

PRAYER AND EXPERIENCE

By BERNARD J. BUSH

THE QUESTION of prayer and experience is raised directly by Isaiah when he issues the Lord's summons to conversion: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts'.¹ This is more than a mere affirmation of transcendence. It means that God's experience of life is different from our own. Experience is constituted by the judgment, value and meaning assigned to the events of a life in time. Thus there is a 'godly' way of being human and an 'ungodly' way of being human. Experience for each type of life will be completely different, not because persons in them feel things differently, but because they meet them differently. How then are we to arrive at this different experience of being, and what will be its characteristic features? Isaiah again urges us in the same chapter, 'Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near'.² So here we have the image of the transcendent ineffable God making himself available to transform the pattern of our thoughts and behaviour, that is, our experience, in order to conform it to his own experience of life. This is the promise, and Isaiah says that to attain this *metanoia*, we must pray for it.

What kind of human experience is it that would lead a person to want to trade familiar patterns of life and action for new and unfamiliar, perhaps uncomfortable ones? Again Isaiah, drawing upon an experience common to saints and sinners, the feeling of inadequacy, assigns it a meaning and tells where it leads: 'All you who are thirsty, come to the water! . . . Why spend your money for what is not bread; your wages for what fails to satisfy!' ³ And just so that we do not miss the point and think he is speaking of material food, he adds, 'Heed me, and you shall eat well. . . Come to me heed-

¹ Isai 55, 8-9.

² Isai 55, 6.

³ Isai 55, 1-2.

fully, listen, that you may have life'.¹ Any feeling of need can be called thirst and hunger. It might be a vague dissatisfaction with the quality of life in the abundant society, agony over the wars, poverty, exploitation, a longing born of love opening out beyond itself, some personal suffering searching for a meaning, a joy or happiness which one needs to communicate and share. These needs, when assigned their 'godly' value, become the origin of a life of prayer and underlie every stage of its progress. Yet even true experience of God, no matter how satisfying, always leads to deeper hunger. 'He who eats of me will hunger still, he who drinks of me will thirst for more'.²

Our God proves that he is greater than all the other gods in precisely this way. He does not overwhelm us with sweetness and light continually, thus making the other gods less attractive. Rather he has constructed us in such a way that in spite of our efforts we cannot satisfy ourselves or one another with them. He is in truth the hound of heaven, always there, always available, working within us where we experience him as a profound restlessness. We must insist on this, since it is called by all sorts of other names. It is a great temptation to want to explain feelings and personal events in purely natural categories, and hence, experience them as natural or merely human. We even devise bogus remedies, escapes and anaesthetics to cure this kind of experience of God in our life. This is sin in its basic sense, the attempt to fabricate securities without consulting God.³ St Paul reminds us, 'for all that is not from faith is sin'.⁴

There is a tendency in some places in the Church today to develop intense inter-personal encounters on deep emotional levels as a way of alleviating anxiety, loneliness, alienation. This can be a vicious circle, since it often leads to even deeper hunger and a search for peace through stronger doses of psycho-emotional experience. This has a very seductive appeal to contemporary insecurities raised by the loss of a sense of community. Whatever its origin, this interior thirst seems quite ordinary, but is really a call from God to drink at the waters of contemplation. It is a personalized call, since the experience of thirst is unique. My need is not the same as anyone else's. The beginning of wisdom is when we realize this and turn to God right there where he is bothering us. 'O God, you are my God whom I seek; for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts like the

¹ Isai 55, 2-3.

² Sir 24, 20.

³ Isai 30, 1 ff.

