

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

A Lent Address for the Bredon Group of Parishes

MANY people pray when they are desperate, people who pray at no other time. As we know, many people will also say that their prayers were not 'answered', by which they mean, that they wanted something to happen, but something else happened instead. The loved one did not get better, the marriage was not saved, the examination was failed, the job was lost, the friendship broke down, the darkness did not lift.

What do we do when we pray for others, or indeed pray for ourselves? A word I find helpful in understanding prayer is the word *attention*. We *attend* to God – in praise and adoration. We *attend* to ourselves in relation to God: *attending* to our blessings (and so we offer God thanksgiving) and *attending* to our sins (and so we bring to God our penitence). And then we *attend* to other people and their needs, and so we bring our intercessions to God.

If we *attend* to someone, we focus ourselves upon them. We are not *attending* if at the same time we are trying to do something else. 'Pay attention' says the teacher to her pupils, because she knows that their minds are elsewhere, they're looking out of the window, for an older generation reading comics under the desk, for the present generation engaged in Facebook or whatever. *Attending* is the opposite of all these things; attending is *waiting*; it is quiet receptiveness, responsiveness; it is allowing the object of our attention to *be*, and to let it work upon us. *Attention* is what we find in an art gallery, where those who come to see a great picture simply want to be in its presence, to gaze at it, to regard it, to let it be what it is. *Attention* is not trying to devour the object of our attention, not trying to change it, not trying to work out how it can be useful to us. *Attention* involves respect, it involves courtesy.

So this makes *attention* a good word to describe the time we try to give to God in prayer. In prayer we don't rush in with all our own requests and concerns at once: 'God, please do this; God, please do that'. We come in with courtesy, and with respect; with reverence for the holy ground on which we stand; with attention to the simple and amazing truth that God *is*. When Moses met God, God told him to take off his shoes for he was on holy ground, and when Moses asked him his name, God simply said, 'I am who I am'. 'Be still then', says, 'and know that I am God'.

And yet we *do* have preoccupations of our own, and anxieties; they may concern *ourselves*, they may concern *other people*. If the first great commandment is that we should love God with all our heart and soul, the second great commandment is that we should *love our neighbours as ourselves*: and those words tell us that it is perfectly proper to have a concern for others, and it is perfectly proper to have a concern for ourselves. So there is a second part of prayer: not simply attending to God and being in his presence, but bringing to him our concerns both for other people and on our own account.

Well, the first thing, I think, however difficult it may be, is to set aside all *our* solutions to the problem. It may be obvious to us what the desirable outcome may be: that X will get better, that Y will

succeed, that Z will not do what Z has set their heart on doing. But the task of praying for X or Y or Z is more than just bringing our preferred solution to God, and asking God to carry it out. After all, if it is the best solution, God knows that; and if it *is* what we want then God knows that as well. Prayer is not telling God things that he knows already.

No, I think that praying for X or Y or Z is a much more difficult and demanding thing than telling God what to do about them. We set ourselves in the presence of God, and having attended first to God, we then attend to those for whom we want to pray. Perhaps we picture them; perhaps we think about them; perhaps we simply name them, deliberately and attentively, to God. Rather than push *our* concerns for them to the fore, we let them *be*; we allow the idea of them just to be, there in our minds, there in God's presence. We make our minds a place, a space, where God is, and where that person is. Are we praying for a sick person? There in our mind is that sick person, frail, in pain. And there in our mind is God, the maker, the creator, the lover of souls. There is the mystery of God's love which reaches out to every one of his creatures. And there is the mystery of human suffering, disease and pain. We make our minds a place, not where we can work out the solution to those mysteries, but where we let the mysteries be, the one working upon the other, the mystery of the love of God working upon the mystery of human distress.

Or are we praying for peace in the world? Again, we don't come to God with our solutions to the problem. Rather we should try to make our minds a place where God's presence and the mystery of his love can brood upon the wasted landscape of human conflict, where his love can work upon it, bear upon it.

