THE PRAYER OF JESUS

By ADALBERT HAMMAN

THE prayer of Jesus cannot be separated from that of the apostolic community which has handed it on to us; nor can christian prayer be separated from the prayer of Jesus which gives it strength and efficacy and defines its purpose. However personal the prayer of Jesus, it is, like his human nature, deeply rooted in the people of Israel. This prayerful people finds its own traditional prayer fulfilled in Christ.

The prayer of Jesus is at one with the prayer of his people. He shares in the cult of the synagogue and keeps the sabbath holy; he makes his own, as the Church does later, the psalter, the prayer of God's people; he confirms and fulfils it.

The fact that Christ's prayer is rooted in the life of his people should not blind us to its originality and novelty. The Gospels contain enough hints. Apart from the Our Father, Matthew speaks of Christ's prayer three times, Mark and John four times, and Luke eleven times. Of all the evangelists Luke is the one who most emphasises the humanity of Jesus and dwells at length on his prayer.

Prayer accompanies the life and mission of Christ and marks each of its important moments. It is first mentioned at his baptism. Luke makes a connection between Christ's prayer and the descent of the Holy Spirit. The solemn proclamation of the messianic mission of Jesus is presented as heaven's answer to his silent prayer.

The account of the temptation makes no explicit mention of prayer, but it is presupposed. Why does Jesus, led by the Holy Spirit, seek out solitude if not, like Moses and Elias, to encounter God and to enter into dialogue with his Father? The answer Jesus gave to the tempter was the prayer that the Jew recited daily in the *shema*.[1]

Before choosing the Twelve to govern the new Israel, Jesus, fully aware of the importance of his decision, prays on a mountain-top, the high place favoured for divine communications. The night is given over to prayer. He feels the need to submit his work, the

[1] The profession of faith, made up of Deut 6, 4-9; 11, 13-21 and Num 15, 37-41, introduced and concluded by various blessings.

foundation and the future of the Church, to the will of his Father.[1] This total dependence is expressed by Luke in the first and last words which he records.[2]

The synoptics all give an account of Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea. Only Luke adds the detail that Jesus asked 'Who do the multitude say that I am?' after prayer. The occasion is no less solemn than the choice of his disciples. The confession of Caesarea counter-balances the defection of numerous disciples; it is a turning-point in the public life of Christ and a decisive moment for the future of the Church. The prayer of Jesus was answered, since the Father revealed to Peter the secret of Christ's messianic dignity.

The transfiguration took place exactly six days later. Such detailed accuracy on the part of the evangelists shows the precision of the memories they relied on, and also the connection made between the confession of Caesarea and the answer of heaven which confirms it. For Luke, and perhaps for Mark if we are to follow Origen, the transfiguration is brought about by prayer: 'And even as he prayed, the fashion of his face was altered'.[3]

All the details of the setting are important. The mountain, in the biblical tradition, is the place where God reveals himself. Moses and Elias are men of prayer. The voice from heaven confirms the mission of the suffering servant and the sonship of Christ. The disciples, later to witness the Agony, were then able to discern the true countenance of their Master and catch a glimpse of the ineffable closeness of Son and Father in prayer.

Another *logion* preserved by Luke enables us to determine the purpose of his prayer: 'I have prayed for thee, that thy faith may not fail'.[4] The Master does not divorce his mission from that of his disciples. Committed by the faith revealed at Caesarea, Peter and the others will have to proclaim the message of the good news to their brethren and to the world. Their courage and confidence will spring from their reliance on the prayer of the Lord.

If we leave aside the Our Father, which is our prayer rather than Christ's, the Gospels record three of his personal prayers: the thanksgiving after the return of the disciples, the supplication in Gethsemani, the prayer on the cross. John's Gospel adds still more examples.

