

# Laurence Freeman - The Prayer of the Heart

*We have lost the mystical dimension of the Gospel. The 40 days of Lent, which have just begun, is an ideal time to rediscover the teaching of Jesus on prayer*

A woman's nephew had been kidnapped. She joined with her devout family to pray intensely for his safety. They felt that if they bombarded heaven, their wish would be granted because they had faith, and it was a just petition. They supported each other with the words of Jesus, "*Ask and you will receive.*"

When the boy was murdered by his captors the shock and grief propelled her into a full-blown crisis of faith. She did not doubt God's existence or angrily reject him: but how could God have failed her? She realised that her understanding, both of God and of prayer, must be inadequate. She consulted a friend who told her, "*I can't give you the answer but maybe another approach to prayer, that I follow, may help your faith grow as it helped mine. I do meditation: the prayer of the heart.*"

There are innumerable valid ways of prayer.

We pray in different ways at different times. Temples, mosques, synagogues and churches attract devotees who pray for what all humans desire: health, prosperity, children, longevity and escape from life's problems. For religious people and others, prayer often means primarily praying for something. It means coming to God with an agenda. Doesn't it seem odd that most Christians are not introduced to nor encouraged to explore the approach that Jesus himself chose when he taught on prayer?

Without understanding and following this teaching it is hard to make sense of the nature and purpose of prayer or of the Gospel itself. Origen, in the third century, put it concisely: "*Prayer in itself is good. It calms the mind, reduces sin and promotes good deeds.*" Prayer is good in itself, like loving. It is not transactional. It is not a negotiation. Many feel rejected when their prayer for something, like the woman who prayed for her nephew to be released by his captors, proves "ineffective". But have we missed something about authentic prayer, something hiding in full view if only we have eyes to see?

Jesus delivered a revolutionary message that changes our essential understanding, not only of prayer, but of everything: life, God and human identity. Christianity is in crisis today and yet many Christians are seeking in other religious traditions what Jesus himself taught. They see little evidence of it because it is painfully absent or even denied in the worship they encounter "in church".

There is at least one sermon, though, where you hear it loud and clear. The Sermon on the Mount (in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the gospel of Matthew) is a great text for a revolutionary Lent. It is Jesus' manifesto of spiritual transformation that shows him above all as a universal master of prayer. His teaching on prayer is central to all Jesus teaches. He dismisses inauthentic, showy forms of prayer that offer only inauthentic, egotistic or even congregational self-satisfaction. He describes the alternative when he says, "*When you pray ... pray like this.*" It is crystal clear. I will select some essential elements of his contemplative revolution.

**FIRST, INTERIORITY.** Go into your inner room, close the door and pray in the presence of the Father, the ever-present Source, whom you will find there. The Greek word for this inner space is *tameion*, which means a "secret" - in the sense of mysterious - boundless dimension, literally a "storeroom" of infinite and nourishing riches.

**SECOND, SILENCE.** Don't babble on endlessly, "like the pagans", who think the more they say the more likely they are to be heard. Your Father knows what you need before you ask, Jesus tells us. If we truly believe that, why in most Christian worship is there no time of deep silence? And where in religious education is there a universal, sustainable, practical introduction to how to pray as Jesus teaches (with some notable exceptions, for example in contemplatively oriented dioceses like Canberra and Trinidad)?

**THIRD, Jesus teaches us to develop EQUANIMITY OF MIND.** At the time of prayer, let go of your worries and anxieties rather than becoming fixated on them. To explain how, he points, as Pope Francis does in *Laudato si'*, to the contemplation of Creation in its rich beauty and transcendent wonder.

FOURTH, ATTENTIVENESS. Set your mind on God's kingdom and all the rest will fall into place. How many Catholic schools have introduced secular "meditation" techniques, suggesting a spiritual bankruptcy in not knowing their own tradition. The heart of contemplation, as Jesus teaches, is pure attention. For Aquinas, "*contemplation is the simple enjoyment of the truth*". Children, as I know well, can meditate, love to meditate, and ask to meditate.

FIFTH, BE IN THE PRESENT MOMENT. Don't worry about tomorrow. The "pure prayer" of the inner room, as desert monasticism through teachers such as Evagrius describe it, begins by simply "*laying aside all thoughts*" which hook us to the past or the future. As we find that prayer is more than thinking or asking, we awaken in the moment of Christ. The scourge of stress and depression is healed by his promise of peace and joy.

Yet in spite of this teaching of Jesus, Christians often remain hooked on prayer as primarily petition and intercession. This can reduce prayer to an understandable but false consolation, like buying a lottery ticket. Of course, these forms of prayer can be valid. But, as St Augustine asked, why do we tell God our problems? To update him on some-thing he might have missed? To change God's mind? (Does God change his mind?) To bribe him to support us against opponents or to treat us as favourites? God has no favourites, St Paul says. In the same Sermon, Jesus teaches that God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Augustine concludes that we validly pray in this way to express solidarity with the suffering and to deepen our faith that God is, believe it or not, God.

I am not saying, therefore, that the approach to prayer that Jesus chose in order to illuminate his whole revolutionary process, excludes other forms of prayer. I have been having medical treatment recently and, when the nurses set up a new drip, I lift my hand to bless it and those caring for me. But all I feel the need to say and I do feel it - is "*Your will be done*" and I feel wonderfully supported by the prayer of others.

We are released from being hooked on prayer as only praying for by the transformative experience of prayer as Jesus reveals it. One simple contemplative practice is easily found. Julian of Norwich mischievously explained it like this: you ask for something. You don't get it. God changes your will into his and then gives what you ask. Her deeper point is that prayer, as Jesus teaches it, is transformative not magical: it changes us.

The Western Church is widely seen as moralistic and trapped in self-obsession. It is hard for people to believe that Jesus taught radical spiritual transformation, the glorious liberty of the children of God, human equality and unity, and the wonder of the human body the sacred language of Christianity. We have lost the mystical dimension of the Gospel, teaching it neither to our clergy nor to our children. The Eastern Church is more mystical but its bridge between contemplation and action also needs repair.

**Forty days is more than enough to discover why the teaching of Jesus on prayer - simple, radical and doable - is worth practising. This Lent, why not build times for interiority, silence, equanimity, attentiveness and the present moment into every morning and evening?** Solitary, but never lonely, contemplation is the cure for loneliness because meditation reveals and realises the community we need. Find others you can join with in person or online. Two or three, as Jesus said, is enough for him to manifest himself and reveal the inner and outer revolution he is leading humanity through. This means that the first sign of change in the prayer that Jesus taught is not in externals - that comes in time - but in the transformation of the person who prays.

The spiritual mothers and fathers of the desert who knew this advised the best thing to pray for is simply the gift of prayer itself.

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