

Workshop on Prayer and Listening

Difficulties In Prayer

Many of us experience difficulties with prayer. It appears that we are not heard, that we are not answered, that we are not 'Getting Through'.

Why should this be? After all, Jesus says "Ask and you shall receive".

In this evening's session we are going to look in some detail at the things that can go wrong and perhaps identify why this happens.

It is also important to clarify that we are not talking about 'problems' in prayer, as if the prayer itself is a problem. Prayer is not a problem. There can be 'difficulties' in prayer but that is a matter of how we pray, not of prayer itself.

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It is fair to say that the difficulties that we experience in prayer are down to single cause, with different manifestations. This cause can be summarized as Pride or Lack of Humility.

This characteristic shows itself to us in several ways and the primary problems that we experience come under three broad headings: DOUBT, DISTRACTION and DRYNESS.

I will take these one by one and attempt to illustrate what may be happening, and also look briefly at some of the escapes that we seek when faced with these problems, the temptations that we can be led to.

To a greater or lesser extent, each of these three is a product of our having “Great Possessions”, those things that we hold on to, the lines in the sand that we place between ourselves and God and which we will not suffer to have crossed. These are the irreducible minima, so to speak, the things we are unwilling to give up. Often we do not even know they are there.

In the second chapter of Acts, in verse 45, we see how the early Church members “sold their goods and possessions”. In reality, they were not simply selling things, but surrendering their ideas, their very will to God to control and take possession of and guide. It was the possessiveness of the Rich Young Man, not his observance of the Law that was the problem. It was not merely the material things that handicapped him from entering the kingdom, but his love of rank and status.

Entry into the Kingdom is about the surrender of all that is of me to the Love and Care of God. It requires a willingness to leave aside all that I hold dear so that He who made the Heavens and the Earth can work. It is about losing the ego and embracing the primal seed of God within me. This is linked to all aspects of life, perhaps most notably conscience when the Word is speaking to me. “Deep within every human being, God has planted His Word”. The contact with the Word is the conscience, where “Deep calls to Deep”. It is to communicate with God at His purest and most simple level, as the Seed of Truth planted inside of us, that we pray.

So what is prayer? To put it simplistically, it is the way in which we engage in conversation with God and as with any conversation, the greater part is gained not by speaking, but by listening. It is by listening that I learn, not by telling God what He ought to be doing for me. In brief, it is in the misalignment of these qualities of speaking and listening that our problems in prayer arise.

I may pray fervently for what I am convinced is God’s will to be realized in my life. It may be for a job, it may be for a relationship, or for a healthy and happy child. Let us say that the matter does not work out as I would like and have prayed for. I can easily say that the prayer has not been answered. THIS IS NOT SO!!! It most certainly has been answered, but not in the way that I wanted. The answer is not a negative, it is a positive

affirmation that I am on the wrong track in what I am praying for. Basically God is telling me that my way, my intention, is not His way. So how do I react? Usually I simply repeat the formula and assume that He is busy. But I get the same answer, **Not your way, but MINE.**

Eventually I fall prey to **DOUBT**, the conviction that my prayer is not being heard and if heard is **not being answered**. **If I LISTEN** to God, instead of **telling** Him what He should be doing, I will have a far healthier response. I will understand that the road that I was so convinced was the correct one just may not be so, and thus I can get out of the **straitjacket of my own will** and look elsewhere, look to Him. This is the **foundational stage of listening**, to know first of all the nature of what I am **not** being called to do, rather than leaping to the assumption that I know the nature of what I **AM** being called to do. Sherlock Holmes famously said, “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth”. The proof of that maxim, by the way, is that I am here this afternoon. **DOUBT cripples me if I allow it to**. And this is **critical**, it is **I who allow doubt to take hold**. Spiritual Doubt is **not a curse from the Divine**, it is the **persuasion of my selfishness, my ego and my possessiveness of my own future. It is a tool of the Enemy**

The reconciliation of this difficulty of the doubt and the disappointment that I experience is more but **different** prayer, **NOT to battle against what I don't like, but against the fact that I don't like it**. We are invited into the central place of our relationship with God, acceptance of His will without condition.

