

THE LION

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Issue 4

Message from the Rector

“The Problem of Prayer”

Part One

Prayer a problem? That is an odd title for an article, isn't it? But if we are going to be honest with ourselves, I would expect that for many of us prayer is one of the things with which many of us have the most problems. And I am not talking about the prayers that we utter when we are looking for a spot in a crowded parking lot, or when a police officer points his radar gun our way, or even the rather short prayers that we say when we get out of bed in the morning or go back to sleep in the evening; but what I am talking about is real prayer: coming into the presence of our Lord in a deep, intimate, consistent way. For many of us, that is the number one problem in our Christian lives.

I would also expect that for most of us it isn't that we don't want to pray, or don't like to pray, or don't feel like we really need to pray; it's just that there are so many other things that need to be done that it is easy to put off praying until we either have the time or are in the right frame of mind to do so – neither of which ever seems to come to pass. And yet, even when we finally do get around to praying, we find ourselves distracted, both internally and externally, with our minds chasing after every other thought that comes our way instead of focusing on what we should be doing, which is quietly spending time in the presence of our Lord. And the result is that we generally just give up and promise to try again later, only to have the same thing happen again.

Does any of that sound familiar? Well if it does, you are not alone. As a matter of fact, between my very informal conversations with people and my very formal studies in ascetical theology – a large part of which deals with the practice of, and problems with, prayer – these “problems of prayer” are far more common than many of us probably realize. As a matter of fact, even many of our Lord's greatest saints, men and women who have a reputation for leading lives of deep and intimate prayer, had the very same problems that many of us have too. So the “problem of prayer” isn't very unique.

But isn't there a way to either circumvent that problem? Or at least work through the difficulties in order to reach a higher level and deeper life of prayer? Isn't there a way to guarantee that we can come to God with the right attitude of mind and in the right state of heart so that we can enjoy deep and intimate prayer?

Well, the answer to that question is both “yes” and “no.” Yes, there are things that we can do to help foster a deeper life of prayer, but “no,” there is no guarantee that we will ever be completely free of these problems. Nevertheless, there is a place to at least begin to find a solution to these problems, and it is no farther away than page 594 of our own Book of Common Prayer. In the section entitled “Family Prayer,” you will find a short prayer that is entitled For the Spirit of Prayer, and it goes like this:

O Almighty God, who pourest out on all who desire it, the spirit of grace and of supplication; Deliver us, when we draw nigh to thee, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with stedfast thoughts and kindled affections, we may worship thee in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Message from the Rector continued)

Now there are several things that I think we should notice about this prayer. First, we see that it recognizes that God is predisposed to pour out on “all who desire it, a spirit of grace and of supplication.” In other words, what we see is that God will freely give to all who desire it the “spirit” of prayer, and this “spirit” includes both the attitude and the desire to come before him and engage him in prayer. This is a lot like our Lord’s promise to grant wisdom to all those who desire it (cf. Jas 1:5): we don’t have to beg for it, we don’t have to wrestle it from God, all we have to do is want and ask for this spirit of prayer.

But perhaps for many of us, this is the first impediment to prayer: Is a true spirit of prayer something that we really want? Do we really want to give up our time – time that can be filled with so many other things – and instead spend that time in what often seems to be just a fruitless pursuit? Most of us realize that the results of prayer more often than not come very, very slowly, virtually imperceptible at times; and it takes an enormous amount of effort and patience to persevere, especially when we are so used to having our wants and desires met almost immediately. So do we really want a spirit of prayer? That may be our first problem with prayer.

Or it may be that we don’t realize just how difficult prayer can be. It is work – it is a lot of work – make no mistake about that. It isn’t easy to commit to coming to our Lord in deep, quiet prayer on a regular basis. Nor is it always convenient to do. Yet in this rather short Prayer Book prayer we are reminded that God will grant to all who truly want it a spirit of prayer. And he will do this for the simple reason that he wants us to come to him. Sure he wants us to come to him with our needs and our wants and our concerns; but above everything else, like any loving parent, God wants us to come to him if for no other reason than to just be with him, spending time with him, and enjoying his presence as much as he is enjoying ours. God delights in our presence, and he will reward us with the spirit of prayer if we ask for it. The only question is: How badly do we want it?

Ok, so that is the first thing that we should notice about this prayer: God will give a spirit of prayer to anyone who wants it bad enough to ask. The second thing that I think we should notice about this prayer is the petition that our Heavenly Father deliver us from “coldness of heart and wanderings of mind.” Which of us hasn’t suffered from this “problem of prayer”? Without question, these two things – a cold heart and a wandering mind – are perhaps the most common complaints that I hear from people who are struggling with prayer.

But, again, what do we notice in this short prayer? Like the petition that God would grant us a spirit of prayer, this petition asks that God also keep our hearts and minds centered on what we are doing. But this petition also recognizes that this can only be achieved through his grace. God’s grace is the foundation of all that we have and are as Christians, and our dependence on that grace is not any less in our prayer lives – even though we still have to do our part. In other words, while it is God who gives us the grace, we still have to do the work; so even though it seems counterintuitive, the solution to “coldness of heart” in prayer is to pray. Pray without ceasing, as St Paul tells us (I Th 5:17). Pray at all times and in all things, Brother Lawrence instructs us in his classic work, *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

So how does this work in practice? Well, when we don’t especially feel like praying we should pray. When we have a few moments during the day, we should quiet our hearts and pray. When we rise up in the morning and lay down in the evening, we should offer our hearts in prayer. Now, does any of this guarantee that we will no longer experience coldness of heart, or never again feel as though God is very far from us or that we are very far from him? Does it guarantee that we never again be in the “desert places” of prayer? Of course not. But without coming to our Lord constantly in prayer our coldness of heart is almost guaranteed.