⁴ Rom 14, 23.

earth, parched, lifeless and without water'.¹ Even sin can lead to God, since it parches the soul. But this kind of understanding is itself a grace and is sheer folly to a person who experiences life in an 'ungodly' way. A person who does not feel deep need, who does not realize, however dimly, that the world cannot satisfy him, is dead spiritually. There are simply no gaps for God in his life. He is the one described in Isaiah, 'Listen carefully, but you shall not understand! Look intently, but you shall know nothing!'² It is also the man pictured in the Apocalypse: 'because you say, "I am rich and have grown wealthy and have need of nothing", and do not know that you are the wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked one'.³

St Ignatius Loyola in his instructions for recruiting people to make the Exercises uses the same method:

Also, when we discover in the conversations they have with us that they are somewhat discontented . . . because they aren't doing so well in their business, or because their parents or relatives don't treat them well or some similar thing; then it can be given them to understand how all men are miserable when they work solely to satisfy someone other than God, either by riches or other things.⁴

Thus, the call to prayer can come out of any human experience if it is discerned correctly. On the other hand, the habitual and spontaneous mechanisms we employ to handle personal tensions in 'sinful' ways can also seem very innocent and natural and are not discerned as temptation. It takes a revelation from God to see our sinfulness *as sin* and not rationalized by some other name. It is a grace that should be prayed for continually, as St Teresa urges us:

This must never be forgotten. Indeed I shall repeat it many times, since it is most important. For there is no state of prayer so high that it is not necessary often to return to the beginning, and the questions of sin and self-knowledge are the bread which we must eat even with the most delicate dish on this road of prayer.⁵

Since, therefore, our need before all other needs is to have this faith-vision, Isaiah says that we should seek the Lord while he may be found, and call him while he is near. We should follow the calls of grace when we discover them. This will lead us to a greater

¹ Ps 62 (63), 2.

² Isai 6, 9. Quoted in the context of listening to the word by Mt 13, 14.

³ Apoc 4, 17.

⁴ *Autograph Directories of Saint Ignatius Loyola* (program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises, New Jersey), p 20.

⁵ *The Life of St Teresa of Avila*, by herself (Edinburgh, 1957), p 94.

interior sensitivity, the desire to assign faith relevancies to our experiences, and to an increased ability to discern the involvement of God in all we think and do. This will mean re-ordering our human relationships to the extent that they are sinful, and working to become free from all the interior and exterior compulsions which inhibit our ability to find God in our experience.

Prayer at this point becomes a more finely tuned and careful listening to his word with a concomitant desire to respond. This is an obediential listening, and can take many forms and methods. We must listen to God as he tells us what kind of prayer will be most effective. However, all these forms of prayer must be grounded in sacred scripture as the guide in human language of what is authentic in religious experience. If we meet any other god than the one described there, he is a false god. Yet this listening is not without its own problems. When we let the word into our lives, it begins its own work. The scriptural models for this are many, but all contain a warning to our self-sufficiency. Isaiah says: '...so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth, it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it'.¹ The letter to the Hebrews: 'For the word of God is living and efficient and keener than any two-edged sword, and extending even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and a discernor of the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from his sight'.² The Psalmist: 'The voice of the Lord strikes fiery flames!'³ Jeremiah: 'Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, like a hammer shattering rocks?'⁴ Then there is the parable of the sower, which is a fundamental paradigm of the degrees and conditions of obediential listening.

By thus taking the living word of God into ourselves, we will be transformed into his image. We will be putting on Christ who is himself the perfect image of the Father. We will have in us that mind which was in Christ Jesus.⁵ This requires a willingness constantly to be undergoing a revision and replacement of cherished values and securities. There is simply nothing outside of God that can be the point of self-definition. All dimensions of achievement – intelligence, knowledge, personality, social relationships which include the deepest bonds of human love and friendship, even apostolic successes – can be obstacles to union with God. That is,

¹ Isai 55, 11.

⁴ Jer 23, 29.

² Heb 4, 12-13.

⁵ Phil 2, 5.

