in terms of a remote God. The Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, sends His only-begotten Son as a visitor to the earth; after the resurrection, the Son returns to heaven, with the promise that he will come again, perhaps briefly, for the Last Judgment.

The Dutch theologian Harry Kuitert has gracefully observed: 'All that has been said about what is above comes from below'.³ Our language about God is precisely that: human language. Even if it seems

¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 117b (Jowett translation).

² Acts 17: 27-28, quoting Aratus, *Phaenomena*, l. 5.

³ Harry Kuitert, 'Alle spreken over Boven komt van beneden', in *Jezus: nalatenschap van het Christendom: Schets voor een theologie* (Kampen: Ten Have, 1998), 176.

to come 'from above', it has its roots below, in human experience. Such language therefore, despite appearances, falls under the principle that the Church is always in need of reform: *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

Perhaps matters in the early Church and in the Middle Ages were more complex than I am making them sound. But since early modernity at least, the idea of two separate worlds, heaven and earth, has become untenable. We can no longer, in any simple way, lift *up* our hearts to heaven. Our image of the world has been changed, with implications for the language of our faith and for the language in which we pray. We no longer suppose that the sun revolves round the earth; and only one of our two worlds is left.

St Paul wrote: 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds' (Romans 12:2); '... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' (2 Corinthians 5:17); 'You were taught to ... be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (Ephesians 4:22-24).

In a new world, which might seem strange and threatening, we have to hear this message. When we repeat the words Jesus has taught us, 'Our Father who art in *heaven*', we can no longer understand them literally. As children of our time, we can only seek and find God in the immense universe where we all dwell, both now and into eternity. And God respects our freedom; God does not impose on us what we should hold or believe. That is no longer God's concern.

The Dutch poet and artist Jan Luyken (1649-1712) has eloquently expressed the idea of a God who is not above but within:

But when Thou wast pleased to reveal Thyself,
Then I saw nothing sail down from above,
But in the bottom of my heart,
There it turned lovely and sweet.
There Thou camest pressing upward from the depth,
And, like a well pounced on my thirsty heart,
So that I Thee, O God, found
To be the ground of my ground.⁴

⁴ Dutch original from *Jesus en de ziel* (Amsterdam, 1678).

Or we could go to the modern Argentinian poet Roberto Juarroz (1925-1995):

Sometimes it seems
 as though we are the centre of the feast.
 But in the centre of the feast is nobody,
 in the centre of the feast is the emptiness.
 But the centre of the emptiness is another feast.⁵

If we are to imagine ourselves in our new world, we need, like artists, all our senses and alertness. Artists are best qualified to talk about praying with *all* our senses. For they are the experts in perceiving; through experience they know that perceiving itself is a grace. Artists create things. They often do not understand or cannot explain—they become open-mouthed and tongue-tied. Who or what is God? You do not understand it, you cannot explain it, but it makes you tongue-tied if you are all attention, and let all your senses be touched.

I cannot pray any longer to God in the highest; rather it is *here* that God prays, breathes, enjoys and savours, here at one with me, as I pray with all my senses. Could Jesus have been expressing this when he said, 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (John 15:5)? Or when he said that he had told us things, 'so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete' (John 15:11)?

Joy, the Fire of Our Being

If you begin to think in this way, then to pray is no longer a performance. Rather, it is something you just do, like cooking a meal or going shopping. Prayer becomes an attitude; each breath becomes a prayer. You do not need to kneel, to raise your arms or to fold your hands. You just keep your eyes and hands open, and use your ears.

When something is making you annoyed or impatient, focusing on your breathing helps to give you space and freedom. It may also enable you to notice something important in your heart that is only whispering quietly. Once you become consciously aware of such experiences, you will be amazed at how often they occur. They will help you to think of God, not as the unapproachable president of an electrical company, but

⁵ Roberto Juarroz, *Vertical Poetry: Recent Poems* (Buffalo: White Pine Press, 1992), 113.



Pentecost, by Christoph Weigel

rather as the electric current itself, present not only in high tension cables, but also in the small switch hidden under the stairs.

It is not a coincidence that the Holy Spirit, *pneuma*, means breath. Think of Pentecost, when people understood each other despite the difference of languages. And imagine that alongside the image in Genesis of the Creator blowing breath into Adam's nostrils of the human being.

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

This is happening to you. This process is taking place continuously.

If we understand prayer in this way, then we are, in a certain sense, evolving each time our heart widens. My joy experienced in the *now* moves the evolutionary process towards its future. Evolution is not



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simply a matter of biological transition from one species to another. Evolution also involves God's self-unfolding and self-imparting, and our development in altruism and grace. Whenever people say or do something that alleviates pain or need, the gracious process of evolution is moving forward. We need not be worried at the emptiness of our churches.

