

REVITALIZING OUR PRAYER THROUGH THE GOSPELS

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A RECENT survey by the Sacred Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes reports a widespread renaissance of a desire for instruction in prayer, a new awareness that fostering prayer is a fundamental responsibility for a religious community. A revival of interest among biblicists in the long neglected topic of prayer in the New Testament may be seen in the presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association of America in 1971.¹ At the same time, the survey cited above also indicates a conviction among not a few religious that it is sufficient to experience the risen Christ in their work and in other people without the prayerful reading of the gospels. In fact, after a period of enthusiasm for the scriptures, one senses occasionally something like disenchantment with the ancient christian practice of *lectio divina*. This may possibly be the result of an inadequate orientation to the biblical vision of reality, or to a preponderantly academic approach to the sacred text, or (as with many pentecostals) a recalcitrant biblical fundamentalism.

Vatican II has borne witness to the place of honour accorded to the contemplation of the gospels in christian spirituality by a noteworthy distinction, in the Constitution on Divine Revelation, between the value of these books and that of other New Testament writings for christian life. 'The gospels have a special pre-eminence, and rightly so, for they are the principal witness of the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our Saviour'.² The evangelists are the specially privileged witnesses to the way in which the christians of the first and second generation had nourished their faith and love and hope upon what Jesus had said and done during his earthly life. That such is the sense in which Vatican II spoke of the 'special

¹ Quinn, Jerome D.: 'Apostolic Ministry and Apostolic Prayer', in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33 (1971), 479-491.

² *Dei Verbum*, 18.

pre-eminence' of the four gospels, may be gathered by the confirmatory function it ascribes to the rest of the New Testament. These writings 'confirm what concerns Christ as Lord: his authentic teaching is more fully stated: the saving power of the divine work of Christ is proclaimed . . .'.³

The document singles out in the first place the pauline letters as of particular value in helping the believing reader experience what the gospels were meant to effect in him.

There were many other signs that Jesus did in the presence of his disciples which have not been written down in this book. These however have been written, in order that you may deepen your faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and thus through your belief, you might have life in his name.⁴

A few years ago I suggested that the modern christian might be assisted to pray from the gospels by taking cognizance of the three stages by which they were produced.⁵ The dialectic governing the creation of these sacred books may be seen to consist of an experience of God, the reaction of faith with reflection, and (ultimately) expression in writing. I proposed that by reversing this procedure, once it is understood, a method of praying from the gospel text might be found. One begins by attempting to grasp the meaning of a passage, then reflects on it with faith in order to discern what the risen Christ is saying to oneself through it at this particular moment. Thus by the exercise of faith and love and hope, one comes to an experience of the mystery presented by the particular passage.

This brief communication will attempt to clarify the nature of the experience sought in this kind of prayer, to explain more adequately the value of reflecting on what Jesus had said and done during his mortal life *as related in the gospels*. In view of the relationship, singled out by *Dei Verbum*, which the letters of St Paul especially bear to the 'special pre-eminence' of the christian witness of the gospels, I shall begin by examining Paul's attitude to the traditions, in his day still orally transmitted, concerning Jesus's earthly life. I wish further to examine one of the rare disclosures of the otherwise carefully guarded secrets of his own prayer-life by the apostle,⁶ to illustrate

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴ Jn 20, 30-31.

⁵ 'Contemplation of the gospels, Ignatius Loyola, and the Contemporary Christian', in *Theological Studies* 29 (1968), pp 417-443. A more recent and fuller treatment of the topic will be found in 'A Suggested Approach to *Lectio Divina*', in *The American Benedictine Review* 23 (1972), pp 439-455.

⁶ 2 Cor 12, 7-10.

the kind of experience sought through the contemplation of the gospels. Finally, by comparing the experience of Jesus's earthly life by the twelve with that of Paul and the evangelists, I shall attempt to indicate the special character of the gospel narratives which makes them particularly apt in assisting the christian towards a faith-experience of these mysteries.

What attitude does St Paul evince towards Jesus's earthly history? The reading of his letters will quickly reveal a certain ambivalence of a paradoxical nature with respect to it. On the one hand, he places considerable emphasis and value upon his reception and faithful transmission of the evangelical traditions, received – like the evangelists after him – ultimately from the twelve:⁷ 'I handed on to you' – he writes to Corinth – 'as of supreme importance, what I in my turn had received'.⁸ Whilst he does not frequently cite Jesus's words, it is clear that Paul views them as of paramount value for christian faith.⁹

Yet on the other hand, Paul – at least on two occasions – insists even more emphatically that he had received the data of tradition immediately from the risen Lord. Thus he begins his account of the last supper by stating: 'I received *from the Lord* that which in turn I handed on to you, how the Lord Jesus on the night he was handed over took bread . . .'¹⁰ More pointed still is his insistence to the galatians that 'the gospel preached by me is not of human origin; nor did I receive it from any human being, nor was I taught it except through a revelation of Jesus Christ'.¹¹ The remark has led some commentators to imagine that Paul had been granted a vision of what Jesus had said and done during his earthly life. The opinion appears implausible. How then explain the antithetic character of these two sets of affirmation?

