

TIME AND TIMES FOR PRAYER

By PHILIP SHELDRAKE

HERE IS SURELY no more common problem in spiritual direction than 'time for prayer'. This may manifest itself as an inability to find sufficient space for extended prayer, a lack of energy, little or no solitude even when there is time, and perhaps a feeling that prayer does not engage easily with the rest of life. 'Time' is a problem in other words, when it implies a daily or at least a regular extended experience of structured and formal prayer in 'periods' distinct from all other activities. A mother with two young children and a husband who worked largely at home described her frustration at not being able to find more than the odd moment alone for prayer. In desperation she retired to the bathroom and locked herself inside, but even there she was likely to be interrupted after a few minutes by a young child enquiring whether anything was the matter. There was not merely very little time alone but no guarantee that what solitude there was would not be invaded.

As directors, how do we respond to this and a myriad other tales? What general approach to prayer do we reinforce in people? I remember that, as students, a group of us were surprised by remarks passed by a priest who had the reputation for being an excellent spiritual director. Was it necessarily the case, he asked, that a formal, structured approach to prayer was suited to everyone? Our assumption, I suppose, was that not to pray in this way was 'to fail' and to 'lose touch' with *real* prayer. We had been warned as novices that the discipline of daily meditation would be hard in a working life but the implication was that to let go of it was the beginning of decline. For another priest, engaged full-time in training young Jesuits and in spiritual direction, it took a transfer late in life to a busy college to make him understand what all those young men had been going on about over the years as they arrived from busy schools, universities and parishes!

While our response to people who come to us with problems about 'time' and 'times' in their life of prayer will no doubt be sympathetic, will it always be realistic? Will we still reinforce the

structured, formal model as a universal ideal? If we believe that a person has genuine and unavoidable difficulties we are unlikely simply to urge him or her to greater effort—though I cannot help noticing that some writing on prayer and spiritual direction seems to imply that such problems are largely of people's own making. In the main our response to people is going to be governed by our own experience of similar struggle and by whether we have ourselves moved beyond a univocal understanding of prayer. It is sometimes difficult for directors who are priests or religious to break away from a 'monastic' model of the christian life—certainly the celibate director has little experience of the day-to-day pressures of family life and a house full of children. In some books on prayer 'giving time' is simply linked to 'desire for God' without a great deal of nuancing. It is frightening when a popular reference work known to many Catholics can say:

When must one pray? It is difficult to determine precisely when this obligation binds. Nevertheless it can safely be said that one is bound to pray many times a year. Some say that to omit prayer for one month or at least for two months could be a mortal sin.¹

The writer concludes: 'the good Christian will pray many times each day'.

Theological assumptions

Part of our problem of course are the theological presuppositions that, explicitly or implicitly, underlie our understanding of prayer. A number of contemporary writers have rightly suggested that questions about prayer really cluster around the God question.² What image of God is operative? Is our God distant and uninvolved, essentially the possessor of power, arbitrary, a 'civil servant in the sky'? Is our prayer as a consequence less a relationship than an effort to gain God's power for ourselves, to get it under control, to make God sit up and take notice? Does God like any self-respecting bureaucrat demand everything in triplicate? It has also been suggested that much inadequate spirituality (and not least theologies of prayer) results from those attempts to 'reinterpret' God that lose touch with the traditional doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation. The contemporary resurgence of arian, monophysite or docetic theologies upsets that delicate balance of the transcendence-immanence of God which governs the way we understand and respond to life and the world.

Our understanding of God necessarily involves God's relationship with human experience and with the material world. Does God offer love as a free gift or has it to be earned? Is prayer essentially God's action or our effort expressed by the quantity of our prayer? Is the material world a snare and a delusion and the search for holiness a 'flight from the world'? Or are prayer and life intimately linked so that it can be said that the aim of prayer is ultimately the deepening awareness of God as 'all in all' leading to a greater engagement with the world of everyday events? The answers to such questions will govern our attitude to the 'how' of prayer.