Modern science tells us that what we call empty space is not empty at all; rather, it is crammed with information, communication, awareness and

energy. Radio, television, and mobile phones use imperceptible signals to carry our communications. Perhaps much of what we share through these means is mere nonsense, but they also give us new ways of sharing distress, pain, sadness and loneliness, of offering comfort to one another, and of speaking words from above here below. And as modern cameras give us many new ways of looking each other in the eye, we might remember the biblical prayer, 'make your face shine upon your servant' (Psalm 119:135). The transmitter masts rising all around us may be seen as the church steeples of what, though secularised, is still a community.

Through quantum physics and nanotechnology we discover a subatomic universe, which, in its tiny intricacy, is as complex and impressive as the starry sky. Through all the pores of our body, all the synapses of our brain, we are in touch with an overwhelming reality. If we remain open to it, we can participate in the eternal creating process of God's ever greater self-unfolding. In so doing we will ourselves become more human, more humane. And our prayer will become awestruck, open-mouthed, as we discover ourselves, in our tininess, to

be nevertheless part of the divine dimension. If we pray differently, prayer will be something that happens to us, something that is constantly revealing more and more of the mystery of the universe, and thus shaping us into different people. It will show us how the Word of God is still becoming flesh, still living among us—quite differently from how we have conventionally been imagining him up until now. A Jewish story expresses the point beautifully:

Once the rabbi of Kraków entered the room where his son was lost in deep prayer. In the corner stood a crib with a child crying. The rabbi asked his son: 'Don't you hear the crying of the child?' The son answered: 'Father, I was lost in God'. Then the rabbi said: 'Whoever is lost in God also notices the fly crawling on the wall'.⁶

Points to Remember

Much of what I want to say has been expressed well in the Remonstrant Brotherhood's new Confession of Faith, reproduced overleaf. But let me end by making a series of short statements about prayer.

- € 'Praying differently'—to pray with all your senses—is not a matter of asking at all. To pray in this way is to be touched, addressed, moved.
- € When we name this experience and pass it on, we have an antidote to the shallow values of our society, to the way it judges us by how we spend money, and constructs our identities from the things that we buy. We have no need to feel ashamed because we smell bad, or because we are not taking care of our hair.
- € Prayer is the everyday speech of all that exists since the Big Bang: of the weather; of water and of trees; of the grass that we cannot hear grow; of all that has a voice, whether that voice roars, trumpets, croaks, barks, mews or whispers; of the human voice in particular, shouting at athletic or sporting events, singing at music festivals, crying and screaming in Iraq or Darfur.

⁶ Dutch original from Ad van Heeswijk and others, *Op verhaal komen. Religieuze biografie en geestelijke gezondheid* (Tilburg: KSVG, 2006), 96.

New Confession of the Remonstrant Church, 2006

*We realise and accept
that we cannot find peace in the certainty of what we profess
but in wonder at what happens to us and what is given to us;
that we do not find our destiny in indifference and greed,
but in alertness and solidarity with all that lives;
that our existence is not fulfilled by who we are and what we have;
but by what is infinitely larger than we can comprehend.*

*Guided by these notions we believe in God's Spirit,
which surpasses all that divides people,
and inspires them to all that is holy and good
so that they will praise and serve God
by singing and keeping silence,
by praying and acting.*

*We believe in Jesus, a man full of Spirit,
the face of God which looks at us and disturbs us.
He loved human beings and was crucified,
but lives, beyond his own death and our deaths.
He is our holy example of wisdom and courage
and brings God's eternal love close to us.*

*We believe in God the Eternal,
who is unfathomed love, the ground of our existence,
who points out to us the road of freedom and justice,
and beckons us to a future of peace.*

*We believe that we ourselves,
weak and vulnerable as we are,
are called, in solidarity with Christ and with all who believe,
to be a church in the sign of hope.*

*For we believe in the future of God and the world,
in a divine patience that offers time
to live and to die and to resurrect
in the kingdom that is and is to be,
where God will be for ever: all in all.
Praise and glory be given to God
in time and for all eternity,*

Amen.

- € Prayer whispers of evolution's progress.
- € Prayer is the new story to be told and heard in the universe after the great stories of the monotheistic religions have come to silence.
- € Prayer draws together the breath of innumerable men and women, indeed living creatures of all kinds, into new churches and communities.
- € Prayer is a matter of attention. We need to be open, like a large satellite dish, receiving the message without any static interference.

Perhaps it is in this way, rather than through our endless talking and calling meetings, that we can renew the Church, the *ecclesia semper reformanda*, and initiate a new Reformation for our new world, in harmony rather than in conflict.

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