Does this kind of praying make a difference? Well, if I were being prayed for, it would make a difference to me to know that others were spending time thinking of me in God's presence, lifting me up (as it were) to God, making their minds a place where God's presence and my pain were brought together in an act of loving attention on my behalf. And even if I didn't know that others were praying for me – say, if I were lying unconscious in hospital after a road accident – who can tell what difference it could still make to me, if those who loved me were *attending* to me in prayer? We know so little of how the human mind works, and all the subterranean connections of one mind to another: but I can well believe that *loving attention in prayer* makes a difference, reaches out (as it were) across the air waves, even to those who don't know they are being prayed for.

Does this mean that God cannot act unless there is a third party prepared to pray? Is it only when I offer myself as a place of attention, a channel of prayer, that God's love can reach out and touch another person? I think there are two ways of looking at this question. Of course, God is not bound by his own creation; and in the Gospel we are told that the Spirit is wind, which blows where it wills. But equally, God has chosen to bring a world into being; and within that world, he has made creatures with hearts and minds and wills; and his creative purpose is that these creatures with hearts and minds and wills should learn both to love him and to love each other. It is our purpose, it is our destiny, it is the reason for our being here, to love God and to love one another; and therefore to attend to God and to

attend to one another; and therefore to bring to God, in the way I have described, the needs of the whole world. Did God *need* to make a world, and people it with creatures who have hearts and minds and wills? No, but he *did*; and because he did, he has given us a part to play in the exercise of his love towards his world. God *chooses* that we should be channels of his love towards each other. God *chooses* that we should be instruments of his peace. It is then really beside the point to ask whether God *needs* our prayers? He did not *need* to make the world the way he has; but having made it the way he has, then yes, our prayers have a necessary part to play in it. He has given us the task of *attending* to each other as well as *attending* to him; and the way in which we *attend* to each other is part of how he brings his love to bear upon the world.

A great responsibility lies upon us. It prompts the terrifying question whether, if I do *not* pray, or if I pray but not well enough, then others will pay the price? Will X or Y or Z really suffer because my prayers are not good enough, my *attention* not sufficiently firm, my mind not perfectly focussed upon their need? Is this really what prayer means?

Again, there are two ways of looking at all of this. Yes, indeed, prayer for another person is an awesome responsibility, a divine privilege, a share in God's redemptive work, a channel to bring his love to bear upon a suffering world. And this means that it is *quite* beyond us, most of the time. We cannot pray like this, day in and day out. Even on a quiet evening in Holy Week, we may find it hard to focus our minds for more than a few minutes. How can we possibly shoulder this burden of responsibility for one another?

The answer lies in some words which the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome. 'The Spirit', he writes in *Romans*, chapter viii, 'helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes [for us] with sighs too deep for words. And God who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God' – or, as another translation puts that last sentence, 'because he pleads for God's own people in God's own way'.

To begin to explore the meaning of these words, however, we need to go back behind St Paul to the experience of the first disciples of Jesus. We are told that on one occasion, 'he was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples"'.

We know the answer that Jesus gave them. 'When you pray, say, "Our Father"'. He gave them a model upon which to shape their own prayers, he gave them words to say when their own words failed, he gave them an example to follow; yes, he did all of that, but Jesus gave his disciples something else as well. He gave them what we call the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist had seen this right at the outset. 'I baptize you with water', he said, 'but one who is more powerful than I is coming ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'. The Holy Spirit is the name we give to the overflowing love and power of God that God himself pours into his creation, the loving *energy* of God, the love that animates, inspires, inflames the world with God's

presence and power. This is why we speak of the Holy Spirit as God himself: the Spirit is indeed God, God himself in his energising power and presence.