It will have been observed that whenever Paul alludes to some point in Jesus's teaching, he never speaks, as does the modern critic, of the 'sayings of Jesus', but of a 'word *of the Lord*'.¹² Similarly in his narrative of the last supper, it is to 'the Lord Jesus' that the words and actions are attributed. In speaking of Jesus's death, Paul will say that the Jews 'killed the Lord Jesus',¹³ that the powers of evil 'crucified the Lord of glory'.¹⁴ I venture to suggest that this is not

⁷ Cf 1 Thess 2, 13; 2 Thess 2, 15; 3, 6; 1 Cor 11, 2, 23; 15, 1, 3; Gal 1, 9; Phil 4, 9; Rom 6, 17.

⁸ 1 Cor 15, 3.

⁹ Cf 1 Thess 4, 2, 9, 15; 1 Cor 7, 10; 9, 14; 14, 37; Rom 14, 14.

¹⁰ 1 Cor 11, 23–5.

¹¹ Gal 1, 11–12.

¹² Cf 1 Thess 4, 15; 1 Cor 7, 10.

¹³ 1 Thess 2, 15.

¹⁴ 1 Cor 2, 8.

simply a rhetorical prolepsis. For Paul, the teaching and actions of 'the Jesus of history' have authority and significance only as the words and works of the risen Christ, that is, as Paul himself has experienced them through the dynamic action of the exalted Lord Jesus. It is not the historicity of these traditions, nor the fidelity of their transmission, which gives them value for christian living, but the action on the apostle of him who stands immediately behind them. There can be no question, I believe, but that Paul learned the 'content' of the tradition (as we should put it) from his predecessors in the faith. Yet Paul does not make such a distinction; for him their 'special pre-eminence' as testimony to 'the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our Saviour'¹⁵ springs from his conviction that they are the 'utterance of Christ',¹⁶ capable of effecting that 'hearing' (the opening of man's innermost heart) that leads to faith. Thus what Paul is concerned to express in citing Jesus's teaching is not the *ipsissima verba Jesu*, but his personal christian experience of the active presence of the risen Lord who has communicated to him his teaching. Similarly, the narrative in First Corinthians should be regarded as an account primarily of the fruit of Paul's contemplation of what was done by 'the Lord Jesus on the night he was handed over'.¹⁷

One additional point regarding Paul's attitude to Jesus's earthly history *in globo* deserves mention here. 'For our sakes he became poor, whereas he was rich'.¹⁸ 'Indeed he was crucified out of weakness, but he lives by the power of God'.¹⁹ He cites with approval an early christian hymn which praises Christ for having 'emptied himself by adopting the character of the servant . . . he humiliated himself . . .'²⁰ The earthly life of Jesus has significance for Paul only as the pre-history of the glorified Lord Jesus, whose dynamic power he experienced at his conversion, and subsequently, at significant moments in his prayer and in his own apostolic career.

Hugo Rahner draws attention to a similar resonance in the experience of St Ignatius, in his perceptive discussion of the christology of the Spiritual Exercises, where he shows persuasively that the 'Creator and Lord' of the Exercises and the Constitutions is in fact the living Christ. He remarks that in the Contemplation for obtaining love, 'the creator and Lord, to love of whom the grateful soul is inflamed, is the crucified majesty of God'.²¹ Fr Rahner has also, I

¹⁵ *Dei Verbum*, 18.

¹⁶ Rom 10, 17.

¹⁷ 1 Cor 11, 23-5.

¹⁸ 2 Cor 8, 9.

¹⁹ 2 Cor 13, 4.

²⁰ Phil 2, 7-8.

²¹ Rahner, Hugo, S.J.: *Ignatius the Theologian*, (tr. Michael Barry, London, 1968), p 135.

suggest, uncovered another pauline feature of ignatian spirituality by drawing attention to St Ignatius's concern that the discernment of spirits be practised in the context of the contemplation of the mysteries of our Lord's earthly life:

To gain a clear idea of what this 'experience' consists in, it is important from the outset to keep in mind a very significant instruction which Ignatius included in his Directory: during the exercises of the election the exercitant should not direct his attention simply to the movement of spirits going on within him, but rather to the love of God which both precedes and accompanies all movements of the soul – and he will do this by continuing to contemplate the mysteries of the life of Christ.²³

For Ignatius of Loyola, as for Paul of Tarsus before him, it is the personal experience of the operation of the risen Christ through his Spirit which alone is salutary.