In all the recorded prayers, Jesus calls God *Abba*, Father. This title was not a new one, although it was more often used by God

[1] Jn 5, 18-19; 8, 28-29. [2] Lk 2, 49; 23, 46. [3] Lk 9, 29. [4] Lk 22, 23.

himself than by the Jews. The fatherhood of God was shown in the extraordinary way he formed the chosen people and gave them their supernatural mission. The post-exilic prophets especially stress this theme. Jesus gives to the term a richness of meaning, a special fulfilment. Jesus says: 'Father' or 'my Father', and this contrasts with 'your Father' which he uses in speaking to his disciples.

The originality of the title of Father as used by Jesus is that it accomplishes the eschatological promises made by Yahweh to his people. The Son of the Father has a mission of salvation: 'That is why my people will know my name; they will understand on that day that it is I who say: Here I am'.[1] That day has come with Christ who completes the revelation of the tetragrammaton[2] made to Moses. The mysterious name of God which expresses his nature is Father. In that word all revelation is summed up: to acknowledge the Son is to acknowledge the Father, to acknowledge the Father is to acknowledge the Son. St. John's Gospel teaches this explicitly.

By calling God Father in his prayer, Jesus introduces humanity to the mystery of his personal relationship with him, and on this mystery his nature and mission depend. The personal prayer of Jesus continues the revelation of the Father at his baptism and transfiguration. It is the answer of the Son to the voice of the Father. Both share in the same mystery and the same work of salvation.

We have two accounts of Jesus' thanksgiving prayer, one in St. Luke, the other in St. Matthew. Luke inserts this prayer of praise after the return of the seventy disciples from their mission. Jesus warns them against glorying in the powers given to them and against the danger of claiming for themselves what is really the work of God. Their joy should be made to depend simply on the fact that they have been chosen. Luke adds that Jesus was 'filled with gladness by the Holy Spirit'. The two versions are otherwise identical. 'At this time, Jesus . . . said, O Father, who art Lord of heaven and earth, I give thee praise that thou hast hidden all this from the wise and the prudent, and revealed it to little children. Be it so, Lord, since this finds favour in thy sight'.[3]

This prayer of Jesus overthrows the values of the world and human wisdom, and sets up other, genuine values for those who are poor in spirit and who recognise in the suffering of the just man the

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[1] Isai 52, 6.

[2] Literally, 'the word of four letters': the consonants of the sacred name of God *Yahweh*.

[3] Lk 10, 21; Mt 11, 25-26.

mystery of their salvation. Jesus reveals the mutual relationship of Father and Son; and his own double experience, divine and human, enables him to understand both the mystery of God and the trials of man. His thanksgiving is prompted by joy at seeing his messianic mission begin to be realised according to the disposition and favour of God.

The prayer of Gethsemani is likewise addressed to the Father. Mark keeps the aramaic form, *Abba*. Jesus turns to his Father at the moment when, humanly speaking, all seems to have failed him. He expresses his trust in the divine omnipotence. Mark's text brings out the unlimited nature of his trust: 'All things are possible to thee'. The synoptics record only fragments of a prayer which lasted for several hours during the night. Jesus is torn between his Father and men. His human nature hesitates at the moment when he is to be given over to sinners. 'He speaks', noted Maldonatus, 'as if he had not the strength to overcome death'. Yet his prayer now shows its real strength. In dismay, he turns towards the *Abba*. Jesus suffers in his soul and cries out. The answer to his prayer does not mean that the divine will is diverted from its plan but rather that he submits to it, flesh and spirit, in complete lucidity, even if it means death. In his prayer, a prayer which caused 'sweat to fall to the ground like thick drops of blood', he finds strength, peace, light and gladness.

The prayer on the cross echoes that of Gethsemani. It belongs to the prayer of Israel and is a part of the liturgy for the evening offering. The psalm *Deus, Deus meus*,[1] sums up Jesus' life of prayer. It expresses the distress of one who has undergone suffering and abandonment with the *anawim*.[2] This poignant situation, expressed in the Jewish prophets, is fulfilled in Jesus. But abandonment and universal scorn do not have the last word. The psalm ends by describing the triumph of the oppressed, and the coming of the reign of God is brought nearer through the suffering of the faithful and innocent servant. Beyond the apparent tragedy, Jesus crucified sees universal atonement and gratitude.