Prayer in christian tradition

The understanding of prayer that places great emphasis on solitude, withdrawal, formal structure and extended time represents only one strand in the christian tradition. Alternative approaches emphasize, in different ways, turning *all* action into work for God. 'I look for God in all things and try to please him in everything I do'.³ Theologically this means taking the consequences of the Incarnation seriously—that we cannot talk of specifically 'spiritual' areas of life or 'spiritual activities', for no aspect of human life is outside the love and activity of God. We live in a graced world and materiality is 'full of grace'.

While teaching about personal prayer has always given some attention to method, it seems fair to say that the emphasis on formalized prayer time begins to predominate with the development of structured meditation in the later Middle Ages. Prior to this development prayer tended to be rather informal. Thus the prayer of the desert fathers was simple, silent and brief. Cassian, the most systematic of the desert teachers recommended brief and frequent prayer. The way to make prayer 'unceasing' throughout the day was to take short scripture verses that could be recollected constantly.

This you should write on the threshold and door of your mouth, this you should place on the walls of your house and in the recesses of your heart, so that when you fall on your knees in prayer this may be your chant as you kneel, and when you rise up from it to go forth to all the necessary business of life it may be your constant prayer as you stand.⁴

Constant prayer is emphasized by other desert monks such as Lucius who opposed those who sought to suppress work in favour of lengthy formal prayer:

I will show you how, while doing my manual work, I pray without interruption. I sit down with God, soaking my reeds and plaiting my ropes, and I say 'God have mercy on me; according to your great goodness and according to the multitude of your mercies save me from my sins'. So he asked them if this were not prayer and they replied it was.⁵

For Lucius, a life orientated towards God was itself prayer. This was also underlined in the West by the Rule of St Benedict (chapter 20) which emphasized that we are heard by God not because of the length of our prayer but because of purity of heart. 'Therefore prayer should be short and pure' as a general rule. Extending this teaching beyond the monastery to the lives of ordinary Christians, St Augustine left an important treatise on prayer dedicated to Proba, a widow, and meant for domestic use by herself and her friends. Long prayer is acceptable if there is time, but we do not *need* this. Consequently Augustine approves of the practice of the desert fathers and their use of 'very brief, quickly dispatched prayers' (*orationes brevissimas et raptim quodammodo jaculatas*).⁶

In the West, meditation remained essentially non-methodical up to about the eleventh century and was closely linked to the prayerful rumination of scripture known as *lectio divina*. This way of praying was not regulated by a fixed time-table nor cultivated by any formalised method. It was essentially a free activity and probably involved the recalling and 'ejaculation' of remembered phrases throughout the day.

Methods of prayer as we understand them really took root from about the twelfth century (for example Hugh of St Victor and Guigues du Pont) and were intended to organize meditation in order to make it easier. A clear distinction began to be made between the different phases of *lectio divina*. The great period of development of formal meditation began in the fourteenth century in the context of a movement known as the *devotio moderna* in Germany and the Low Countries. Gerard Groote composed a systematic treatise on 'the four kinds of things to be meditated'. Other representatives of the *devotio moderna* such as Florent Rade-wijns, Gerard of Zutphen, and Jan Mombaer further developed

the art of meditation, arranging it in groups of exercises day by day, week by week and month by month. This tradition of systematic meditation gave birth to a vast literature over the next two centuries including works by St Ignatius Loyola, St Francis de Sales, Dom Augustine Baker and the seventeenth century anglican divines.

Yet the tradition that prayer need not involve extended time nor structured method remained alive. Even the great contemplative Carmelites stressed the unity of prayer and action. St Teresa of Avila could happily say that 'the Lord is among the saucepans':

If contemplation, mental and vocal prayer, nursing the sick, the work of the house and the most menial labour all serve this guest who comes to eat and drink and converse with us, why should we choose to minister to him in one way rather than another?⁷

Although St Ignatius Loyola is frequently portrayed as methodical about prayer this was really limited to the particular context of the Spiritual Exercises. In general, St Ignatius reacted against an over-formalized approach. His emphasis was not so much on withdrawal as on responding to God's presence and action in life. His comments on prayer in his letters and in the *Constitutions* recognized that a full life did not leave much free time. In many ways the teaching of St Ignatius offers one of the best approaches to the problems of time for prayer, and the link between prayer and the remainder of life. I shall develop this later.