³ Ps 28 (29), 7.

whatever a man uses as landmarks to define and locate himself, or to secure his self-esteem and gain respect from his fellow-men, will be the purest vanity if they are not transformed and integrated by Christ. This is deep freedom and is not to be presumed too easily: the chances for self-deception are very great here. We must continually pray for liberation from these very sophisticated forms of slavery to the world. St Paul describes his experience of this replacement: 'But the things that were gain to me, these, for the sake of Christ, I have counted loss. Nay more, I count everything loss because of the excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ, my Lord'.¹ This knowledge which is experiential rather than conceptual produces the change of affectivity, so that whoever prays comes to prefer what Jesus preferred, to see the world the way he saw it, to love what he loved, to hate what he hated, and to suffer and die in imitation of him. To be christian, then, and to live joy, peace and love, means allowing Christ to take over my experience and lead me through his own. Christian community will be the assembly of those who believe and share the same experience. Our *koinonia*, community, is 'the fellowship of his sufferings; become like to him in death, in the hope that somehow I may attain to the resurrection from the dead'.² Or as Jesus describes it, 'But you are they who have continued with me in my trials'.³

This work of interior transformation can be distressing because it can seem as though everything has been taken away without anything to replace it. This is the desert or dark night experience. Many souls beat a hasty retreat from this phase, not because it is so terrible, but because it seems so neutral and vague. We have had a taste of the transfiguration joy, a foretaste of the resurrection, and are very reluctant to rejoin the Lord, 'Jesus only', and the companionship of the long dusty road to Jerusalem. Our life with the Lord is much of the time like Peter who recognized him and loved his company, who received revelation and prophesied without even knowing it, but still kept one ear cocked for the values of the world. 'And Peter, taking him aside, began to chide him saying, 'far be it from you, O Lord; this will never happen to you'.⁴ This ambiguous witness is characteristic of too many of the Lord's disciples who are still scandalized at the cross. More accurately, we are not scandalized at the cross 'out there' where it adorns the walls of our houses, but

¹ Phil 3, 7-8.

² Phil 3, 10-11.

³ Lk 22, 28.

⁴ Mt 16, 22.

rather that this annoyance, this irritation, this insult, this grievance could be the cross offered to me. Christ's reaction is swift and pointed: 'But he, turning and seeing his disciples, rebuked Peter, saying, Get behind me, satan, for you do not mind the things of God, but those of men'.¹ Anyone who wants to live close to Christ must be willing to endure such rebukes – even welcome them. This kind of obediential listening causes pain in resistant flesh. Jesus, who became sin for our sake, is given to us as sharing this experience; 'And he, Son though he was, learned obedience from the things that he suffered'.² For our part, we can expect the same thing, for 'God deals with you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not correct? . . . Now all discipline seems for the present to be matter not for joy but for grief; but afterwards it yields the most peaceful fruit of justice to those who have been exercised by it'.³

And so the purpose of all the purification is peace and the increased ability to hear the word of God gently stirring in our hearts. After the rocks are broken by the mighty wind, the earthquake and the fire, the Lord speaks to us in the gentle breeze.⁴ Occasionally this happens in experiences which can only be called transcendent – infusions of light, love, understanding – a vision in faith of the reality of God which is simply beyond the spectrum of the merely human and is understood to be such. At other times it may be very hard to discern the hand of God in some event or circumstance, but he is always there directing us, as Isaiah reports; 'The Lord will give you the bread you need and the water for which you thirst. No longer will your teacher hide himself, but with your own eyes you shall see your teacher, while from behind, a voice shall sound in your ears: "This is the way; walk in it", when you would turn to the right or to the left'.⁵ We must reflect prayerfully on every aspect of our lives in order that all our experience be christian experience.

We have a basic desire to want to increase, to be created, to grow, become wise, to act creatively. Everyone points to the reality that this can only be accomplished in some kind of community. We find ourselves when the 'I' and the 'thou' become a 'we'. Thus we are most truly constituted ourselves when we accept that we are loved and hence lovable. This is how we locate ourselves; and when this dimension is absent, we are lost. But here again, because

¹ Mk 8, 33.

² Heb 5, 8.

³ Heb 12, 7, 11. Cf also Deut 8, 5.

⁴ 1 Kg 19, 11-12.