Luke notes the last words of Jesus which are once again a prayer: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit'.[3] His prayer had put his personal mark on the psalm. Now his last words are an act of filial confidence in his Father, whose will he has accomplished to the end, for the salvation of men. 'Crying out with a loud voice': this

[1] Ps 21.
[2] The devout and faithful nucleus of the chosen people: the spiritual Israel.
[3] Lk 23, 46; cf. Ps 30, 6.

prayer does not come from an exhausted moribund; it is the clear-sighted, free, complete self-offering of the High Priest, 'obedient even to the death of the cross'. Prayer and self-oblation are fused in the one sacrifice which founds the new Israel and realises the work of salvation entrusted to him by the Father.

Prayer leads Jesus to the heart of his unique and highly personal intimacy with the Father. He lives by that relationship, and in it his soul finds rest. It is the deepest secret of his interior life. Prayer is natural to him; it takes him to the innermost mystery of his life, establishes him in truth.

Every situation and each request made bring Jesus back to the purpose of his mission: the divine will, the work entrusted to him. Prayer enables him to discover and to bless the plan of his Father which he has come to forward. When he asks for something, he wants only the will of the Father and the desire to act in his service. In Gethsemani Jesus finds peace in submission to the Father; and the submission is the fruit of prayer.

And so, as we see from St. John,[1] Jesus can give thanks to his Father before a miracle, for his Father will always hear him. His will is completely conformed to that of the Father. His submission motivates his filial confidence, which is absolute. No prayer has ever expressed confidence so unconditionally, with such strength and audacity: 'When you ask for anything in prayer . . . it will be granted you'.[2]

The prayer of Jesus commits him, it is turned towards action, and in action it is expressed. It guides and directs all his activities, while at the same time elevating his passivity. Luke emphasises how major decisions and turning-points are always preceded by arduous prayer. Far from cutting him off from men, prayer takes him to the heart of his mission,[3] which is to save the world. Through prayer he sees more clearly the meaning of his coming; he is enabled to make human history his own and to fulfil the expectation of the nations.

Prayer enables him to understand by experience and to go through with his vocation as suffering servant and also to answer the demands which his special vocation makes of him. The prayer of Jesus is self-oblation, his self-oblation is prayer. His resurrection confirms that the evening sacrifice had found favour with God. The Lord, the *Kyrios*, is victorious and henceforward intercedes for us as our Mediator.

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[1] Jn 11, 41. [2] Mk 11, 24. [3] Mk 11, 25; Mt 5, 23-24.

CHRISTIAN PRAYER

The originality of christian prayer lies in its mediation by Jesus. It is through him that we become sons of God and that we can call God our Father. Jesus ushers us by grace into his own communion with the Father. Christian prayer springs from faith, and it is the Spirit who inspires it and makes us say: *Abba*, Father. Every prayer, from now on, is made in the name of Christ, through his mediation. He is the necessary and infallible way to God. The roman liturgy expresses this in the conclusion to its prayers: *Per Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum.* It would be futile to seek another way to the Father. Jesus is the universal mediator; all prayers are borne by him to the heavenly Father.

The leading ideas which make up christian prayer can be reduced to four: it is prayer in the Church, it is a vital, existential act; it is eucharistic and it is eschatological.

PRAYER IN THE CHURCH

Modern writers feel a curious need to justify the integration of the liturgy into prayer, as if either would make sense without the other. Scripture reveals the marvellous interaction and dependence of the liturgy and prayer. They are the two poles of the one mystery.