Jesus himself was filled with the Holy Spirit of God his heavenly Father. Jesus was conceived in the power of the Holy Spirit who came upon the Virgin Mary; it was the Holy Spirit who descended upon him when he was baptised by John; led by the Spirit he went into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan; and in the power of the Spirit (says St Luke) he returned to Galilee. The Holy Spirit, the loving energy and power of God the Father, makes Jesus who he is; it is in the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is Son of God, the Christ (the anointed one). We shall not be reading into this picture anything which isn't there if we go on to say that it is in the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus himself prays to his Father. Indeed, we have a glimpse of exactly that later on in St Luke's Gospel when the seventy disciples return from their preaching mission, and (we are told) 'Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth"'.

It is this Holy Spirit whom Jesus gives to his disciples. 'I baptize you with water', said John, 'but one ... is coming ... [who] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'. Now certain very important things follow from that. If the disciples of Jesus are baptized, not just with water, but also with the Holy Spirit – and if *we* are among those disciples (and *we are*) – then it follows that *we* share in something of Jesus's own relationship with God the Father. If Jesus was conceived Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, then we too, in a sense, are children of God. Not *the* child of God, as Jesus is *the* child of God; but we are, as it were, *adopted* into the family of God, and by our baptism into the Holy Spirit we receive the same privilege of being the children of God that belongs to Jesus by birth.

And being adopted into the family of God, we are given the privilege and power of speaking to God as Jesus does. If Jesus calls God his Father, we too can say, 'Our Father'. If Jesus's prayer is '*in* the power of the Holy Spirit', then *our* prayer is also '*in* the power of the Holy Spirit'. Don't worry that your prayer may not *feel* like that; don't worry that none of this may seem to match up with your *experience* of prayer at all – for the moment we are not thinking about our feelings or our experience. We are thinking about what God has made true, as a matter of objective fact; and as a matter of objective fact God has baptised us with his Holy Spirit, adopted us as his children, and given us a share in all the powers and privileges that belong to Jesus his beloved Son. Whether it *feels* like that to us, is (for the moment) neither here nor there.

And this brings us back to St Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, because that is exactly what he goes on to say in that same Chapter viii from which I have already quoted:

All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry "Abba! Father!", it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ ...'

So we are the adopted children of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, empowered to pray to God as Jesus prayed, calling him, 'Abba! Father!' St Paul, who writes in Greek, scarcely ever falls back into Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. It is so significant, so exciting, that here is one of those rare moments when he breaks into the very word that Jesus used when he spoke to his Father in prayer, 'Abba!'

When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, and he gave them what we call the Lord's Prayer, he was giving them more than his words, more than a model for their own words, more than an example to follow. He was, in a much deeper sense, giving them a share in his own life of prayer. It is as if he said to them, 'You have seen me pray, and you long to do the same. Very well, you can. You are my disciples, you are baptised in the power of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who inspires and energises and empowers my life, and brings me to the Father's presence, as a child comes to its parent. My relationship with God is your relationship. He is my Abba, and he is your Abba also. My prayer to him is your prayer. The words I use are words you too can make your own. And all this comes from the power of the Holy Spirit who makes me the Son of God, and who makes you the children of God as well. If I am God's child, then you too are his children, heirs of God and joint-heirs with me ...'

The disciples did not know how to pray as they should, so they asked Jesus to help them. We too, says St Paul, do not know how to pray as we should, but Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit still comes to help us. Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, prays his own prayer deep within us, with sighs (says St Paul) too deep for words. 'And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit "prays for God's own people in God's own way"'.

I have offered you this insight, this tough bit of New Testament theology, not because I think it's a bright idea, but because I think it's *true*. When St Paul says that the Spirit prays within us with sighs too deep for words, I believe he's stating an objective fact about our prayer, *all* prayer. Whether this *means* a great deal to us probably depends on the way in which we think about Jesus; and how we think about Jesus will depend in part on what we think was going on in the wilderness at the outset of his ministry when, we read, 'He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan'.

