

THE PRAYER OF PETITION

By ROBERT BUTTERWORTH

IN A WORLD where prayer in general is often ridiculed, if it is not ignored, the prayer of petition seems especially open to misunderstanding and attack. Petitionary prayer certainly presents the theologian with a problem.¹ Can he give an intelligible account of it? Can he show that the making of petitions is an intelligent religious exercise? In this article we shall do no more than illustrate the need for the christian theologian to abandon the kind of thought-model which both gets him into difficulties with regard to prayer and is in fact a quite inadequate representation of the relationship that exists between God and the christian; and to look around for a thought-model that makes petitionary prayer both meaningful and necessary for the christian.

There are, of course, those who try to dismiss the ordinary religious practice of petitionary prayer as a merely subjective exercise which somehow consoles the petitioner in his troubles, a sort of palliative safety-valve for use under the pressure of the daily turn of events. It is, after all, consoling for people to imagine that at least somebody up there cares about the way life goes on down here. And then pleasant coincidences reinforce the error. Events do occur which can be interpreted as 'answers' to prayer. But then it can never be certain that they would not have occurred anyway; so to call them 'answers' might really be to try to justify a false position illegitimately. As for 'unanswered' prayer, this surely shows quite clearly the extent to which petitionary prayer is a self-constituted hoax from the start. To imagine that one is really petitioning one's God when all one is doing is looking for mental, emotional or physical relief from one's own or someone else's distress is bad enough; but still to insist that it really is a petition, but that for obscure reasons God could not see his way to vouchsafing an answer – or that God always

¹ Among interesting recent books on the subject of prayer the following pair deserve mention: Phillips, D. Z.: *The Concept of Prayer* (London, 1965); Baelz, P. R.: *Prayer and Providence* (London, 1968).

'answers' petitions but does not always think it expedient to let us know what answer he gives – is a piece of even more outrageous self-deception. And in any case, look at the selfish trivia that believers always seem to be asking for: fine weather just when the farmers need rain, or success in an examination for which preparations have been inadequate, and so forth. Or at the impossible reversals of the scientifically certain course of nature: recovery from terminal cancer, for instance. It all adds up: the practice of the prayer of petition is just superstition – whistling a rather grand tune in the dark, unheard.

Believers think otherwise about petitionary prayer. But *how* do they, for the most part, think about it? What sort of thought-model do they use when they try to give themselves, or others, an intelligent explanation or account of such prayer? How do they try to make clear what happens, or how prayer works? The prevailing thought-model which both ordinary believers and believing theologians naturally use can be said to derive from theism: from traditional natural theology. Under pressure to be convincingly clear, believers reach for that system of truths about God and about his relationship to the created world which the human mind, prompted by what God himself has revealed, can work out for itself. Theism, with its urge to be utterly clear about God and his creation, is a system of thought which objectivates God as much as possible. While it admits, in principle, a somewhat murky immanence in creation on God's part, its best efforts concentrate on elaborating God's difference from his creation.¹ But if the clearly objectivated God of theism is so different from creation, so totally transcendent, as theism seems to make out, are not the mutual relationships of God and creation (insofar as we are allowed to speak of God's being related to his creation at all) dangerously attenuated? And is God really an objectifiable reality? One Object among other objects? The habitual theistic thought-model used by believers seems open to all sorts of objections, and not least in the matter of petitionary prayer.

For instance: theists ascribe omniscience to God. But if God knows everything knowable, what can possibly be the point of the kind of prayer which purports to inform God of our own needs or of the needs of others? He necessarily knows them already. Do we

¹ On this issue, see Bishop Robinson's admirable paperback, *Exploration into God* (London, 1967).