By definition a christian is a member of the Body of Christ. He is always involved in the mystery of the community of the Church. In his commentary on the Our Father, St. Cyprian gives the reason for this: 'The Master of peace and unity did not want us to pray individually and separately. For when we pray, we do not pray for ourselves alone. The Lord of peace and the Master of concord has taught us the need for unity, and wants each of us to pray for all men, just as he has taken them all into himself'.[1]

According to the vocation he has received, each one must play his part in the building up of the christian community. All the instruments enrich the symphony to which they contribute. But there is no confusion, and unity does not impair the individuality of those who make it up but rather perfects them through each other. Only liturgical prayer, properly understood, can give to personal prayer all the depth and extension of the faith which underlies it. Prayer, all prayer, whether individual or collective, is always a contemplation of the coming of the Word into this world. It is made up of

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[1] PL 4, 523-4.

admiration and gratitude, dialogue and silences, wonder and self abasement. Interior prayer fashions the 'living stones' which build up the kingdom of God. One can say truly with Edith Stein: 'Every genuine prayer is a prayer of the Church: through every genuine prayer something happens in the Church, and it is the Church herself who prays in it, for it is the Holy Spirit living in her, who in every individual soul asketh for us with unspeakable groanings'.[1]

The animating principle of this prayer in the Church is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has a twofold task: he brings scattered humanity together into the unity of the one Church, and at the same time he inspires the Church to transcend its own limits and to reach all men. The Spirit who prays within awakens in the christian community and in the individual christian a sense of the world's anguished aspiration towards salvation.

A VITAL, EXISTENTIAL ACT

Prayer, whether personal or collective, cannot be separated from the faith which commits the whole man. There is no break in continuity between prayer and life, contemplation and action, liturgical celebration and christian living, because faith does not affect a special and transient moment of our lives but is a life renewed by the Spirit. Faith is of its nature an activating influence and it contains the grace to act.

We do not find in the prayer of St. Paul any conflict between his contemplative and his active life, between God and men, between mysticism and the apostolate. Both take him to the heart of the Father's work, received from Christ; the unity of his spiritual and apostolic activity is to be found here. Paul's prayer accompanies all his apostolic life, and his whole apostolate takes place in the presence of God.

The mission to men cannot be separated from the service of God; they are the ebb and flow of one grace, received and participated in. The christian therefore is always in a liturgical situation. He makes his self-offering in his daily life. He offers himself, says St. Paul, 'as a living sacrifice, consecrated to God and worthy of his acceptance. That is your spiritual worship'.[2] Whatever the christian's situation, whether he is married or celibate, in time of perse-

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[1] Cf. Hilda C. Graef, *The Scholar and the Cross* (London 1955), p. 126.

[2] Rom 12, 1.

cution or of peace, his whole life must express the *Amen* of his faith. Action and prayer, service of men and service of God, are but two manifestations of the one charity of God which inflames the hearts of his children. Prayer and christian living are both answers to the grace which has been received.

EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

The christian is a beneficiary, one who has received gifts. Thanksgiving is therefore the dominant note of christian prayer and of christian faith, for it is man's response to the gift he has received; it is his welcome of the charity which dwells in him: 'And first I offer my thanks to my God through Jesus Christ for all of you'.[1]

The initiative always comes from God, and the Father anticipates the christian. Thanksgiving is thus man's awareness of his condition in relation to the Giver of all gifts. The christian is by definition 'a man who gives thanks'.

Prayer itself derives from grace received. It is a gift. It is prompted in us by the Holy Spirit who teaches how to be truly sons of God. Every act of thanksgiving makes us enter more deeply into the mystery of our sonship and the grace of salvation. Since God is always the one who gives and sons can only receive from their Father, thanksgiving is the only answer we can make to God.

Thanksgiving is not something accidental in the christian life nor is it a special sort of activity. It is the christian condition made manifest, it is the *Amen* of his life to the work of God in him. Although he receives his salvation once and for all, the christian must devote his whole life to its working out in his flesh and blood, in his soul and in his life. His life will be a constant act of thanksgiving in so far as he shares actively in the work of salvation and makes it personal.