In the Greek, the word *temptation* has a more far-reaching range of meaning than we often give it. To be *tempted* is to be *put to the test, tried to the limit*. So do we *really* believe that Jesus of Nazareth was *tried to the limit*, really tempted to turn aside from the path that God had mapped out for him; that he *could have* consented to sin? Many Christians, in their heart of hearts, don't think that Jesus *really* had to struggle with those choices, really had to *choose*; after all, they say to themselves, he was the Son of God, so obviously it was easy for him; obviously, he couldn't go wrong.

Two very different pictures of Jesus. And depending on the Jesus we believe in, we shall draw very different conclusions about the way he prayed. If we take the line that *because* Jesus was the Son of God, everything really came to him quite easily and he never had to struggle with real choices, then I

suppose we shall picture his prayer as something quite effortless. Off he went into the hills, and there he communed with his heavenly Father whenever he felt like it.

But if we take the line that Jesus's human experience was real, and his choices were real, and his struggle to do the Father's will was real, then we shall draw a very different picture of his praying. There was a cost to that praying; there was a searching for the right path, a questioning of the Father's will, a price to be paid in doing what he had to do. Those nights of prayer in the Galilean hills, those forty days in the Judæan desert being put to the test, must have been a kind of wrestling; like the story of Jacob in the Old Testament who wrestled with God all night long, and who was both blessed and bruised in the process.

I believe that this is the picture the New Testament gives us of Jesus. The fact that he is Son of God, Son of Man, Christ, Lord, Saviour, indeed God himself – none of that diminishes his real humanity. Indeed, to say that Jesus is a real human being, involved in real and costly choices – and that *this* is the one whom Christians believe to be God incarnate, the Word made flesh who lived among us – makes that a far more tremendous affirmation. Here is a God who really and without reservation involves himself in human life, takes upon himself a true human identity, shares our human condition without qualification, lives our life and dies our death.

And this means that we can draw some very practical conclusions about the way Jesus prayed. His prayer was a very human sort of prayer. It cost him; it was hard work, he had to *attend* to his Father's presence with all the difficulty which we have already reflected upon. He was indeed Jacob wrestling with God; and though he was blessed, the struggle also bruised him beyond measure.

Can we check this out at all against the picture we have of Jesus in the New Testament? Well, yes. First of all, notice the way St Luke concludes his account of the temptations in the wilderness: 'When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him *until an opportune time*'. In other words, it wasn't over. Jesus didn't just wave away his temptations like flies; he had to struggle with them again – and again.

Secondly, reflect on the story of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Here we have one of our few direct pictures of Jesus at prayer. And there is nothing effortless about it. 'Pray that you may not enter into temptation', he says to his disciples; for it is clear that the time of temptation, of testing, has returned. 'In his anguish', says St Luke, 'he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground'. Do you know that those words are missing from some of the early manuscripts of St Luke's Gospel? Not from the best texts; and I've no doubt that Luke wrote those words; but *some* early Christians could not bear to read those words, and left them out. 'The Son of God sweating as it were great drops of blood – and while he was at *prayer*?' they said to themselves in disbelief. 'Impossible!' Not impossible, says the evangelist, for the Son of God was human through and through, and here was a real and very costly choice to make: faithfulness to the Father's will at the cost of certain death, or getting up and walking out of the garden and telling the world that he'd made an embarrassing mistake about the whole business? 'But how could he have struggled and sweated

and wrestled in prayer?’ some of those first Christians might have asked. ‘Didn’t he know that he would rise again from the dead?’

Well, the picture which the gospels give us of Jesus is of one who *did* believe that his Father would vindicate him, even from the grave; but do you think that made anything *easier*? This, after all was just what Jesus had to struggle over: was he really going to put his faith in God to the test, to the practical test, of giving himself up to suffering and death – *real* suffering, *real* death? Never for one moment do the gospel-writers allow us to say, ‘But he had his faith, so that made it easier for him. He was the Son of God, so that made it easier for him’. No, they say, Son of God, he still struggled; Son of God, he still sweated blood to do the Father’s will; Son of God, he wrestled all night long, and was bruised as well as blessed.