⁵ Isai 30, 20-21.

of the facts of change, suffering and death, we are always conditionally constituted. No matter how good it is, we know that it is not going to last. As Fr John Sheets, S.J. has observed; 'We were not made to share a common humanity but to share that for which a common humanity provides the foundation – a sharing in the life of the Son'.¹

It is this desire to share the Spirit of Christ that is leading many christians to a desire to share the experience of prayer itself. They range from the enthusiastically pentecostal to quiet gatherings sharing scripture reading. The unity and love that characterize these groups bears a different 'feeling' from groups gathered for any other purpose. There is explicit orientation to the Father as the point of definition for the relationships in the group. The perfect expression of this prayer is seen to be the liturgy of the eucharist, where all enter into sacramental unity with the offering of the life of the Son to the Father. In this experience, which gathers the meaning of every aspect of our lives, personal and social, we can always locate ourselves because the Spirit in us is always turned to the Father: 'For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you . . . when he, the Spirit of truth has come, he will teach you all the truth. . . whatever he will hear he will speak'.² Jesus, the one who baptizes with the Spirit, thus fulfils the prophecies of the new creation when men would be interiorly directed by an entirely new principle.

When we pattern our lives on the sacred scriptures, they will then shape our expectations of what is truly creative and authentic in our manifold relationships. They will shape the way we love. At this point we must seriously accept that if we are to love as christians, we must love as Jesus loved. This will cost us our life, our radical self-hood, as it cost him his. It reverses all the natural expectations of how love is to be experienced. The simple fact is that the death of Christ is the paradigm of love in the new creation. Also contrary to natural expectations, the experience of the death of Christ in us is joy-filled. St Paul says, 'For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so also through Christ does our consolation abound'.³ This is the major theme of his writings, stemming from his encounter with the risen yet still-suffering Lord on the road to

¹ Sheets, John, S.J.: 'Four Moments of Prayer', in *Review for Religious*, Vol 23, no 3 (May, 1969), p 397.

² Jn 16, 7, 13.

³ 2 Cor 1, 5.

Damascus, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting'.¹ The action of calvary is not over and done with but is a continuing experience in the Church and in each member.²

Hence in the christian scheme, the consummation and fulfilment of love will be to share the experience of Christ's love. In the first place, it will be the *kenosis*, the act of love whereby he emptied himself to enter our history. So love will be an emptying rather than a filling, a giving rather than a getting. Any loneliness can be an experience of this kind of love. Our supreme experience of love will be when we share his supreme experience of love, where he said 'it is consummated'. To share this experience with the Lord is the reason why mystics long for death, and the martyrs die in ecstasy. It is not a desire to escape from the tedium of the world, or of relations with other persons, but is a burning desire to embody the peak experience of Christ's love in themselves. They become impatient with the daily cross, the partial, progressive embodiments of his death in themselves. Here it is necessary to be careful not to deny that the desire to be in heaven with God, our Lady, the saints and angels as a state preferable to this one is praiseworthy. The fourth Eucharistic Prayer expresses it thus: 'Then, in your kingdom, freed from the corruption of sin and death, we shall sing your glory with every creature through Christ our Lord'. St Paul describes Christ's sacrifice as love and speaks of his own progressive entrance into it, looking forward to his own death: 'But God proves his love for us, because when as yet we were sinners Christ died for us'.³ Further, 'With Christ I am nailed to the cross. It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me'.⁴ And with great longing, 'For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. . . desiring to depart and to be with Christ, a lot by far the better'.⁵

This view of life and love considerably modifies human relationships. As the Lord predicted, it will destroy some and rebuild others.⁶ It is, however, not something that can be assimilated or worked out intellectually. It is a conviction produced in us by the action of God in our souls. The means to attain it is to pray for it, consistently, insistently. We must beg for our own death and transformation. As Hans Urs Von Balthasar observes:

In contemplation . . . one has to look the word in the face, feel God's gaze fixed upon one, and, in acknowledging him to be right, con-

¹ Acts 9, 5.

² Cf Col 1, 24f.

³ Rom 5, 8.

⁴ Gal 2, 20.

⁵ Phil 1, 21.

⁶ Cf Lk 12, 49f.

damn oneself. That is one of the main reasons why people so persistently avoid contemplative prayer, and, though admitting its necessity in principle, evade any personal encounter with the Word.