In a sense christian prayer dissolves the distinction between asking and giving thanks, since both are related within the same economy of grace. Every partial quenching of the thirst for God creates a new and still greater thirst for him, and so asking and giving thanks interact. All God's acts of liberality imply further and still more generous gifts since, as St. Augustine says, God is more inclined to give than man is to receive.

In the prayer of thanksgiving we can grasp how far faith can be at once personal and collective. It bears witness to the community's

[1] Rom 1, 8.

gratitude for the mystery of salvation, it is the *Amen* of the liturgy, and it is at the same time the most intimate and personal expression of the individual's sense of his sonship, his rebirth in the Spirit and his welcome of the transforming power of grace.

Christian life, then, is eucharistic. The Eucharist is the christian's greatest prayer, the sacrament of thanksgiving – thanksgiving made flesh. It will last throughout the history of the world until the final, universal transformation.

PRAYER AND ESCHATOLOGY

Prayer in the age of preparation and foreshadowings was sustained by messianic hope; the prayer of the new Israel recognises that the promises have been fulfilled. It is prayer of thanksgiving because the fulness of time has come and the final age has begun. But for its realisation the whole span of the last age must be unfolded in time. And so christian prayer is eschatological. Thanksgiving and expectation make up the double aspect of faith, and they alternate in prayer.

In a changing world and a developing historical situation the christian bears witness to another world, to another city, to another life, to the kingdom of God towards which he moves like a pilgrim, or like Abraham, patriarch of the first journey across the desert. The law of exodus is heard throughout salvation-history, from its beginnings to its completion, and it directs the christian towards the *patria*. History points to Christ who both has come and 'will come without delay'. The eucharistic pasch enables the christian to anticipate by faith the end of time, to re-enact the mystery while looking forward to its complete fulfilment: 'It is the Lord's death that you are heralding, whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, until he comes'.[1]

The Apocalypse, the last book of scripture, concludes with *Marana tha*, 'Come Lord'. This last prayer sums up the expectant attitude the believer has throughout his whole life. It is the cry of the Holy Spirit in the liturgical assembly; and it is the prayer of the Holy Spirit within the heart of every christian.

As Tertullian said, the Our Father is a summary of the Gospel and it is the model of all christian prayer. It teaches us to ask the Father that his work of salvation, holiness and lordship on earth

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[1] Cor 11, 26-27.

may be fully accomplished and that his will may be done. It repeatedly reminds the Church and the christian of their concrete situation which is one of unending combat of death with life, of darkness with light. The whole universe is involved in this struggle.

Christian prayer already belongs to a world renewed. It makes us aware that the centre of history has been moved to the end of history, towards Christ in glory, first-fruits of universal salvation and the universal pasch. And so the christian can appreciate his homelessness here below and see why he is a stranger and a pilgrim. Origen compares his state to that of the people of Israel during their journey across the desert: 'My soul has gone on pilgrimage. Understand if you can these pilgrimages in which the soul, wounded and groaning, weeps at the thought of a journey begun so long ago; the meaning of the pilgrimage remains obscure until the goal has been reached. Only when it has gone to its rest, arrived at its paradise, its home, can it grasp and understand the pilgrimage . . . For the time being, the soul is in the desert, tested in its faith, purified by the Lord's commands. Often, it overcomes one temptation only to fall into another: so many halts on the desert journey . . . And finally, when it arrives at the end of the journey, or rather at the highest degree of virtue, it will cross the river of God and will receive the promised inheritance'.[1]

As the Church gives thanks without ceasing, so too she waits in hope, turned towards the East from which the Lord will come again. She repeats the *Marana tha* of the first christian communities, in the midst of this transient world with its persecutions and upheavals, her eyes turned towards the first hints of that dawn which will one day light up the sky.

(*Translated by Peter Hebblethwaite, s.j.*)

[1] Homilies on the Book of Numbers 27, 45.