somehow jog God's memory by reminding him of the needs of men? Hardly. God is also necessarily eternal, and so everything is equally present to him who knows nothing as past or future. He needs no memory and cannot forget. And more: if God is also eternally immutable, what is the point of informing him of man's needs in the hope that he will see his way to doing something about them? He cannot change his set plan or purpose for the world even if he wants to. Of course you might say that in his eternally set plan for the world God has eternally allowed for all man's petitions for all man's needs for all time, and has eternally predetermined which petitions he will answer and which not, and how exactly he will answer them. But this is really a face-saving attempt to make an immutable God seem to be mutable and flexible. In fact it reduces petitionary prayer to a farcical self-delusion. If God, on the one hand, has immutably decided to answer the prayer I make, what kind of 'answer' do I suppose I am getting? I deceive myself when I suppose that it is my prayer that really determines God's 'answer'. God must have eternally determined what his answer will be, and the most I can do is to bang on the button when suitably stimulated like a monkey in a laboratory cage. The monkey will get banana whether it wants or feels it needs banana or not. There is no chance of the monkey getting nuts, because the scientist has pre-loaded the machine with banana only. Indeed, not only is God's answer built into his eternal plan, but so is my prayer also. I have to make *this* prayer to elicit *this* answer on which the fulfilment of precisely *that* immutable divine plan depends. The immutability of the God of theism, his lack of real flexibility, seems to destroy my personal freedom. And if, on the other hand, God has immutably decided not to answer the prayer I make, then why should I ever bother making it? Or does my God get some sort of pleasure out of seeing me sit up and beg?

Certain necessary qualities of the theistic God, and notably his omnipresence, seem to be at the root of a further set of objections against petitionary prayer. God is 'everywhere'. He can no more be 'out there' than he can be anywhere else. He is not localizable at all as another object in a world of objects. This is not to say that God is not real, or that he does not really exist. It means simply that his reality is not the objectifiable kind of reality of the bodies and the embodied persons with whom we may suppose we are in normal contact. So at least on this count, prayer, including the prayer of petition, is misleadingly conceived of as addressed to a

Person objectifiably 'out there'. So when we think or speak about 'talking' to God (whether in petitions or in other ways), we are taking great liberties with language. God cannot be out there, objectifiably over against us as other human persons are over against us when we talk to them. It cannot, because of God's necessary qualities, be true that we talk to God in literally the same way as we talk to other human persons. The human language we use is built to fit the human-to-human situation; it cannot also fit the human-to-God situation in the same way. The talking-to-God language fits in some way: to some degree this language manages to be, we believe, a truth-bearing expression of our view of the human-to-God situation. But to take this language literally is to get the human-to-God situation wrong. The human-to-human model of thought, built into the human-to-human language about prayer (and especially about prayer of petition) is inadequate and therefore strictly misleading if thoughtlessly applied to the human-to-God relationship.

It seems from all this that traditional theism will not provide the thought-model that will enable the theologian to give an intelligible account of petitionary prayer. Where then must we turn? We have been forgetting, as is so often forgotten, that it is *christian* petitionary prayer of which we wish to give an account. It has been far too frequently assumed that christian theology is best thought out and rendered intelligible in terms of theism. This assumption is remarkable on at least two counts: first, it would be very odd if the revelation of God in Christ marked no substantial advance beyond what is found to be thinkable about God by man's natural reason; and secondly, it should be remembered that so unobjectified and unobjectifiable was the early christian notion of God considered to be by certain contemporary pagans that, at least in the second century, christians were condemned as atheists. Of course, the reasoned truths of theism will always remain valuable for the christian theologian. They play an indispensable part in determining the rules for natural human thinking about God and about creation's relationship to God. But they cannot tell as much of the whole truth about God and this relationship as has been revealed in God's own revelation of himself and his relationship to creation in Christ. Not that a new and different God suddenly reveals himself. Rather, the one, true God who is the 'object' of the natural human thinking whose systematization is called theism, reveals himself in Christ as existing both in himself and in his relationship to his creation in a

radically new and different way – a way which cannot be adequately thought of along the lines of the objectifying thought-models which are natural for man. The revealed God of christianity, the God revealed to us in Christ, is, above all else, an intimate God, a God who takes humanity to himself, who makes humanity personally his own, who relates humanity to himself not only as a creature to its creator but, further, as Son is related to Father in the spirit of eternal love and obedience. The christian God is a God who assumes and transforms humanity by endowing humanity with his own eternal personalness, the personalness we try to express through the christian doctrine of the Trinity. Natural human thought-models, constructed to express the infinite and objectivated difference between God and man, must fail to express the intimacy between God and man which underlies the christian doctrine of saving incarnation. The infinite difference between God and man must remain – hence the abiding value of theism. But theism must not have the last word.

