

John Dalrymple: Simple Prayer

DLT 1984 repr 1996

Notes by Alison Morgan, Sept 1999

1. Towards simplicity

Prayer begins by asking; never outgrow it, because it is an exercise of faith in God. Prayer of *petition* leads to prayer of *thanksgiving*; and then to prayer of *contrition* - because we realise we have duties to God - and then to prayer of *praise*, in which we outgrow self altogether. These are the 4 main types of prayer; they coalesce into communion with God, but the 4 elements are always present in man's approach to God.

Need to make sovereignty of God the business of our prayer; face God and dwell on him. Intimacy in prayer comes when we find we can remain in communion with God without any particular desire to move on to some business with him. As in a human relationship; more intimate once have reached the stage of being comfortable in silence together. Wordless prayer risks boredom or fear of being ridiculous; lots of words and formulae reassure.

2. To know God

Meditation (knowing about God) vs contemplative prayer (knowing God). Anxieties about entering into contemplative prayer: we are no longer in control of what happens; and faith is required to do it. Contemplation brings no results in form of conclusions about God or self; and hence great faith required to make time to do it in busy schedule.

3. Receptivity

True prayer is relational; but not between equals. God is the potter, we the clay. Have to deliberately change gear at the beginning of prayer and deliberately drop all desire to be in charge and to know where we are going. Receptive is a better word than passive, because we have to be active in our cooperation.

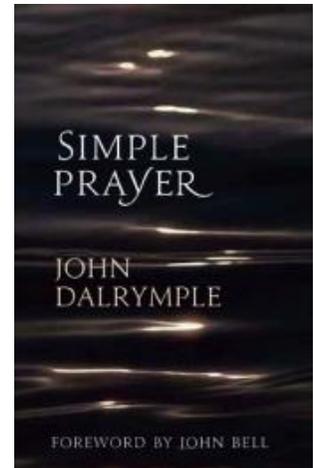
Prayer sometimes understood as an Experience. In fact it is surrender to God, and its prime motive is service. We serve God in prayer. His glory and his kingdom are paramount. The Experience he may see fit to give us in prayer may be that of boredom...

4. Some theological considerations

Simple prayer is receptive; intuitive (process not of reasoning but of simple knowledge which people have of each other when they become intimate); personal (not thinking but relating). Theologically speaking the exercise of prayer is an exercise of the virtues of faith, hope and charity.

5. The gift of time

Giving of time to someone is the gift of self; often we give advice or money instead, both of which effectively cut short the process of engagement. One justification of time spent in prayer used to be that it was valuable to do it' but JD suggests prayer is in fact a 'waste' of time. We do not pray in order to gain something for ourselves, but in order to give something to God. It is sacrifice; the language of love. As human relationships; we waste time with those we love, but not with those we don't. There is little common sense or prudence in the adventure of prayer.



It isn't even always noticeably rewarding; may often be dull and boring. But dryness in prayer is not dead end but threshold. Recommends minimum period of half an hour at a time; 15 minutes wouldn't do with a person, nor will it with God. Might prefer to organise prayer life on weekly rather than daily basis. We always have time for the things and persons we know to be important. Need to set aside specific time and place; we only learn to pray all the time everywhere after we have resolutely set about praying some of the time somewhere.

6. Spiritual reading

Reading is an essential point of departure for prayer; need to fill minds with reflection about supernatural realities before we can begin. *Surrounded as we are with glittering superficialities presented to us by the media and by our day to day meetings with fellow human beings, we need positively to decide to think about God if we are to preserve a true sense of Reality in our lives. The most real in this world is the most invisible; but because the most invisible the most easily forgotten. Reading about these invisible realities of our Faith corrects the tendency for our hold on the invisible to lessen. It feeds our minds with the Truth.* Hence monastic emphasis on lectio divina. Read any book which helps you at the present time. Also read Bible, listening both to human authors and to God.

7. Some methods

Lord's Prayer

Jesus prayer

Short phrases: choose a few favourite expressions and slowly repeat them to God (not to oneself about God)

Psalms

Discipline of body; good way of praying is simply to make self conscious of your breathing and to feel God's creative spirit being infused into you, natural and supernatural simultaneously.

8. Faith, not works

Test of the quality of your prayer is the quality of your life - test is not how you feel during prayer. Prayer is the articulated expression of our whole lives; we are to take the whole of our living, in prayer and outside prayer, and present it to God as an offering subject to his judgment. Wm Temple: not that conduct is supremely important and prayer helps it, but that prayer is supremely important and conduct is its test. The Christianity of the NT is not perfectionist but relational; prayer is the attempt to relate our lives personally to God. Those who want a quiet and undisturbed life are well advised to avoid taking prayer seriously.

Further consideration - as we come closer to God it will appear that we are further away; because the masks of our false selves are peeled away in the light of our meeting with God who is Truth. Light reveals specks and blemishes not previously visible.

External success is poor test of action; world's redemption was effected by the colossal failure of Calvary, not the short-lived success of Palm Sunday. We will never comprehend or please God in prayer; will always be painful gap between our ideals and our achievement.