It is quite impossible to contemplate the word if one does not seriously intend to let it influence one's conduct. . . anyone who practises contemplation must have the courage to face the word, the sharpness of the sword and the burning fire.¹

This talk of suffering and death may sound threatening and beyond normal christian experience or perhaps simply traditional. Yet it is important to have realistic expectations of what prayer leads to in our lives. We must have a correct 'feel' for what is genuine christian religious experience. To affirm that suffering and death are the distinguishing characteristics of love *as christian* is necessary in the light of the current temptation to see sex as the highest expression of human love. This is not gross or crude. There can be a subtle idolatry of marriage when the marital union of love is valued as the highest and the most creative experience of love. The phallic symbol of love is pagan. The crucifix is its replacement in the new creation. Yet many desert calvary for the home and hearth in the name of christian creativity: 'I have married a wife, and therefore cannot come'.²

We cannot extort happiness or joy or fulfilment from God on any other than his terms. And his terms are seen in Christ who emptied himself to share our emptiness and to make it redemptive. 'For you know the graciousness of our Lord Jesus Christ – how, being rich, he became poor for your sakes, that by his poverty you might become rich'.³ Thus by his cross and resurrection he transforms the consequences of our sin – existential poverty, radical alienation, suffering and death – into the means of salvation. He did not exempt us from the necessity of experiencing these things, but he infused them with hope, that is, with his living resurrected presence. Identical feelings can lead to different conclusions. 'For the sorrow that is according to God produces repentance that surely leads to salvation, whereas the sorrow that is according to the world produces death'.⁴ Hence, concomitant with accepted suffering, persecution, misunderstanding, real injustice, struggle with sin, minor and major irritations, will be faith, hope, deep peace, and

¹ Von Balthasar, Hans Urs: *Prayer* (New York, 1967), pp 176–7.

² Lk 14, 20. The excuses are many; cf Lk 9, 59f.

³ 2 Cor 8, 9.

⁴ 2 Cor 7, 10.

dare we say, love, joy and happiness. This polarity of reactions to personal suffering and its relationship to Christ's cross is typified by the two thieves crucified with him. One wanted to use Christ to escape from the pain. He saw only the absurdity of enduring something unpleasant if it could possibly be avoided or anaesthetized. The other accepted the suffering as the consequence of his sin, superimposed it on the cross of the only one who really suffered innocently, and saw paradise the day he did it.

The most creative moment in history, when sin was destroyed and the new creation began, was the moment of Christ's death and glorification. This moment will define and judge all other creativity. It was the moment when Christ definitively and irrevocably entered human history as human, never again to be driven out, and makes himself available to every man now. From the very core and centre of life, he challenges each one personally: Do you want a share of the action? Will you enter the new humanity?¹ Will you drink the cup?² Will you continue with me in my trials?³ Will you love one another as I have loved you, and lay down your life for each other?⁴ Are you willing to enter entirely new patterns of kinship, not related to natural bonds of affinity, by hearing the word and acting upon it, thus becoming my mother, brothers and sisters?⁵ Will you do your good before men in such a way that they will give glory to the Father and not to you?⁶ It is a life of discerning the pattern of the supernatural in the natural. It means a life of consolation, peace, tranquillity. It is the freed love described by St Ignatius in his definition of consolation in the *Spiritual Exercises*:

I call it consolation when some interior motion is caused in the soul whereby the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord; and consequently when it is able to love no other created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but only in the creator of them all.⁷

Again and again, Jesus uses human encounters and experiences as the occasion to reflect upon their real meaning. For example, he corrects the woman from the crowd who expressed a purely natural view of his relationship to his mother. He said, 'Rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it'.⁸ He discerns the work of his Father in the capacity of his disciples to make sense of his

¹ 2 Cor 6, 17.

⁴ Jn 15, 12-13.

⁷ *Spiritual Exercises*, 316.

² Mt 20, 22.

⁵ Lk 9, 21.

⁸ Lk 11, 28.

³ Lk 22, 28.