Within a short time of the founder's death, the Society of Jesus succumbed to a fear and suspicion of contemplative and free-wheeling prayer. This was partly because of a fear of 'illumism' and partly a reaction against the excessively contemplative approach of some spanish Jesuits. Paradoxically it was partly the desire of some Jesuits for more time for prayer that led to the imposition of one hour's meditation for all as a reaction! It is not unfair to say that this process had a profound effect on the wider Church. The emphasis on methodical (and usually discursive) meditation necessarily involved an awareness of structure and therefore of time to a much greater extent than freer more affective prayer.⁸

There is not the space to survey the history of christian prayer in more detail, but even this selective glance reveals a tradition that is much wider than the impression inherited as a result of the process of formalization. A number of emphases seem particularly

relevant to our problem of 'time' and 'times'. For example, it is possible to turn all activity into a work for God and it is possible to conceive of prayer as unceasing. I would now like to focus on some particular expressions of this approach in a little more detail.

St Ignatius and contemplation in action

St Ignatius saw God as dwelling in all things and 'labouring' for people in the world and experiences of life. This is present especially in the 'Contemplation to attain the love of God' in the Exercises—which is perhaps both a method of prayer and a whole attitude to prayer in daily life (Exx 230–37). It points to an awareness of God in all times and in all things so that contemplation and action become not two quite distinct things but inextricably linked one to another.

Even within the formal experience of the Exercises, St Ignatius, in a sense, demythologises the 'magic' of prayer-times as alone the context for the Spirit's action by emphasizing the need for a much wider context of awareness and reflection (Exx 73–74 and the different approaches to the Examen, Exx 24–43). Outside the Exercises, it is said that St Ignatius did not ask how long a person contemplated, but how often he made the Examen. Our understanding of this process has sometimes been limited to an examination of failings but it really involves the cultivation of a general awareness of God's action and presence in daily life. This process of finding God in more and more of life was, in St Ignatius's mind, vital for people whose activities prevented them from indulging in lengthy periods of prayer. As a practical hint it is worth noting that, for many people whom we direct, the 'Examen of consciousness' may be the only *regular* prayer they can manage in a busy life.⁹

Apart from its emphasis on awareness of God in ordinary events, the Examen also involves a degree of self-awareness, of how I am responding or failing to respond to the promptings of the Spirit in and through the demands of daily life. In other words it may become a helpful context for growth in an attitude that St Ignatius saw as vital—what he called 'self-abnegation' or forgetfulness of self. In the Exercises it is generosity rather than simply *time* given to prayer that is vital. Da Camara, the compiler of St Ignatius's autobiography, reported that St Ignatius put more emphasis on self-denial than on length of prayer. It has been suggested that 'self-abnegation' was St Ignatius's test of authenticity both of

action and prayer because each can be vitiated by self-seeking. If there is genuine self-sacrifice in ordinary activities it does not take long to find God.¹⁰

Maurice Giuliani, a contemporary expert on giving the Spiritual Exercises 'in daily life', points out that for St Ignatius, an 'exercise' was *any* action that prepared a person to receive the grace of God. Outside a closed retreat this will not be limited to times of formal prayer. Indeed he is dubious about reinforcing the 'special status' of formal prayer 'as if it offered a privileged context for the most intense spiritual experiences'.¹¹ The fundamental 'attentiveness to God' is not confined to formal prayer. Indeed, Giuliani argues, part of the aim of the Exercises 'in daily life' and, one might argue, of ignatian spirituality as a whole, is precisely to transform ordinary activities into 'spiritual exercises' so that a person may come to see that each day is rich in moments when it is possible to find God in the midst of human activity.