9. Poverty of spirit

A chief fruit of prayer is honesty about ourselves, peeling away of false sense of achievement to reveal true self dependent on God; equally imp is growth in poverty of spirit - unmasking this time of hidden conditions in our surrender to God. We set up supports to fall back on if God's demands become too great; usu unconscious ones. Poverty of spirit doesn't mean having no possessions, but rather having what we possess 'non-possessively', as stewards. God comes to be seen as the one Absolute, all else as relative.

Growth points:

- material goods; gifts from God (keep creation/incarnation as well as redemption); avoid letting them become necessities. Our society would like us to find our identity in our possessions, in having rather than being. *All who*

dedicate themselves to God in prayer find that they become independent of consumer goods. Whether they have them or not, they are free from the need to possess them; they can travel light through life in the midst of the glittering plenty of the industrialized world. Jesus as example.

- spiritual possessions: immaterial things like job, status, reputation, power; we cling to these even more tenaciously than we do to material things. Progress in prayer can be gauged by the generosity with which we let go of these things.
- human support: need for affirmation and acceptance. *We must not cling possessively to the following good things, but must remain grateful, contented but unattached: other people's esteem, their notice, their thanks, their understanding, the support, their encouragement, their respect - in a word, community affirmation.*

10. Liberation

2 meanings: from external restraint

: from internal compulsions

Internal freedom is freedom not from a tyranny imposed on us by others but from the tyranny of ourselves, our uncurbed passions and desires which enslave us no less really than the secret police of an oppressive regime.

Both forms of liberation are part of Xtian gospel; parallel aims. *One goal of the follower of Christ is freedom for all from external tyrannies. The other goal is the internal freedom which for the Christian only comes from communion with Christ. In terms of priority, this second goal is more important, according to the gospel, even though in terms of time external liberation comes first. You do not speak to a prisoner about internal peace. You free him. The urgency of the NT writers is for the second, deeper, freedom. There is little urgency for the first freedom...[slavery]... The early Church left the struggle against slavery to a later date. It concentrated its urgency on the immediate struggle in the heart of every person against sin. [Romans 7-8]*

Another way of describing this liberation by poverty of spirit is to say that we gradually become more inner directed; values which are imp to us become internalized. For most people values are external - achieve feeling of well-being thru work, possessions. For Christian the journey to maturity is that from externalised values (doing, having) to internalised ones (being). This liberation can be frightening.

Inner freedom shows in availability to others. *I am only completely free when I am ready for others to enter into my life at a time of their choosing, not mine, and can do this without internal insecurity. [?!]*

End point is intimacy with God. *The fact that our treasure is to be found secure in God himself and not insecurely in the passing events of this life means that, as long as we keep our hearts fixed on that treasure, we will not be anxious. Depending on where their treasures are, men and women are anxious or peaceful.*

11. Dark night

2 things happen: initiative in our spiritual life passes from us to God

: God when he takes this initiative allows us to suffer, esp in prayer.

Conversion of soul from worldly life to spiritual life is at first superficial only; soul remains full of sinful tendencies, but attaches them instead to spiritual not worldly objects. New convert remains acquisitive, but for spiritual goods like grace and merit. (St John of the +). Dark night frees us from emotional returns and visible results in prayer. Also operates at deeper level of purpose and direction in life; this is strengthened as the other is blocked - provided you don't give up.

12. Cloud of Unknowing

Cp C14 text itself.

Created world put behind in cloud of forgetting; God in front in cloud of unknowing.

WB Yeats poem on how we see God - moorfowl as great moorfowl, peacock as great peacock. *In other words, just as for a vegetable God could be portrayed as an unimaginably marvellous Vegetable, for birds and unimaginably marvellous Bird and for animals an unimaginably marvellous Animal, so untrained human beings will tend to think of God as a marvellous, supernatural Person, ruling over them from heaven. ... Exp of cloud of unknowing cures us of that.*

13. Towards union

Mystics.

Created world as means of understanding God and rising towards him. Francis. GManley Hopkins. This world both hides God and reveals him at the same time.

Prayer as journey. Gradually we pass from thinking of God as part of our life to the realization that we are part of his life. Copernicus.

Prayer leads us to Truth; so, sooner or later, the copernican change takes place. Instead of granting God a place in my life, the realization dawns that he is Creator and has granted a place to me in his life. The world belongs to him, not me. I am in his world. I am an idea that he thinks up - not vice versa. I wake up in the morning to his creation. God is, in fact, at the centre. He is drawing me towards that centre, at his pace, in his time, according to his will. When this realization dawns, prayer is seen in a new, more relaxed, way. It is seen not as a work, an achievement, but much more as a letting go, allowing God at the centre to do the work, becoming merely receptive to his work in us.

Practical way of taking this on board: turn common statements about God round. So 'I need you' becomes 'God needs me'; 'I love you' becomes 'God loves me'. This won't puff you up in pride but rather capsize you in humility.