St Paul is thus well aware that the traditions regarding Jesus's earthly life are of a different order from those traditions of the rabbis which Jesus had condemned as 'the tradition of men'.²³ In receiving the evangelical traditions, Paul has experienced that sense of belonging to the risen Lord, that inter-personal relationship which for him is the essence of christian faith. 'He died on behalf of all', he declares in his second Letter to the Corinthians, 'that the living might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died on their behalf and was raised. Consequently, from now on we do not know anyone in a merely human way. Even if we had known Christ in a merely human way, we now no longer know him thus'.²⁴ Christian existence is described to the galatians in terms of Paul's own experience in prayer of Jesus's earthly life: 'The life I live in my present historical existence is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and *handed himself over for me*'.²⁵ This is a description in the concrete of what Paul means by 'living for God', after dying to the law by having been crucified with Christ.

Does Paul give any detailed description of his personal experience, through the intervention of the risen Lord, of Jesus's earthly life? I believe he does in a passage that affords a rare glimpse of his own prayer. It is significant that the incident occurred before any of Paul's extant letters were written. He appears to connect it chronologically with the precious mystical experience of being 'snatched up to paradise',²⁶ which happened in the mid-forties of the christian

²³ *Ibid.*, p 146.

²⁵ Gal 2, 20.

²³ Mk 7, 8.

²⁶ 2 Cor 12, 1-6.

²⁴ 2 Cor 5, 15-16.

era. Thus the episode – Paul's earnest plea to be delivered from 'a thorn for the flesh'²⁷ – undoubtedly had a formative influence on the position Paul takes in his writings towards the earthly life of Jesus.

'And so, because of the superlative grandeur of these revelations, lest I become unduly elated, there was given to me a thorn for the flesh, a messenger of Satan to pommel me, lest I become unduly elated. Three times I besought the Lord concerning this (adversary), that he might withdraw from me'. The specific cause of this exquisitely painful trial cannot now be conjectured – witness the many ingenious but unconvincing suggestions by commentators as to its being of a physical, or mental, or moral nature. That Paul regarded it as deleterious to his apostolic work seems fairly certain, since he attributes it to Satan, elsewhere designated in his letters as the chief opponent of his ministry.²⁸ Thus Paul appears to have been confident not only that his prayer would be heard, but that this obstruction to his effectiveness in the apostolate, to which he had been summoned by Christ, would be removed.

Paul asserts (contrary to the opinion of a number of commentators) that his prayer *was answered* by the risen Christ. 'And he has given me his response. My graciousness is all you need, since [my] power is being brought to its perfection by [your] weakness'. By his use of the perfect tense, Paul indicates that Christ's response to his prayer has continued to be efficacious up to the present moment. He experiences the graciousness of Christ in the constant deployment of the risen Lord's power through his own weakness. This christian experience of weakness is precious in Paul's eyes firstly as an experience of the protective nearness of the risen Lord. He employs for it the same image of 'the tent of the presence',²⁹ which the author of the fourth gospel later borrowed to describe the incarnation of the Word.³⁰ 'Therefore, most gladly will I boast in my weaknesses in order that Christ's power may spread its tent over me'.³¹ The metaphor of boasting indicates, as well as a sense of security, Paul's joyous response of praise and thanksgiving.³² 'That is why I

²⁷ 2 Cor 12, 7–10.

²⁸ 1 Thess 2, 18; 2 Cor 2, 11; 4, 4; 11, 13–15. Cf Lyonnet, Stanislas, S.J.: *La Loi fondamentale de l'apostolat formulée et vécue par Saint Paul (2 Cor 12, 9)*, in *La Vie Selon L'Esprit: condition du Chrétien* (Paris, 1965), pp 263–282.

²⁹ Exod 40, 1ff.

³⁰ Cf Jn 1, 14.

³¹ 2 Cor 12, 9.