At this point we shall take a short-cut. To elaborate a fully christian theology of God is hardly possible. But to help us solely in the matter of christian petitionary prayer, we can surely do no better than turn to an obviously key episode, in which Christ himself is shown giving his disciples direct instruction in the basic form of christian prayer which we know as the Lord's Prayer.¹ The differences of intention and form between the Matthew and the Luke accounts of the episode and the prayer need not concern us here. It appears to be the case that Luke intended his shorter form of the Lord's Prayer to serve as a *formula* for christian prayer: 'Whenever you pray, say. . .'² Matthew's intention in giving the longer, familiar form of the prayer seems to be to offer a *model* of christian prayer rather than a fixed formula: 'So you pray like this. . .'³ Now since in fact the Lord's Prayer is entirely petitionary in form, it is natural to try and find in it, and especially perhaps in the Matthew model, the kind of thinking which should underlie the intelligent petitionary prayer of the christian.

Many interpretations of the Lord's Prayer have pointed to its two easily distinguishable halves as representing the essential

¹ The handiest and best modern book on the Lord's Prayer seems to me to be undoubtedly Evans, C. F.: *The Lord's Prayer* (London, 1968). Lohmeyer, E.: *The Lord's Prayer* (London, 1965), is an older and somewhat unwieldy classic, much plundered by other writers on the subject.

² Lk 11, 2.

³ Mt 6, 9.

divisions of christian petitionary prayer. First the christian turns, rightly, to God, and in a set of three petition-like prayers shows that he acknowledges the priority of God's own purposes over anything that the creature may desire. Then, and only then, in the second half of the Lord's Prayer, does the christian come to his own needs and the needs of his fellow men. Another, slightly different interpretation which settles for two clearly distinguishable halves in the Lord's Prayer comes from Augustine.¹

But these and similar interpretations have been criticized and perhaps also superseded in more recent work on the Lord's Prayer. In particular, the structure of the Matthew Lord's Prayer has been seen to have a different kind of unity: not compacted of two halves, one of three Godward petitions and one of four manward petitions, but rather constructed round the central petition for 'daily bread' (or whatever that phrase might be thought to mean). We cannot go into details about this newer kind of interpretation. But what emerges of importance here is that the whole of the Lord's Prayer is given a unified interpretation, in that it all makes petition to the Father in order to bring about in the world 'the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'.² It is to this sole object that the whole petitionary intention of the Lord's Prayer is directed.

If this interpretation were to be given its proper support, the argument would run on these lines. It is for the Father alone, through the working of his divine power, to realize what he has eternally purposed in the Son: to make his Fatherhood a hallowing reality in the world, to assert his rightful kingly rule over men and thereby ultimately to bring about his will throughout the whole creation. The fatherly purpose must be brought about by the Father himself but – and here is the specifically christian touch – in and through us men. So we pray, centrally within the Lord's Prayer, for the God-given sustaining means that, as creatures, we must have if we are to serve our God-given purpose of bringing the fulfilment of Christ to the Father's world. We pray, therefore, for 'bread'. But in the path of our fulfilling, within and through ourselves, the fatherly purpose of God, there stand obstacles. In order

¹ St Augustine, *The Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, II, 10, 36–37, trans. J. J. Jepson, *Ancient Christian Writers*, 55 (Cork, 1948), p 124.

² Eph 1, 9–10.

to be able to go ahead confidently and effectively with God's work we need, apart from the God-given means to do the work of Christ in the world, release from the downward drag of our total indebtedness to the Father and our brethren; we need assurance that we will not be overwhelmed in the inevitable trial connected with the work; and we need safekeeping from the prowling Evil One. The whole of the Lord's Prayer makes up a unified petition that the Father will intervene and effect his purpose in the world through us, his christian community.

Now if it is possible to determine the dominant characteristics of this unified petition which is meant to serve as a model for christian prayer, we should be able to see further into the kind of mentality or mental stance which should be operative in christian petitionary prayer in general. In fact, modern commentators on the Lord's Prayer may be said to have isolated two dominant characteristics of the whole prayer: its urgency and its community dimension.

The Lord's Prayer is a petition made with urgency. Much has been written about the eschatological interpretation of the Lord's Prayer.¹ And it is from the eschatological character of the main elements in the prayer that the over-all urgency derives. Certainly, it is very attractive to view the main elements of the prayer - Name, Kingdom, Will, Bread, Cancellation of Debt, Trial and the Evil One - as all having to do with the final, ultimate realization of God's eternal purpose, with the bringing about of the *eschaton*. Some scholars would go so far as to see even in the grammatical tenses of the verbs used an expression of the eschatological tension, the christian urgency, of the whole prayer. Nor is this fanciful. The prayed requests of the Lord's Prayer are requests for once-and-for-all interventions on the part of the Father - interventions which alone can ensure the furthering and realization of his fatherly purpose among men. This would seem to imply that urgent concern is an essential quality in christian petitionary prayer; and it is to be urgent concern for the finalizing of the Father's plan. Christians are those who in their petitions do not simply beg for the intervention of some *deus ex machina*, but rather express their need, the basic christian need, to see the Father's plan fulfilled in all their fellow men. Their petitions are urgent expressions of this need, for