⁶ Mt 5, 16.

words and uses it as an occasion for prayer: 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you hid these things from the wise and prudent, and did reveal them to the little ones. . . and no one knows the Son except the Father'.¹ So when Peter recognizes the Son and blurts out his confession of faith, Jesus discerns the presence of his Father and is at pains to instruct him that what has just occurred is not recognition according to merely human ways of knowing one another: 'Blessed are you, Simon-bar-Jona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven'.² This meaning was apparently not a self-evident experience to Peter. We have already seen what happened when Peter recognized him simply according to the ways of man. Finally, Jesus often provides commentary on the meaning of what is occurring by citing relevant portions of the psalms and prophets. He does this especially during the passion where the chances of misunderstanding are greatest.

We find the same kind of reflection in Mary, who 'pondered these things in her heart'. Her understanding of the visitation, as given to us by Luke, shows her communicating the Word before he was even born. She transmitted him through an 'ordinary' greeting and act of charity. Elizabeth provides the discernment. Her joy was caused by the presence of the Lord in the person of the 'mother of my Lord'.³ In St Paul we have a similar reflection, explicitly attributing to God the consolation experienced through the joyful encounter of reunion: 'For indeed when we came to Macedonia, our flesh had no rest; we had troubles on every side, conflicts without and anxieties within. But God, who comforts the humble, comforted us by the arrival of Titus'.⁴ Perhaps it is more difficult to recognize God in experiences of joy than of suffering.

In addition to growth in charity – 'the way Jesus loved' – and the ability to discern the hand of God in every human experience, another hall-mark of true progress in prayer will be increased awareness of personal sinfulness. The saints often speak of themselves as the world's greatest sinners. This testimony is not pious pretension or exaggeration. It is uncompromising truth, deriving not from introspection or heightened psychic sensitivity, but from the revelation of God. It is the soul being shown itself as God sees it, sinful, lost, being graciously loved and redeemed. Only God can produce this understanding in the soul because only God knows what sin really is. This awareness does not therefore precede the

¹ Mt 11, 27.

² Mt 16, 17.

³ Lk 1, 39-45.

⁴ 2 Cor 7, 5-6.

entry of God into my life, but is its first and continuing effect. It is the experience expressed by Peter when he said, upon realizing the presence of God, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord'.¹ His vocation to follow the Lord proceeded from that moment. St Paul reflects the same conviction when he says: 'This saying is true and worthy of entire acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief'.² He is describing a unique experience. It is self-revelation with an entirely personal character. The sinful soul before God in prayer is not just one of a fallen race, more or less equally guilty, but 'me'. It is 'my' sin that is revealed. If the person begins comparing his sin with others, he gets told about the beam and the mote. St Gregory the Great has a famous dictum about this: 'The sun turns brown him whom it touches closely; so the Lord, when he comes, darkens him whom he most touches by his grace, for the closer we come to grace, the more we recognize that we are sinners'.³

If prayer is sustained and the living word is allowed to penetrate to the sources of my life, changes of the sort described will inevitably occur. The time to worry is when a person seems to be praying and nothing is happening. Often the problem is simply that one is reading, studying, thinking or doing any number of things except the real confrontation which is prayer. Talking about prayer and reading articles on the subject are no substitutes for doing it.

The Vatican Council, reflecting on life's goals, and the quality of experience which makes it christian, urges:

Only by the light of faith and by meditation on the word of God can one always and everywhere recognize God in whom 'we live, and move, and have our being' (Acts 17, 28), seek his will in every event, see Christ in all men whether they be close to us or strangers, and make correct judgments about the true meaning and value of temporal things, both in themselves and in their relation to man's final goal.⁴

The growth of this awareness in our hearts will cause the promise given through Isaiah to be fulfilled in us. 'Yes, in joy you shall depart, in peace you shall be brought back; this shall be to the Lord's renown, an everlasting imperishable sign'.⁵

¹ Lk 5, 8.

² I Tim 1, 15.

³ Gregory the Great, *Super Cantica Cantorum expositio*, PL 79, 486; cited in François Roustang, *Growth in the Spirit* (New York, 1966), p 150.

⁴ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 4.

⁵ Isai 55, 12-13.