³² Rudolf Bultmann observes that already in the Old Testament 'boasting' included 'confidence, joy, and thanksgiving, and the paradox is that the one who glories thus looks away from himself, so that his glorying is a confession of God'. Of Paul's 'boasting', he remarks; 'This glorying is also thanksgiving'. See his article, *kauchaomai* (boast), in Kittel, G.: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol iv (Grand Rapids, 1967), p 617.

take delight in manifestations of weakness – in acts of insolence, in hardships, in persecutions and frustrations, when they are endured for Christ – since it is when I experience my own weakness that I am powerful'.³³

There is a second aspect to this account of his prayer by Paul which deserves attention here. The power of the risen Christ, which he was privileged to experience, gave him also an experiential knowledge of that 'weakness' that Jesus had combatted in himself during 'the days of his flesh'³⁴ which became for Paul the salient feature of Jesus's earthly history. 'For indeed', he writes of Christ a few paragraphs later, 'he was crucified out of weakness, but he lives by the power of God'.³⁵

Certain resonances between Paul's account of this prayer-experience and the New Testament narratives of Jesus's prayer and struggle in Gethsemane, I venture to suggest, reveal the profound christian value of this incident. Commentators frequently note that, like Jesus in the marcan and matthean accounts,³⁶ Paul prayed 'three times' with great fervour. Much more significant, however, is the symbolism which these two evangelists seem to attach to 'the cup' which Jesus asked the Father to remove. It represents, at least in part, that collapse of his disciples' faith in himself and their dispersal, which Jesus prophesied (only in Mark and Matthew) would result from his passion. Thus it was this total destruction of his only real accomplishment during his public ministry, the faithful loyalty of this little group, that Jesus prayed to avert, as Paul begged to be relieved of a serious obstacle to his own apostolic ministry. Luke's narrative of Jesus's 'agony'³⁷ insinuates Satan's involvement,³⁸ while Paul ascribes his predicament to 'a messenger of Satan'. Hebrews highlights the response given by God to Jesus's prayer to be delivered from death, although in an unexpected manner through his resurrection.³⁹ Paul indicates that Christ answered his petition in a way he had not anticipated. Thus this pauline narrative may be taken to exemplify the christian experience through prayer of a

³³ 2 Cor 12, 10.

³⁴ Heb 5, 7.

³⁵ 2 Cor 13, 4.

³⁶ Cf Mk 13, 27-42; Mt 26, 31-46.

³⁷ Pfitzner, Victor C.: *Paul and the Agon Motif* (Leiden, 1967), p 131. He insists that this lucan term 'does not suggest that the wrestling of Jesus emphasizes a struggle for peace of soul, for inner composure in view of the cruel irrevocable fate which awaited him, but rather an intense and decisive struggle for victory'. He adds: 'Jesus's wrestling in prayer is to be seen within the framework of a wider conflict, here the messianic struggle for victory over against Satan and death' (p 133).

³⁸ Lk 22, 53; cf also 4, 13; 22, 3.

³⁹ Heb 5, 7.

feature of Jesus's earthly life, the cross, which is central to the gospels.

These reflections on Paul's experience suggest the possibility of taking a new approach to the narratives of the gospels in prayer, by viewing them primarily as accounts of each evangelist's christian experience of Jesus's earthly history. This may hopefully be achieved by comparing the original experience of the twelve with that of the evangelists and of St Paul.

The experience of the twelve fell into two distinct and disparate moments: their direct involvement as a group in Jesus's public life, and their meetings with the risen Lord after his resurrection. In the first phase they became Jesus's disciples, instructed about the Kingdom of God by his teaching and by his 'acts of power',⁴⁰ or 'signs'.⁴¹ Yet their attachment to him remained grounded, not on christian faith, but on the traditional faith of Israel. During this stage, they penetrated the mystery surrounding Jesus's message and person only to the degree that they finally recognized in him the fulfilment of Israel's ancient messianic hope. 'You are the Christ',⁴² Peter confessed in the name of the twelve at Caesarea Philippi.

The second moment in the collective experience of the twelve, their confrontation with the risen Lord Jesus, created christian faith in their hearts, and they were commissioned as apostles to 'preach the gospel to every creature'.⁴³ The risen Christ revealed to them the mystery of his unique relationship to the Father and to the holy Spirit, the christian significance of what he had said and done in his mortal life, the christian relevance of the scriptures of Israel. Reflection with christian faith enabled the twelve to perceive the continuity existing between their bipartite experience; and this they expressed in the apostolic *preaching*, the gospel, with the aim of converting others to Christ. They also articulated it in the apostolic *teaching*,⁴⁴ whose purpose was a more profound comprehension of the mysteries of Jesus's earthly life by those who already believed. This teaching constituted those traditions which, as he attests, Paul had received from his predecessors in the faith.

St Paul's experience of Jesus's earthly life may thus be considered to stand midway between that of the twelve and the later gospel writers. Like the twelve, Paul had met the risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus road, and he regarded this confrontation as the last of the post-resurrection appearances.⁴⁵ Like the evangelists, however, none

⁴⁰ Mt 13, 54.