¹ Perhaps most tellingly by Raymond E. Brown S. S., in *Theological Studies*, vol 22 (1961), pp 175-208: 'The Pater Noster as an Eschatological Prayer' - reprinted in his *New Testament Studies* (London-Dublin, 1965), pp 217-253.

they realize – and it is the revelation which is vouchsafed to them in Christ that makes them realize – that the world's ultimate need, the need against which all other needs are to be viewed and measured, is that the Father should bring about his purpose in Christ. So a note of eschatological urgency will be an inescapable characteristic of all christian petition; and this because the principle behind all christian petition is the urgent longing to see the Father bring the world he has created to its proper and only fulfilment in Christ.

The other inescapable characteristic which even more obviously emerges from a consideration of the Lord's Prayer as a unified petitionary model is to be found in the community dimension of the whole prayer. It is a prayer to our Father to effect his purpose in and through us. To be a christian is to be personally committed to the realization of the Father's purpose in Christ. So to pray as a christian must be to renew the commitment of one's whole christian self to the Father's work of reconciling and completing all things in Christ. To commit oneself in this way is to commit oneself to the work of the christian community, and to pray as a member of that community in Christ which urgently waits for and asks for the Father to intervene and bring his purpose about in and through them. The christian community, in its basic model petitionary prayer, is offering itself in willing cooperation to the Father in and through Christ. Christ is the supreme Servant of the Father's will and purpose, the Servant whose total service alone serves to effect the Father's loving purpose perfectly. Rather: whose total service in fact constitutes the effecting of the Father's purpose for the whole world. The christian servant community petitions that the Father's purpose will be effected in and through themselves. They petition to become cooperators, who serve in the work already effected in principle in Christ but still in need of urgent effectuation in the world and for the world.

It is along these broad lines that the model of the Lord's Prayer reveals not so much a new thought-model for all christian prayer of petition as the fact that no human thought-model will ever cope with such prayer – certainly no thought-model which imagines a God 'out there', and over against us, who is requested to intervene from the beyond and fulfil our passing whims and desires. Petitionary prayer based on such a thought-model is bound to result either in superstition or, at best, a sub-christian appreciation of what christian prayer of petition is really about. It is from the

Lord's Prayer that we can divine the kind of God-man relationship at play in christian prayer.

The christian, we believe, is in process of becoming in Christ a son of the Father. Together with other christians he forms a filial community committed to the furtherance and ultimate realization of the Father's purpose. The christian prayer of petition is petition that the Father will further and realize his purpose through the willing and cooperative mediation of christians, thus making his Fatherhood real in them who offer themselves to serve his purpose on the model of Christ's eternal and incarnate Sonship. Christian prayer of petition is a prayer for sonship – the supreme gift of the Father – for participation in the Sonship of Christ. It is an offer of filial cooperation in the communal work begun by the Father in Christ. It is a real request that in and through our human minds and wills and abilities, not merely from outside us but from inside our christian selves, the Father will further his loving purpose. The theistic thought-model which emphasizes man's difference and distance from God cannot cope with the intimacy between the Father and the christian implied and expressed in the christian prayer of petition as instanced in the Lord's Prayer. Our new closeness to the Father in Christ, our personal commitment to the service of the Father in Christ, requires a special approach in the matter of petitionary prayer.

It might be thought that the approach outlined here has simply explained away the petitionary character of the christian prayer of petition. It is not really petition any longer. Under the guise of petition we are not really asking for anything – at least not for anything in particular. How can we still ask for our petty particular favours when such a grandiose approach is made to the whole business of petitionary prayer? The answer lies in the fact that it is only an approach which allows for the special relationship of the christian to the Father – the relationship in which the christian filially serves as the willing instrument of the Father's purpose – that also gives really christian sense to the particular petitions we feel we ought to make to our Father. In the light of our special relationship to the Father we can frame and put our petitions in a really christian way; we can avoid the dangers of self-deception and the false objectivization of a *deus ex machina*. Our Father wills that we serve him as his Son served him; and we make those petitions which befit our christian concern and our christian status and christian function as filial servants of the Father.