It is not, of course, that all human activities are automatically 'spiritual exercises'—this depends on a context of reflection (perhaps through the Examen) and a growth in selflessness. Thus, in his letters, St Ignatius emphasizes that it is devoting time to other activities precisely 'for God's service' that makes this truly 'continuous prayer'.¹² Those who resent the distraction of activity may, if they accept this 'for God's service' make it 'the equivalent of the union and recollection of uninterrupted contemplation'.¹³ In a letter to Francis Borgia, St Ignatius suggests quite clearly that length of time does not necessarily mean real prayer. He speaks with approval of the desert fathers' tradition of brief prayer and of St Augustine's letter to Proba (already quoted) on the value of ejaculatory prayer throughout an active day.¹⁴

Perhaps the breadth of St Ignatius's understanding of prayer is best summarized in a letter to Fr Brandão concerning young Jesuits busy with studies. They should:

. . . seek God's presence in all things, in their conversations, their walks, in all they see, taste, hear, understand, in all their actions, since his divine Majesty is truly in all things by his presence, power and essence . . . But this method is an excellent exercise to prepare for great visitations of Our Lord even in prayers that are rather short.¹⁵

The sacrament of the present moment

St Ignatius's teaching might be described in terms of the sacra-

mental quality of all time and all activities. Two other spiritual-writers are gaining a contemporary popularity precisely because they take up the same theme and offer a spirituality suited to people with little time for extended prayer. Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675–1751) was himself a Jesuit whose conferences and letters were edited in the nineteenth century as *Abandonment to divine providence*. De Caussade emphasized that perfection was not so much to do with exceptional ‘states’ as with self-giving to God’s will in whatever situation we live and work. God is present in every situation, clearly or obscurely, in the guise of something we can do, bear or enjoy. Each passing moment is a ‘veil of God’ which if scrutinized and interpreted by faith becomes an unveiling of God. He actually uses the term ‘the sacrament of the present moment’ to describe this possibility. De Caussade clearly points to the necessity of integrating the spiritual with daily life, thereby transforming life into a state of prayer.

The seventeenth-century Carmelite, Brother Lawrence’s *The practice of the presence of God* refuses to distinguish between times of prayer and all other times which we can transform into ‘spiritual exercises’ by doing for God what we would otherwise do simply for ourselves. Again, as with St Ignatius, the crucial thing is to purge our actions of selfishness:

He found the best means of drawing near to God was through the common tasks which obedience laid down for him, purging them as far as lies in us from every human ingredient and performing them all for the pure love of God.

It was, he said, enormous self-deception to believe that the time of prayer must be different from any other. We are equally bound to be one with God by what we do in times of action as by the time of prayer at its special hour. His prayer was simply the presence of God, his soul unconscious of all else but love.¹⁶

Mindfulness

While there are clearly dangers in a naive comparison of christian and non-christian meditation and experience, certain elements of the buddhist ‘way of mindfulness’ seem to complement the teaching of de Caussade and Brother Lawrence. This is especially the case with the extension of a meditative attitude beyond concentrated moments into the activities of normal life, and also with the importance of eliminating selfishness. Rather than ‘being present’ only partially to our ordinary activities, we should treat each

experience and moment as of unique importance. We should seek to maximize each moment. 'Let it not escape from you!' warns the Buddha.

The 'way of mindfulness' draws attention to the vital importance of the first stage of perception: the initial 'conscious awareness' of, 'attention to', or 'taking notice' of people and objects. It is clear that further stages of perception, for example of things, people and events in their detail, inter-relationships and so on, are affected by the purity or lack of purity of the initial awareness of the object. Thus, as a first step in the 'way of right mindfulness' we need to cultivate a 'bare attention' or clear and singleminded awareness of what actually happens at successive moments. 'Bare attention' therefore eschews judgment or evaluation in favour of purifying the experience of first impressions. The Buddha is recorded as teaching: 'In what is seen there should only be the seen; in what is heard, only the heard; in what is sensed (as smell, taste or touch) only the sensed; in what is thought, only the thought'. In other words, we are invited to allow things, people and experiences to speak for themselves and we are asked to live in full awareness of the here and now.

