

THE PRAYER OF FAITH

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

WE REALLY DO matter to God. He cares for us with all that he is. Leaving aside the intricate speculations of theologians about the domestic life of the Trinity, we can say that the only God we know is an immense love for mankind. Everything that man has ever genuinely experienced of God points to one unshakable reality: God has an infinite concern and care for man. God has never revealed himself except in terms of the many faces of love. He is God-with-us, God-for-us, so much so that the christian faith has been called a psychological projection of a father figure. Who was it who said that if the God of the christians did not exist man would have had to invent him? But God is with us not as an invention or as an abstraction, but as one who is consumed with loving care for us. To believe this is to take the first step along the road of the prayer of faith.

Indeed, without this faith there can be no such thing as prayer, adoration, contemplation. How can I pray to a God who is aloof and distant, who demands admiration and gives nothing in return? I would be like Lazarus lying at the gate of Dives' mansion. The aberrations of religion that seek to placate the power of an inaccessible god are surely born in hearts that have never realized that God is on the side of man. For what else is the good news but an invitation to believe that God is with us to a degree inconceivable to the human imagination? The God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, the God present to us in the Spirit of love, is one whose sole apparent preoccupation is man.

If but once in our lives we have felt the gentle caress of that concerned love we have touched faith. But to grasp the hand that reaches out to us, to bind ourselves to that love, to live out that love in every dimension of life: that is another matter. There are so many things that militate against the whole crazy idea. God in love with mankind? Then why pain, suffering, injustice, hatred, war, hunger? There are a million 'whys' that scream out in contradiction of God's own declaration of love. And even were we able to shout them down, one insistent voice would remain – why me?

Dare I accept God's declaration of love in Jesus Christ? In the

read more at www.theway.org.uk

hidden depths of my heart I realize the demands that such an unselfish love is going to make once I have accepted it. Such a love is going to deal shattering sledgehammer blows to that hard core of egoism that I call my self. It is indeed a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Terrible, because a completely unselfish love invites me to complete unselfishness. It invites me to love without fear and without any demands for guarantees. Love without any sort of insurance policy: 'Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me'. This is the reaction of every human heart to the demands of the love of God for mankind, and the prayer of faith is the road from that first instinctive reflex to the final 'Into your hands I commend my spirit'.

Faith is not simply giving assent to the fact that God is love for mankind. Nor does the prayer of faith consist in telling God that we know he loves us and that we love him. Faith in the fact of God's love will remain unreal and sterile unless it goes hand in hand with faith in the loveliness of God's creation, of mankind and of our own selves. The christian faith in God necessarily implies a faith in mankind and in the world in which we live with God. The fact that the world and mankind matter so much to God that he died for them must mean that they have to matter that much to us as well. Condemnation of the world, and any sort of self-condemnation that implies that God has not done as good a job as he might have done, can have no part in a genuine christian spirituality.

This does not mean the false sort of optimism that tries to say that everything is for the best in the best of worlds. The world is in a mess, human greed and injustice still work incredibly cruel havoc; I may be in a mess, seeming to myself to be drifting in an apparently purposeless life which is not making any difference to anyone. We have to admit all this and still believe and love and hope. But this is what faith is about: believing in what is not seen. The real growth of faith begins when its seed is planted deep in the dirt of this world of mankind and of myself. The prayer of faith gathers its power and creativity when, like Christ rising from the tomb, it struggles up through all that is negative, purposeless and evil to affirm again the message of love and release the force of the Spirit of love into the depths from which it has emerged.

Faith is not a refuge from the evils of the world, quite simply because it is faith in a God who chose to get himself involved in the evils of this world to the extent of dying because of that evil. A doctor does not heal a broken leg by amputating it, nor did Christ heal

mankind by eliminating evil. He became part of this broken, torn body; on the cross he was the crucified world, and healed it from within. But unlike the doctor, he shared the pain with the suffering world, he saved mankind by sharing its crucifixion. So too, faith in Christ must necessarily mean entering into every aspect of a tortured world; it must mean sharing all that seems to cry out against the God of love and yet still continuing to love. Christ prayed not that his followers would be taken out of this world but that they would be saved from the evil one. He sent his apostles into the world even as he himself had been sent: to take upon themselves, as he had, the sins of the world.