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I read the **Bible** every morning, I close the book and I **begin to pray**. I pray for the coming day and I find that my thoughts are **centred on a meeting** that is coming up. I see that this is **interfering with my prayer and so I try to push it aside**, but it stays there. I am **focused**, at least a little, **on the meeting** and I am in to the **“I'll say this and he'll say that” scenario**. In the meantime my **prayer time has passed** and I am **tense and uneasy**. I am paying the price for **DISTRACTION**. My real focus is not to **speak and listen to God in a spirit of surrender**, but on the meeting later and the **resentment** or the **worry** that I have about it. I am not surrendering myself and my day to God, I am **going through the motions of prayer**, perhaps very fervently, but **my heart** is stuck **at 10.00 that morning**. Do I think that I can solve or change this situation from here, at 6.00? Where is my **loyalty**, to myself or to God? I have a **choice**, to serve myself and **indulge my ego and desire to be in charge**, or **to surrender all to Him**. The psalmist says, “My help comes from Yahweh who made Heaven and Earth”. The clear implication is that my help does not come from **ME**.

If this **Distraction is the problem**, leading me to give only **half a mind** and **half a heart** to God, the solution is **VIGILANCE**, in the sense that Jesus teaches us about vigilance, the loyal servant who is always ready for the Master's return. **My commitment to God is not for the hour**, but it includes that. It needs to be for the **full twenty four** hours of the day. It was this vigilance that **St Francis** lived out so remarkably. He was described as

“not only praying, as much as becoming a prayer”. This is what God asks of us, that we seek to become a prayer, in our living, breathing, laughing and crying humanity. The **light must burn constantly and brightly**, not just when I condescend to have the time, so that the Master can be welcomed with joy and celebration **whenever He comes** home.

Finally we come to the condition in prayer know as **DRYNESS**, in which we have **lost the capacity, the will even to connect**, and only habit and experience can keep our hand to the plough. This comes **to us all**, I suspect, at one time or another. It is necessary therefore to reach down, to **stretch the roots of faith**, even of blind faith in Christ. **Perseverance** will return us to connection, but for a time we may just have to rough it, and trust. Fr. Pat preached one time on this, on the lack of connection that many of us can feel from time to time. He referred to this as **“God’s Waiting Room”**. “Don’t worry,” he said “stay put and the doctor will be with you shortly”. Another friend is fond of saying “Don’t leave until the miracle happens”. It is about having the **strength in the roots to go on**, even when there seems to be nothing happening. To **continue when it seems empty and dry**.

These three conditions can lead to **two principal temptations or refuges**. The first is **Lack of Faith**, blaming humans and humanity for our ills but really it is lack of faith in God. In this state we **construct a parallel world** from which we can exclude others, and **build our own God** and have a relationship with Him. This is **not true Faith**, it is subjective and **based on wounded pride**, or disenchantment of some sort. It feeds off the insecurity in me and I come to see God not as a support and a consolation and a guide, but as a partner, possibly an equal partner in extreme cases, **with whom I am allied against an unfaithful world**. The technical term for this is **“presumption”**.

It is in this temptation that we need to be so careful to step back, take stock and **LISTEN, not to OUR “God” with qualities that suit us and our wants, but to The One God**, the One who we really need to hear. Let God do the work, and be a willing helper.

Of course, bad as presumption is, it is **arguably less damaging** than its polar opposite, the **temptation to simply give up on prayer to be come lazy** because it is no use anyhow. This condition, spiritual sloth or **ACEDIA** to give it its technical name, corrodes the **very foundations of my faith**. It leads to **lax practice** and **selective adherence** to God’s commandments, notable the Great Commandment and gives rise to a **relativist** view of the world that is often **far away from tolerance and forgiveness**. It might be **characterized** by **judgements** on what constitutes **right or wrong** without regard to or making an effort to divine the **Godly truth of a situation**. It is the **“I’m not hurting anyone”** syndrome, the **“what I do is my own concern”** school of thought, which forgets that like Adam and Eve, God will always find me. When He does, I can **either retreat** in fear from Him by becoming more subjective, limited and self-driven, or else I can **surrender** to Him and **ask His forgiveness**. Sadly, Satan’s infectious **Pride** often leads us to the lonely road rather than the humble one. ACEDIA leads inevitably to complete **prayerlessness**, reaching for the **false refuge** of not being seen to be wrong,

rather than the **truly safe haven** of accepting our weaknesses and fallibility and the Grace that come from that.

The key to living with and through these problematic states is humility. **A Humble Heart leads to a Humble Spirit**. God will not wave a wand and MAKE us loving, loyal and prayerful. He could I guess, but it would be of no interest to Him. **He does not conscript** us into the faith, **we are invited** and it is up to us to accept. This is identified by the Catholic Church as “full and willing adherence to Christ”.

Openness to listening will be a good place to start after we come back.

For now, has anyone any thoughts or comments?