Yet we must act, choose, decide and judge at almost every moment of the day. In response to this Buddhism suggests a second aspect of the 'way of mindfulness' called 'clear comprehension' which aims to make all our activities, choices and judgments truly purposeful and in accordance with our ideals. If 'bare attention' focusses on full awareness, 'clear comprehension' seeks a proper understanding of purpose. Is this action really in accordance with my purpose? And, importantly, am I free from egocentric habits or thought-patterns? 'Clear comprehension' very much depends on allowing the focus of my formal meditation to flow into my daily routine. In the end 'mindfulness' absorbs all activities so that life as a whole becomes 'spiritual practice'.¹⁷

The Jesus prayer

Finally, it is worth noting briefly a living christian tradition which continues to emphasize 'ceaseless prayer' in the tradition of the desert fathers. The 'Jesus prayer' of the christian East becomes almost habitual and unconscious through continuous repetition. This helps a person to be in God's presence in all places and activities. The tradition is far more than a mere mechanical repetition of a phrase and really should be practised only with

adequate guidance. In the very popular book *The way of the pilgrim* the anonymous author was directed to recite the Jesus Prayer up to twelve thousand times a day!

I roamed about through many different places for a long time with the Prayer of Jesus as my sole companion. It gladdened and comforted me in all my wanderings, my meetings with other people and in all the incidents of the journey.¹⁸

The important point is the way such praying can accompany normal living—the question of quantity mentioned by the ‘pilgrim’ is in fact unusual. Even the formal recitation during explicit times of prayer has no set length. The free recitation is, according to a contemporary writer in the tradition, a way of spiritualizing perfectly normal activities such as mending socks, washing up or waiting in a queue!¹⁹

Does time have a value?

It may appear that what I have written is tantamount to denying the value of time and solitude in prayer. However we must recall our starting point—how do we respond in spiritual direction to the problem of finding time for extended prayer and linking prayer to everyday life? I do not intend to deny a value to time but rather to put it in proper perspective and, to a degree, to relativize it.

Whether a person’s normal prayer involves regular, formal periods or not, the same basic emphases are vital. Firstly, in order to enter the intimacy with God that is offered it is not necessary to find ways of attracting God’s attention or of meriting God’s love. The deeper a person’s prayer goes the more there is a sense of unworthiness, but equally the more there is a forgetfulness of self which counteracts the ‘pelagian’ tendency to be self-conscious about times for prayer or about length. Secondly, prayer is frequently seen as a special activity in life that we have to learn and in which we can become more proficient through technique. Prayer is not a matter of proficiency but a living relationship and a *desire* for God. If ‘time’ and ‘times’ are basically associated with a belief in technique they are a delusion. In the context of a ‘pelagian’ and results-orientated western society there is something to be learned from the oriental emphasis on the letting go of striving and effort. It is said that to achieve ‘enlightenment’ we must stop trying. A wise zen *roshi* suggested to a disciple that if he tried hard

enlightenment might take five years, but if he tried very, very hard it might take twenty years!

The unhelpful emphasis on prayer as a special activity in life may not only lead to an excessive reliance on technique and structure but equally to a sense that 'time for prayer' means 'time away from life'. However, a thorough-going christian and incarnational basis for prayer does not reject the everyday as a distraction. Christian prayer should always involve who and where we are. Many people who come for direction have inherited a one-sided 'spirituality of disengagement' which sees life as fundamentally an encumbrance. Here, as I suggested, the Examen may be a helpful corrective. It is certainly important to encourage people not to run away from prayer into activism, but it is also important to reinforce their sense that, for exceedingly busy people, the bulk of their prayer (in the sense of the greatest quantity of time) will be outside the time they can infrequently set aside for formal prayer.

