

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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PATHWAYS of PRAYER

Prayer is the heart of religion, not only among Christians, but seems to be natural to people of all races, ages and levels of civilization. The normal person in possession of their rationality, intelligence, insight and emotional maturity knows that they cannot solve life's problems by wishful thinking. We become able to discover transcendent power within that enables us to fulfill our aims and goals. Those who are most devoted to prayer cultivate the inner life like craftpersons or artists realizing the exercise improves their handling of reality.

Reality deals with the phenomenal rather than the idealistic. Prayer is an individual and very personal relationship between each of us and the God of our own understanding. Trouble and perplexity drive us to seek realism in the situation and insight into solution for our anxiety.

The mystics of various religions - Hindu, Buddhist, Hebrew, Christian, Islam and others - have developed exercises and disciplines to realize devotional experiences. The mystical experience of God has certain characteristics that are common to all faiths. As Karen Armstrong ("A History of God", Ballantine Books, page 219) describes it, "It is a subjective experience that involves an inner journey, not a perception of an objective fact outside the self; it is undertaken through the image-making part of the mind - often called the imagination - rather than through the more cerebral, logical faculty.

Prophets are also persons of prayer. They are as fully devoted to the religious cause as the mystics, but they follow another discipline. The mystic is regulated by the aim of self-control, while the prophet is directed by the aim of social action. The prophet is devoted to social welfare and identifies with

the common life of people. This person broods with God over the wrongs of the time and speaks out the message of reform and renewal. The urgency of social needs possesses the prophet until he or she can bear it no longer and feel compelled to take courageous action with God to serve others.

The prophet is disciplined by a keen sense of need and of calling to respond and help bring about reform.

The priests are also persons of prayer. They take up prayer as a religious vocation. But their discipline is not the self-control of the mystic or the social action of the prophet. Priestly discipline is ritual. The life of prayer is regulated in the place of worship by tradition and authority. They develop liturgies, breviaries, and common prayer.

Each of these disciplines has its psychological value. Priestly

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prayer is rich in traditional symbols, aware of historical continuities, precise in well-ordered expression, effective in literary and dramatic power, solemn in dignity, and impressive in social resonance.

However, priestly prayer can result in sterile, hollow formality. The priest is the religious conservative, the opponent of change, the believer that the divine is best known through tradition and the institution they represent. Ritual and liturgy are the priestly tools, and distrust for enthusiasm and innovation characterizes these people.

The prophet is the religious liberal. They have a sense of mission as the mouthpiece of God. The prophet is of this world and enters the arena of social and political conflict to speak for the realm of God. The prophet's praying appears to lead them to aggressive social action and reform.

The religious intellectual is another representative of the praying person. This is a person of thought, a scholar, one who becomes aware of spiritual reality through logic and reason. These folk may easily appraise spirituality rather than experience it. As an explorer agnosticism may keep them away from personal prayer.

Conflicts among these four types of religious approaches to prayer occur within the individual as well as the religious movements of our society. I have personally suffered the struggle between the priestly and prophetic roles in prayer, as well the intellectual. I suppose only the naive are unaware of the clash of these positions in our use of prayer.

Some of the effects of personal and individual prayer may

be to make us more aware of our inner needs and the realities of life. It can relax us and help us tap our inner strengths. The meditation in prayer can help us to gain perspective and clarification of the problems of life. It usually leads to decision and dedication, which set free latent powers to achieve.

Prayer usually helps us to renew our emotional energy. It makes us also responsive to the social needs around us, sensitive to the needs of others.

Spontaneous prayer may be a momentary cry of distress for help. Disciplined prayer, along whatever route, may be followed in faithful religious practice. It can be awakening and call forth the love and courage we need to serve the realm of God. It can be as therapy to the unsatisfied life.

If our prayer life suffers it could be not so much a failure to bring practice up to theory as failure to bring theory up to practice.

Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive
-It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

WE MAY EXTEND OUR SPIRITUAL ASSETS

The marketplace and fashion entice us in countless ways to indulge our individual pleasures and to invest in material assets. Being poor certainly limits ones options, but investing all of our life in material wealth is not a guarantee of happiness or of real success. There are other riches that can be more precious.