And what about the “wandering mind” that is also mentioned in this short Prayer Book prayer, and that seems to be such a common problem for us all? Well, again, we should be getting the idea by now. This too is something that we should ask God to guard us from, because it too is a gift from God.

(Message from the Rector continued)

But like the other gifts, there are things that we can do to help. Maybe when we pray, we should not find the most comfortable place to do it, especially if we are prone to falling asleep when we pray. Or maybe we should pray with our eyes open and focused on some object: perhaps a crucifix or a picture or something like that. Or maybe we should say our prayers aloud. This is an old trick that helps to keep our minds focused on what we are doing. Remember the story of Hannah as she was praying in the Temple (I Sm 1:12-13), softly praying her prayers to herself? She had discovered something that helps many of us remain focused in our prayers: just whispering them to God. Now granted there are times, such as in contemplative prayer, when this will prove to be more of a distraction than a help, but since most of us haven't reached this level of prayer in our prayer lives, perhaps saying our prayers out loud will help to keep our minds and our hearts focused on what we are doing.

And finally, the third thing that we should notice about this short Prayer Book prayer, is that everything is tied together as we pray that God would grant these things so "that with steadfast thoughts" (i.e., a mind that does not wander from lack of discipline) and with "kindled affections" (i.e., a heart that has not grown cold through neglect), "we may worship thee in spirit and in truth...." You see, at bottom, that is what prayer really is: it is nothing other than another form of worship. Now certainly and without question, prayer is also the process by which we make our needs and desires known to God, but as our Lord reminds us in his Sermon on the Mount, "...your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Mt 6:8). So prayer is more than just asking God for things: it is primarily a means of relationship, a relationship not fundamentally based on what one party can give to, or do for, the other, but it is a relationship of One Party being the object of the worship of the other. In other words, prayer is our act of coming to our Lord in order to be with him – being satisfied with nothing other than just being in his holy presence – and having our souls filled with what they most long for: his love and his grace. For as St Augustine well put it so many years ago: "O God, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." That is what prayer does for us: it rests our hearts in the presence of the One who has created us for himself. There is no, nor can there be, a higher or greater rest for us than that.

The entire discipline of prayer – like the rest of the spiritual disciplines – is, because of our fallen nature and because of our fallible and weakened human condition, a very difficult thing for most of us. In the next issue I hope to provide some guidance on how we can not only improve our present prayer lives, but also explore some of the ancient pathways that lead to our "union with God": things like the practices of *lectio divina*, centering prayer, and so forth. But until then, may God grant each of us not only the desire for a life filled with prayer, but also its spirit that we might more fully worship him in spirit and in truth.

Music Notes

Kathleen Knott, Music Director/Organist

The First Communion Service – John Merbecke (1505 –c. 1585)"

During Advent and Lent we sing selections from the Mass from "The First Communion Service." This music can be found in the back of The 1940 Hymnal. These settings are more austere than the Healey Willan Mass settings that we sing during the rest of the liturgical year. Archbishop Cranmer commissioned John Merbecke to compose a simpler service music for the Book of Common Prayer with "for every syllable a note." Merbecke based his compositions on plainsong melodies with adaptations to the vernacular. In 1550, The Book of Common Prayer Noted ("Noted" meaning with musical notes) was published. This book was only used for two years. It was replaced by

(Music Notes continued)

The Second Book of Edward VI. The Catholic reign of Queen Mary and the Protestant disregard for music during the reign of Queen Elizabeth made Merbecke's musical contributions fall into disfavor. His mass was forgotten until the first half of the 19th century when the Oxford movement pushed to reinstate some of the older Christian traditions, such as the older Anglican liturgy and theology.

John Merbecke's name is found on the 1531 list of singing men at St. George Chapel, Windsor, and in 1541 he became the chapel organist. He became involved in the underground Protestant movement, and in 1543 was convicted of heresy and was sentenced to be burned at the stake. He received a pardon from Henry VIII due to the intervention of Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester and others. In 1545 he returned to his position at Windsor and remained there until his death.

Finally, thank you to St. Mark's Choir and Handbell Choir for all of their hard work during the Advent and Christmas seasons. In addition, we welcome Geri Hart to our soprano section.

Daughters Of The Holy Cross

Please join the Daughters of the Holy Cross for coffee, refreshments, and fellowship immediately following the 10:00 a.m. service on March 6th and April 3rd

Upcoming Holy Days

February/March/April

February 2 (noon) – Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary

February 10 (noon and 6:00 p.m.) – Ash Wednesday

February 24 (noon) – Feast of St Matthias the Apostle

March 21-23 (8:00 a.m. and noon) – Holy Week

March 24 (6:00 p.m.) – Maundy Thursday

March 25 (noon) – Good Friday

March 26 (4:00 – 5:00 p.m.) – Sacramental Confessions

March 27 (8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.) – Easter Sunday (10:00 a.m. service with incense)

March 28 (noon) – Easter Monday

March 29 (noon) – Easter Tuesday

April 4 (noon) – Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (transferred)

April 25 (noon) – Feast of St Mark the Evangelist

St. Mark's Anglican Church

Rev. Canon Michael L. Ward, SSA

Rector

Rev. Mr. Randall Russell

Curate

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