⁴³ Mk 16, 15.

⁴¹ Jn 9, 16.

⁴⁴ Cf Acts 2, 42.

⁴² Mk 8, 27-29.

⁴⁵ 1 Cor 15, 8.

of whom had personally belonged to the twelve, Paul had had no immediate contact with Jesus 'in the days of his flesh', and with them he had relied upon the evangelical traditions. The reception of these traditions, as we have seen, Paul testifies to have been an experience of the activity of the risen Lord.

The four evangelists had not personally followed Jesus during his public ministry, nor did they share in the post-resurrection appearances. The traditions they received, founded on the twofold experience of the twelve, became the basis of their gospels. Luke shows his awareness of the disparate character of these two moments in the experience of the twelve by his declaration of intention: 'to draw up an account concerning those events fulfilled among us, as the original eyewitnesses who also became ministers of the word handed them on to us'.⁴⁶

The gospel writers included this eyewitness testimony in their narratives, because they saw it as the most effective means of avoiding the tendencies towards gnosticism, which in one form or other was making itself felt in early christianity. 'By this you recognize the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ come in the flesh is from God'.⁴⁷ Moreover, like St Paul, their own experience had taught them that these traditions of Jesus's earthly life were the 'more excellent way' to assist the believing reader to relate in faith to the exalted Christ, whose present existence was beyond the range of his experience.

Secondly, the evangelists also received through the traditions the fruits of the paschal experience of the twelve, the initial christian understanding of Jesus's earthly history.

However, it is not possible to evaluate adequately the 'special pre-eminence' amongst New Testament writings claimed for the gospels by *Dei Verbum* without recognizing as an effect of the charism of inspiration the personal and unique experience 'in the Spirit'⁴⁸ of Jesus's earthly history, out of which each evangelist created his distinctive literary contribution to the New Testament. In our day, redaction criticism has begun to explore the highly individual christologies that lie behind the four gospels. The lack of nostalgia evinced by these writers in their approach to Jesus's life upon earth allays any suspicion of a desire on their part to return to it as a kind

⁴⁶ Lk 1, 1-2.

⁴⁷ 1 Jn 4, 2.

⁴⁸ The phrase is that of the seer of Patmos (Apoc 1, 10), by which he describes his experience of recognizing, in the majestic figure of the exalted Christ, that Jesus whose earthly history the first disciples had shared.

of vanished golden age. All the evidence points to the fact that each wrote his book out of a personal, highly privileged experience of what Jesus had said and done.

The christian who is desirous of revitalizing his prayer through the gospels should regard each narrative he contemplates primarily as an account by the evangelist of his experience of this particular mystery. We have seen how St Paul came to regard each saying of Jesus as 'a word of the Lord', how he attributed to 'the Lord Jesus' the events in which he was involved upon earth. Rarely indeed, and perhaps only in the fourth gospel, does one catch an echo of this experience by those who wrote the gospels. The fourth evangelist's remark, 'and *we have beheld* his glory',⁴⁹ his affidavit attesting the trustworthiness of the testimony of his master, the beloved disciple, 'And *we know* that his witness is true',⁵⁰ provide instances of this. Possibly the peculiar use of the term 'remember' by this writer may be taken to describe his own experience 'in the Spirit' of Jesus's words and actions. He draws attention to the promise that 'the Paraclete, the holy Spirit the Father will send in my name – he will . . . cause you to *remember* everything I have said to you'.⁵¹ This evangelist comments on his own narrative of the cleansing of the Temple: 'When therefore he was risen from death, his disciples *remembered* that he had said this, and they believed the scriptures and the word which Jesus had spoken'.⁵² He further comments on his narrative of the messianic entry of Jesus into Jerusalem: 'These things his disciples did not understand at first, but when Jesus had been glorified, then they *remembered* that these things had been written concerning him, and that they had done these things to him'.⁵³ This 'remembering' that bespeaks the enlightenment of christian faith springs not simply from the recall of the past, but from the Spirit. The author whose accounts of these events disclose an insight into their meaning not found in the other gospels must surely speak also out of his own experience. He has proposed to the christian reader his narratives of Jesus's actions as 'signs' for christian faith. In the discourses he has created, it is the glorified Lord who speaks to the reader, as he had spoken through the Spirit to the evangelist himself.

⁴⁹ Jn 1, 14.

⁵² Jn 2, 22.

⁵⁰ Jn 21, 24.

⁵³ Jn 12, 16.

⁵¹ Jn 14, 26.