The spirit of that evil one has ever sought to make man discontent with God's world and discontent with himself. He has ever sought to insinuate into the heart of man the corroding thought that he should dissociate himself from the pain and suffering and injustice in the world. This he does in so many subtle ways that men do evil and are persuaded that they are doing good. The evil one nearly succeeded in persuading mankind that war was normal, that it was natural that some should starve whilst others feasted, that the colour of a man's skin makes a difference and that one human being could be a slave to another. He almost succeeded in persuading us that we were right all the time. He used the same tactics on Christ, when he tried to persuade him to avoid the crucifixion, the sign of his complete involvement in this world of ugliness and beauty, of life and death, of hate and love, hope and despair. The discontent of the evil one has nothing to do with the agony of Christ. It is a false agony, a sterile labour that produces no new life and leads only to ultimate bitterness and frustration. It is a discontent that demands the elimination of one's fellowman, as the discontented Cain slew Abel, a monstrous offspring of greed and envy. It is the antithesis of the christian faith in that it is fundamentally a conviction that God has not got enough love to go round; this is the real atheism.

The agony of Christ is the agony of love that brings forth life. The agony that still cries out 'Father!' in the full knowledge that his present situation seems to give the lie to that word. The agony that says 'friend' to one who betrays with the kiss of friendship. The agony that proclaims life for all mankind in the moment of death, and forgiveness of the unforgivable. It proclaims the indestructibility and universality of love in the midst of hatred, fear and greed. The agony of Christ releases into the heart of man the Spirit of love who invites man to believe that he can respond to utterly selfless love,

that there is no need to eliminate God or his fellowman to prove to himself his own worth. The arms of Christ on the cross, stretched out to embrace the whole world, are nailed there by all that is evil in this world.

The prayer of faith demands the same sort of realism that Christ lived. It demands that we come to grips with our own reality and with the reality of the world we live in. It is rare to meet someone who fully accepts himself. One who never has even a fleeting day-dream about what might have been and who he might have become. There is a shadow of Walter Mitty in the heart of every human being. The christian is called to live out a vision (the dream of Martin Luther King), not a fantasy. The past, my personal past, is not some sort of capital that I have acquired and can now retire on. Nor is the present 'me' the irradicable pattern of the future 'me'. Obviously there is and has to be a consistency of each human being with himself and in himself. But we have to be careful what consistencies we settle for; and having settled for them, we have still to take care that they do not simply harden into cast-iron moulds, rigid but brittle. If we really pray ourselves in faith, we lay ourselves open to a continual process of becoming. For that prayer will be the lived expression of our faith that we are ever open to growth in love, and to the discovery of heights and depths within ourselves that we do not know at the present moment.

This means first of all that we take stock realistically of our present situation without fretting about what has been or what might have been. We can only begin from where we are here and now. If we do not, we should logically spend our lives in impotent rage about what happened in the garden of Eden. We are who we are, here and now. The question is, where do we go from here? Into unrealistic daydreams? Perhaps very holy ones, but nonetheless unrealistic. Or do we go on in the same old rut? The answer to this question demands a judgment of value not simply about our own lives but about life itself. Is life itself worth living, in all its routine and ordinariness? What does it all add up to when we spend a third of our lives asleep? Is there a purpose behind it all, or should we just cop out and hang the consequences?

So many people today feel that they are drifting along without really living. They sense that they should be doing something in life, but they cannot see or decide what that something is. Many of them have been scarred by experience: broken home, broken marriage, failure in business, or the simple day-to-day struggle looking after a

family and trying to comprehend this rapidly changing world. We are all very little fish swimming in a very big pond, and it is only natural that at some time or other we should wonder whether or not we are making any difference to the world. It is only natural that we question ourselves about the purpose and meaning of life. But it should also be natural for us, as christians, to seek a response in faith. If we are to do that, we must ask the question in faith.

