

Sermon on Prayer...

We know from the gospels that his disciples approached Our Lord and asked him how to pray. Prayer is the bedrock of the Christian life, of course; but do we know how to go about it? I think, as with so many things, we have a sort of clichéd view of what it is to pray. I know I have, and it's taking me a long time to grow out of it. I often prefer to think about something else instead. I remember being in a country parish in Yorkshire and walking the short distance through the trees from the vicarage to my friend Tim Tunnard's house. There were two great stone balls on the top of his gateposts. We had jokes about these. And the first thing you saw when you went up the drive was the music room and Tim's piano in the window.

He would be smoking his pipe – the one he used to drive the educational bureaucrats to the other end of the room when, as a Her Majesty's Inspector, he had to attend their tedious conferences. We would sit and talk about – well, anything. Music. The weather. The relative merits of various pubs. We would engage in deep intellectual discussion. For instance, I would say, *You've done the first cut of your lawn early this year, Tim.* And he would say, *Try a drop of this Paddy's Irish whisky – it'll do you no harm.* Or he might say, *There'll be no end of the cold weather while the blackthorn's blooming.*

That's rather like how our praying should be. I didn't go round to Tim's with a barrow-load of requests. I didn't grovel in front of him, giving him titles and bowing and scraping. I went because I wanted to see him. That's all. And that's what our praying should be like. God said, *I have called you my friends.* Your friends will give you things naturally. But you don't just go asking for them all the time. We pray in order to get to know God better – that's all.

And the grand titles are not necessary in private prayer. God does not need constantly to be paid metaphysical compliments. Well, you say, *What about the words we use in the prayer Book – King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the only Ruler of Princes?* That's all right for Sunday best. After all, no one but a buffoon who didn't know his manners would bandy civilities in public with his sovereign. But the titles we use when we address God in public worship aren't in order to please him. He doesn't require that sort of obsequiousness. The titles are to remind us of God's grandeur and the great gap between his Person and ours.

And another thing: I would ask Tim back to my house. Remember to ask God to come to you, to tell you things, to make things clear to you. Ask God to give you the reassurance of his presence and constant friendship. But this image of prayer as a conversation, as a chat, can be taken too far. I keep thinking of my auntie Doris who left England for New Zealand when I was a little boy. We kept in touch. But letters in those days took six weeks by sea. So you asked her something and didn't get an answer for quite a while. So it is with prayer. The questions we ask of God sometimes take time to get answered. Not because God has to wait for the *Cunard* mail ship, but because God talks to us at our pace, and he knows that some things he has to say take time to sink in.

You *can* ask God for things. But the truth is that God will only give you what he's got to give. If you're like a happy-clappy I once knew in York, you can pray for a parking space. But God doesn't deal in parking spaces. Prayer is not psychotherapy, as the nauseating versions of religion we get on TV and in the self-help magazines present it. Don't even look at their blasphemous presentation of religion as *spirituality* as *something that works for YOU!* Plug up your ears when you come across jargon such as *the need to make your own journey* and even worse *to discover your own personality* or *to answer your deep personal needs*.

We have no deep personal needs. Our needs are all the same. They are to learn to know God, to draw near to him and to love him. Nothing else will do. We might think something else will do. And perhaps for a time we might indeed be seduced and deluded by other satisfactions. But they won't last. St Augustine tried everything else first: he tried vegetarianism; he tried to believe that reality is what you make up for yourself – how Augustine would have understood our culture of nihilism expressed by the slogan *everybody has a right to their own opinion!* He tried starring in public debates – the fourth century version of our TV chat shows. There were no fast cars in Augustine's day, but he tried plenty of fast women. He asked God to *make me chaste and continent – but not yet*.

Eventually, he realised what he ought to have realised at the start and he said *Lord, thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee*. God let Augustine mess around for a long time. God was waiting for him. God wanted him as Bishop of Carthage and spiritual genius for all ages. God knew – as Charles Sisson puts it- *that the vain, the ambitious and the highly-sexed are the natural prey of the incarnate Christ*. And so, after trying everything else, Augustine walked out into his garden – as I might walk into Tim Tunnard's garden – as you can walk out into the church garden when we've finished here – and just gave himself up.

God can only give us what he has to give. And what he has to give is himself. If you don't want it, that's OK. It's hell, that's all. God is Being and hell is nothing. If we don't want God he won't force us. God will – weeping with disappointment – allow us to choose nothing if that's what we want.

So what does God have to give? Simply the life of God himself. Transcendental heavenly gifts that we can't begin to comprehend. Delights that are truly *past man's understanding*. We can't understand these joys until we throw off our longing for something else and ask to receive them. It's not a question of asking for a sack of goodies: it is a case of entering a world. And God has told us directly how to do it. Simple. Absolutely simple. God knows what *fools and slow of heart* we are – so he makes it simple. He just asks us to pray for faith, hope and love. These are the gifts that he has to give us. And this is how we shall come to know him.

And then it's like waking up and recognising, *Of course – so that's what it was about all the time! Let our hearts there be fixed then, where true joys are to be found*. Can you pray for your health? Of course you can. But imagine for a minute what it might be like instead to give thanks for your suffering because in it you are privileged to share the sufferings of Christ. What else? You can always pray for others – much as you like. Harp on about the agony of others as much as you like. You can pray especially for those you really can't stomach.

Remember also the prayer that doesn't seem as if you're doing anything at all. Just go away to your own place and be quiet. Stop the relentless jabber of the introspecting consciousness – that me-ism which overshadows our life and spoils it. Instead prepare to hear the still small voice. We are nothing. Prayer is asking God to fill our nothing with his Being. As usual no one puts this better than Charles Sisson:

*I can no more be contrite, God
Than I can understand your magnificence
A creeper here, a boaster there
My conscience is under the tarmac.*

*Abjection is also a vice
For there is nothing which could be abject
In nothing, which is what I am
Stamped with the Maker's image.*