As a self-appointed leader of the fledgling Christian church, St. Paul sometimes was given gifts of money. In his Letter to the Christians at Philippi, Paul thanked them for a monetary gift, but went on to say, "It is not the money I am anxious for; what I am anxious for is the interest that accumulates in this way to your divine credit!"

The meaning to be taken is that from every generous gift the giver obtains more than the receiver by developing human sympathy and growth of character. God's bank in us pays good interest on all the spiritual investments we deposit there.

And like any bank, our religion, Christian or otherwise, invests spiritual resources, built upon the separate deposits of the good we contribute. We are enabled then to draw upon this bank of moral and spiritual goodness and find pleasure in moral wholeness and healthy relationships.

When one pursues the values of honesty, meekness, and service, greater rewards than monetary or material are ultimately ones invaluable compensation. As the Lebanese philosopher, poet and prophet, Kahlil Gibran declared, "You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you most truly give." This is not to talk about ones principles, but to act them out.

We can only do this out of the

interest accumulated in our bank of divine credit.

"Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed."

-James Montgomery

Prayer is love on its knees.

GOD WRITES A LEGIBLE HAND

Contemporary history proves, if nothing else, the validity of the argument of Jesus that we are members one of another. The society which denies humanity's essential unity starts on the road to disaster.

If Canadian politicians insist on each province, region and peoples being separate and autonomous, then Canada is lost as a nation. If Christian churches and religious faiths continue to ordain independent, self-determining groups, then the work of God is splintered. In each case we lose our power to be.

Our belongingness and interdependence is the stern reality we face in a world ruled by the illusions of politics and power. Only the naive imagine it possible to build security and peace on a basis of separation and grievance.

Of course it is difficult to convince people that they should not always think of themselves first when advertisers are constantly telling them how special they are. Whatever the case in real life, in television commercials you are always number one.

The willingness to give up ones selfish aims is vital to society today. When we refuse to contribute to the good of the whole, we perversely contribute to our own downfall.

God writes a legible hand. Sometimes what is written may be seen on a human face. Other times it is

("God's Hand", cont'd)

written on the face of the land. Whatever we sow we reap. Abuse the land, abuse people, we pay for it in disaster.

God writes a legible hand in the economic and international world as we seek to live together in a global village. Both at home and abroad we are seeing the validation and need of mutual relatedness and dependence.

RESOURCES

"An African Prayer Book", edited by Desmond Tutu (New York: Doubleday) 1995. A collection of prayers expressing the spirituality and rich experience of the Christian community in Africa. The prayers are organized into categories of adoration, thanksgiving, supplication, etc.

"Earth Prayers From Around the World: 365 prayers, poems, and invocations for honouring the earth", edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (San Francisco: Harper Collins) 1991.

A collection of prayers from all over the world and from different historical periods. Each prayer links spiritual life with the well-being of creation.

"More Than Words: Prayer and ritual for inclusive communities", by Janet Schaffran and Pat Kozak (Oak Park: Meyer Stone Books) 1988.

A combination of prayers, songs, and entire worship services that reflect the spirituality of different peoples and cultures. Readings, prayers, and poems can be used to encourage a diversity of images of God and an involvement in justice and peace.

"Dare to Dream: A Prayer & Worship

Anthology From Around the World", edited by Geoffrey Duncan (London:HarperCollins) 1995.

An inspiring collection of prayers, litanies, poetry, and readings gathered from around the world. The purpose of the collection is to draw people into a deeper understanding of world issues and to challenge them to action.

The above books are available through United Church Book Rooms and Presbytery Resource Centres.

NEEDED: AN APPROACH TO THE FUTURE

Do the Christian churches as we know them today have a future? The answer is obviously, no! Changes must take place and are taking place. Which way is the wind blowing? And are the churches listening to the wind as it rumbles, whispers, pushes, dances? The wind is nothing less than the spirit of God. It thrusts us into the NOW. It asks us to bear towels, hot water, forceps to the countless chambers where the world is continually being born. And, like the biblical spirit, the beckonings of the wind are set in the context of the events of history. We are challenged to form not only new ministries for a new age, but to begin to forge a new consciousness of the meaning of freedom and responsibility.

"Be alert, stand firm in the faith, be brave, be strong! Let everything that you do be done in love."

1 Corinthians 16:13.

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