This means that we begin with certain presuppositions that are given to us because we believe in Jesus Christ. We begin with the mystery of human life. Each and every human life is bound up for ever with the mystery of God, for the only God we know has shown that he is eternally wedded to mankind and to his creation. Therefore our lives contain a hiddenness that we can never fully comprehend. Each of us is a work of God's love, each bearing his individual stamp. We each of us know that our life matters; but we know it by faith, not through any sort of quantitative evaluation of our own contribution to the human race. For the same reason we have no right to undervalue the worth of any other member of the human race. What is more, our faith in Christ should convince us of the worth of living an ordinary human life. Jesus himself lived just such a life for over thirty years. Are we to say that he was wasting his time at Nazareth? Who in imperial Rome, the hub of the known world, was aware of his death when it happened? A minor incident in an obscure province that was more trouble than it was worth. We cannot all be prophets (let us not be jealous of them). Yet each of us is a charism of the Spirit, and no one of us can ever know in this life exactly how much we mean to the world and to God.

To accept the mystery, the hidden splendour of the ordinariness of human life, is to live the prayer of faith. It is the great glory of christianity that we have a God of the ordinary, a God who simply asks us to become the self he loves in us. Basically this means that the task of each one of us is to become a lover of God, of mankind, of this beautiful world in which we live. The purpose of living is to become a lover. This is what christianity tells us. We may move mountains, but if we have not learned to love we are nothing. No matter what our situation in life is, it is always possible to grow in love. Christ says to us that even when we are surrounded and persecuted by enemies we can still go on loving. This is what life is about. This is the message of faith that we have to give to the world that cannot believe in itself and is seduced by love's counterfeits offered by the spirit of evil.

The prayer of faith requires a growing fidelity to ourselves as we are and demands an asceticism that constantly rejects the self that we pretend to be. But none of us are formed in a vacuum. Our selves do not emerge fully grown. They are mediated to us progressively through the intricate web of relationships that make up human living. Hence fidelity to my own self implies fidelity to the forces of love that have and are forming me. This is the crucial point in my growth, for there can often be an opposition between being faithful to my self and fidelity to those who love me. But this tension is perhaps the most constructive and maturing tension in the life of a human being. The easy way out, and the destructive way, is to reject one or other side of the tension. Either to become myself in complete disregard of others (though this disregard is illusory), or to become the puppet of others and never realize my personal potential. But living in faith and praying in faith means accepting to live with healthy tensions, learning to react and respond to the realities of the here and now, and not to fritter away emotional energies by fretting against what is. It has been said that the major sin of humanity is impatience, that sin is a sin against faith and hope and love, since it is basically a refusal to accept ourselves and others.

Fidelity to myself, fidelity to others and also fidelity to God. God is faithful because he always fulfils his promises. We respond to God's faithful love when we consistently try to fulfil the promise that God has given us in Christ. This is the promise of the Spirit of sonship that has been given us in our baptism. We are creations of the love of God, and our fidelity demands that our lives speak out that promise of love in us. We are faithful to God when we accept him on his terms and treat him not according to our selfish emotional reactions but on the level on which he approaches us. He is the God of the ordinary and we have to learn to use the ordinary in our lives as a means of building up our relationship with him. Everything that we do matters to God; and we do him the greatest insult if, in any area of our lives, we behave as if he were unconcerned. Is not this one of the lessons of the sermon on the mount? The very hairs of our heads are numbered.

Accepting in faith that God cares about the detail of our lives can have an immensely liberating effect on our lives and on our prayer. But it is essential that we understand the greatness of the love which inspires God's interest. Otherwise we can end up in a morbid scrupulosity which leaves us barefoot as we dither about whether or not it is more perfect to put on the right sock before the left. God's

concern is not that of a billiard marker who racks up the points we make each day. Nor is his concern that of the company accountant who always has the bottom line at the back of his mind. God's interest is one of love, a love that is full of trust and confidence and that seeks to help us to grow into mature persons. In fact, God is more conscious of us than we are of ourselves. Perhaps very often in our prayer we are unconsciously keeping God at a distance because we have never really accepted in our heart of hearts the dimensions of his transcendence. We treat him as if he were in part our own creation, and project onto him an element of our own fragility. But the incarnation means that God really can get that close to us and not be lessened in the process. We have a God who is so near to us that we need never worry that he will ever forget us. We live within a love so great that it can express itself in the most ordinary of gestures.