It does seem to me to be important, as far as possible, to emphasize the importance of creating oases within a very active life. There is a real danger of fragmentation—of giving less and less attention to more and more things. It seems to be a phenomenon of our age that there is an increasing sense of being pressurized. Listening especially to those involved in professional ministry in the Church it is clear that this pressure has become internalized and is linked to a sense of guilt about taking 'time off' and to a duty to be always available. In this context, it seems to me that a spiritual director may well do better to start by talking more in terms of necessary leisure and 'taking time for yourself' in order to achieve a greater personal wholeness. More 'time for prayer' (if this is an issue) can come later. To talk of this first before the human question is faced may once again set in motion the treadmill of guilt about religious or 'ministerial' duties.

With some people, the problem of 'time and times' for prayer may be associated less with guilt than with a genuine call to solitude within an active life. To feel genuinely drawn to extended times of prayer when circumstances do not allow this may cause real suffering. However, careful discernment is needed here. The genuine call needs to be distinguished from seeking to avoid the demands of everyday life. We have all, no doubt, met people like the seminarian who continually felt drawn to prayer instead of studying or undertaking ordinary domestic tasks.

It often helps to expand people's understanding of prayer and even to ask questions about the time-cycle within which they think and work. Praying is not incompatible with other activities such as walking and rhythmic domestic tasks such as painting or ironing. Others I have known have linked their praying with what others would see as simply hobbies or relaxing pastimes such as playing or listening to music, sketching or carving. Equally, time for prayer should not be reduced to the simple equation: 'each day must have a generous quota'. Perhaps in an urban environment people need time-cycles different from the traditional one of twenty-four hours which fit in with a more realistic pattern such as term/vacation and with a greater irregularity of 'days of rest'.

In the end, whatever we say as directors about 'time and times' must be rooted in the real situation of each individual and should help to maximize the opportunities for prayer that actually exist. We should not burden people with a spirituality that condemns them to continual failure or to feelings of being second-rate.

NOTES

¹ See the entry 'Prayer (theology of)' in the *New catholic encyclopaedia*.

² See, for example, K. Leech, *The social God* (London, 1981), especially chapter 3.

³ See *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. William Young (Chicago, 1959), p 40. Cited subsequently as *Letters*. ⁴ Cassian, *Conferences* 10,10.

⁵ *The sayings of the desert fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (London, 1981), p 121.

⁶ St Augustine, *Ad Probam* in Migne, PL 33, col 1075.

⁷ St Teresa of Avila, *The way of perfection* (London, 1961), p 89.

⁸ On the development of jesuit prayer see the useful summary in 'Ignatian prayer or jesuit spirituality' by Joseph Veale in *The Way Supplement* 27, Spring 1976.

⁹ See G. Aschenbrenner, 'Consciousness examen' *Review for Religious*, vol 31 (1972), pp 14-21.

¹⁰ See Aloysius Pieris, 'Spirituality and liberation' in *The Month*, April 1983.

¹¹ See M. Giuliani, 'The ignatian "exercise" in daily life', *The Way Supplement* 49, Spring 1984.

¹² *Letters*, p 129. ¹³ *Letters*, pp 254-55. ¹⁴ *Letters*, p 211.

¹⁵ *Letters*, p 240.

¹⁶ See de Caussade, *The sacrament of the present moment*, trans. K. Muggeridge, (London, 1981); and Brother Lawrence, *The practice of the presence of God* trans. E. M. Blaiklock, (London, 1981), especially p 29.

¹⁷ See Nyanaponika Thera, *The heart of buddhist meditation* (London, 1972), pp 24-27.

¹⁸ See G. P. Fedotov, *A treasury of russian spirituality* (London, 1981), p 294.

¹⁹ See Kallistos Ware, *The power of the name* (Fairacres Publications, Oxford, 1980).