If Jesus the Son of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, offers his eternal prayer to the Father *through us*, and if Jesus is the sort of Son of God the New Testament says he is – one who struggled, and wrestled, and sweated, and wept, and made hard choices and suffered on account of them: and if *that* is the texture and the composition of *his* prayer to the Father, then *that is the kind of prayer he makes through us*. That is why the Spirit prays in us with sighs too deep for words; for this is Jesus, making his costly prayer to the Father. When we pray, and we enter into *his* prayer, and he makes his prayer through us, then we are with him in Gethsemane; *we* are the disciples whom he asks to be with him. Like those first disciples, we may not manage very well, we may fall asleep on the job; but nonetheless we are those whom he has invited to take part in his prayer.

And this should make all the difference to *our* prayer. When we bring our own preoccupations and anxieties to God, our hopes, our dreams, our fears, our perplexities, our choices, then Jesus is there already, offering them up to the Father. There is no struggle we can have in prayer, which is not already *his* struggle; there is no hard choice we have to make in our lives, which *he* has not already wrestled over. Oh, of course, we have decisions to make which Jesus in his earthly life never had to face – all the choices of modern life - but the essential struggle at the heart of every choice we make – is this right or is it wrong, is it God’s will or is it not – *that* was what Jesus wrestled with throughout his life, and *that* was what went into his prayer, the prayer that he continues to pray through us.

When Jesus was teaching his disciples to pray he told them to go into their inner room, shut the door, and pray to their Father in secret. That inner room may sometimes be a very dark place for us; as dark as night in the hills of Galilee, as dark as the forty nights in the Judaeian wilderness, as dark as Maundy Thursday in the garden of Gethsemane. Yet Christ knows the darkness of that inner room; as that great seventeenth-century divine (and sometime curate of Kidderminster) Richard Baxter wrote in his hymn:

Christ leads me through no darker rooms
Than he went through before.

There are dark rooms to enter; we enter them ourselves, and our loved ones enter them, and none of us enters a darker one than the darkness of Gethsemane. Yet the dark rooms lead to a door, and the door opens to the kingdom of God, and that is where God is taking us in his love, and our loved ones too, just as he took Jesus through Gethsemane, and through the pain and dereliction of the cross, and through the grave and gate of death, and into his kingdom. 'Heaviness may endure for a night', says the psalmist, 'but joy comes in the morning'. To go back to that picture of Jacob wrestling with God in the night; by morning Jacob was bruised beyond measure, but he was blessed as well.

When we pray to our Father in the secrecy and darkness of our inner room, we may have shut out the outside world, but that hidden communion with God does not shut out the presence of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. *Our* inner room turns out to be *his* inner room, where he graciously invites us to participate in his own prayer to the Father. As Baxter concludes,

He that into God's kingdom comes
Must enter by that door.

My knowledge of that life is small,
The eye of faith is dim;
But 'tis enough that Christ knows all,
And I shall be with him.

And this is the note on which we should end. Jesus prays his Gethsemane prayer within us, yes; but he is not only the Christ of Gethsemane, he is also the risen and ascended Lord. In the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, we read that Jesus 'ever lives to make intercession' for us. According to the same epistle, he is the 'great high priest who has passed through the heavens'; the one 'who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God'. The prayer he continues to make on our behalf and in our hearts, is all at once the prayer of the Man of Sorrows and the prayer of the Risen Lord. He is the one who wrestles with the Father's will, but also the one to whom the Father has given his final and unconditioned 'yes'.

God's *ultimate* answer to our prayer is always 'yes'. In the *end* it is always joy; in the *end* it is always blessing. There may be bruising in the process; and God's answer to us, as it was to Jesus in the garden, may well be: 'there *will be* joy, but you must for it wait until the morning. The night may be long and heavy, and you may yet be bruised some more, but morning comes and with that my blessing and my joy'.

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