But once we try to begin to live in this spirit then the trouble starts. Inevitably there will be a clash between the spontaneous reactions of our egoism and the faithful presence of God. Events in our lives, the way we are treated, the very existence of certain people, may seek to persuade us that God is absent. Or we may be tempted to keep him out of certain areas and relationships in our lives. What are we to do in such situations if we are going to go on living and praying in faith? The jesuit brother St Alphonsus Rodriguez has an interesting way of dealing with this problem. He said that whenever he had some suffering – a situation, a person, an event – that he could not reconcile with the presence of God, he would in prayer put that person or situation between himself and God and keep it there until he could see God through it and accept it as something from God. In other words, instead of attempting to shelve the problem and go to God by circumventing it, he treated the very point of opposition as the means for deepening his relationship with God. This again is, in the ordinary detail of life, the living out of the spirit of the agony in the garden in which Christ accepted to go to the Father by the very means which seemed to separate him from the Father.

Any relationship, and especially a relationship of love, is corroded and stunted when it co-exists with unresolved points of conflict which fester beneath the surface. The prayer of faith demands that we believe that God has enough love to support the conflict and that he will give us enough love to face up to it. The final resolution of the point of conflict may take years, but time does not matter.

Indeed it may be necessary for our growth that we wrestle all our lives with this or that situation. This coming to grips with a situation is the hallmark of the prayer of faith, which is also the prayer of the deepest reality of ourselves, of the world and of God.

The possible may be defined as what man discovers that he is capable of doing. No matter how broad the range of the possible, there will always be an impossible; and it is in the impossible of the moment that God takes over. God can always begin where we have to leave off. Faith is the bond between the possible and the impossible, between man and God. The prayer of faith consists in continually refusing to live within what we consider as our spiritual possibilities. It is a prayer that leaves the question of limits to God. It is a prayer that can begin at the moment when we feel that we should give up praying because prayer is no use. What we really mean in such circumstances is that we can see no possible remedy. That is the moment when we can really come before God in truth. We really pray when we pray for the impossible; for then we really put ourselves into the hands of God with complete trust. And even if our particular impossible never happens, we will have learnt to go beyond our own limitations which are the real impossibility.

One of the great strengths of the present period of spiritual renewal in the Church is the rediscovery of the prayer of faith. The healthiest sign in this time of crisis is the deepening of the life of prayer. Were this reaction not there we could have reason for serious anxiety. But the sifting process that is going on is a process of purification that will always be necessary in the Church of men. Many of the props and supports have disappeared and institutional churches of whatever faith have been seriously discredited. Many people have been led to face up to the fact that the christian believes in Jesus Christ, not in an eternal institution. Christ is the same, but the institution must change. Real infidelity enters when we attempt to limit Christ to the structures of a particular type of institution, and when we worry more about the precise theological formulation of belief than about the way in which we are living our belief. We live in a world that desperately needs the joyful message of faith. A message that puts heart into man to move the mountains that the world is faced with. A world that hardly dares believe in itself and that looks with horror at what it has done needs men who live the prayer of faith. This means people who grow daily in the divine conviction that this world and all that is in it is worthwhile. People who are convinced that the world is saved and is being saved, and for that

reason are not afraid to get their hands dirty.

A world in an impossible situation needs a God of the impossible. A world that thinks it is a mess needs a God who has been used, since the first day of creation, to dealing with chaos. This is the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. A God who releases into this world the Spirit of an eternal love that the world hungers for but cannot fabricate. From the heart of humanity and of creation there rises a constant prayer of faith in the person of Jesus Christ. His prayer is an invitation to all men to live with him in the Spirit of love and become in him a living prayer of faith.