

# *what is prayer?*

a sermon preached on

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Joel 2:1-2,12-17, Psalm 61:1-17, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The liturgy of this day and the season into which we enter invite us 'to pray'. This seems, therefore, an apt moment to ponder the question: what is prayer? Or, more specifically, what kind of 'prayer' might we aim for in the Lenten pilgrimage?

Someone said, 'show me a person's prayer, and I'll tell you what their God is like'. Yes indeed, how we pray *does* reveal a great deal about what we think God is – and how God goes about God's business. Many of us were taught that praying consists in a whole lot of talking – talking *at* God, about all the things an omniscient deity could be expected to know already! Jesus teaches: "Ask, and it will be given to you".<sup>1</sup> But Jesus also teaches: "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words".<sup>2</sup>

Our many words are usually a cover for our deep fear of silence – never before so pressing a spiritual problem, perhaps, as in this near-toxically extroverted and noise-bombarded consumer culture. Even doctor's surgeries are now filled with the soul-destroying noise from wall-mounted LCD TVs! I suspect our terror at the prospect of silence actually reveals the deepest fear of all – actual, raw encounter with the Holy Mystery who is beyond all words, fear, because so unlike the manageable God we have constructed for ourselves.

Many great teachers in our tradition grasped the nettle. "The one who cannot keep silence is not contented with God."<sup>3</sup> "Talk of God that does not emerge from silence and lead again into silence does not know with whom it is dealing."<sup>4</sup> "We know that God is intimately with us and we also know that [God] is infinitely beyond us. It is only through deep and liberating silence that we can reconcile the polarities of this mysterious paradox."<sup>5</sup> "Silence somehow reaches to the root of our human problem."<sup>6</sup>

Silence is the midwife of solitude. "Solitude: everything in our culture mitigates against it, from the first prerequisite of the ability to stay in one room, to overcoming the culture's horror vacui, the terror of space or time that is not filled up and overflowing, whether it is our plate at the restaurant, our clothes cupboard, our shelf of spiritual books or, most terrifying of all, interior solitude."<sup>7</sup>

"When you pray, go into your room, shut the door..."<sup>8</sup> The evangelists testify to Jesus' silence: before his family, remaining in Jerusalem as a boy; holding his breath under the muddy Jordan waters, awaiting the voice; in the terror of wilderness; in his penetrating gaze at Peter and others; before the accusers of 'the woman taken in adultery'; before Pilate; on the cross; in the tomb; in his sudden appearing behind locked doors.

From silence emerges our true relation to God. The real problem with all our words is that they objectify God: "So long as in our prayer we continue to think and feel, to treat God as 'in relation to ourselves', it is certain that we have not yet entered into the innermost 'mansion' of the Interior Castle... Those whose aim is God never stop short at anything whatever that is thought or felt, no matter how exalted or uplifting it may seem to be. God is beyond."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:7

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:7

<sup>3</sup> Fr Herbert Kelly SSM

<sup>4</sup> Hans Kung

<sup>5</sup> John Main, *Word into Silence*, New York: Continuum, 2006, p7.

<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert*, Oxford: Medio Media, 2003, p45.

<sup>7</sup> Maggie Ross, *Pillars of Flame: Power, Priesthood, and Spiritual Maturity*, New York: Church Publishing, 2007, p90.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 6:6

<sup>9</sup> Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006, p81.

In silence before the God who is Beyond, we are as those “having nothing, and yet possessing everything”.<sup>10</sup> Silence is analogous not only to solitude, but also to darkness: “It is in the depths of darkness – recognizing that we shall never master or understand what God is like – that enlightenment comes.”<sup>11</sup>

In the context of Lent’s 40 days, then, the prophet’s call for a ‘fast’ is the call to silence before the Holy Mystery – the God who is beyond, who is deep and dazzling darkness – that we may “return to [the Lord] with all our heart”.<sup>12</sup>

So, returning to the initial question, what is prayer? One of my early spiritual teachers described it this way: ‘Prayer is not so much getting what I want; as becoming who God wants me to be’. Rowan Williams wrote: “Prayer, more and more, is not something *we* do, but what we are *letting* God do in us”.<sup>13</sup>

Lenten prayer is a pilgrimage: of becoming who God desires us to be; letting God do God’s will in us. Receiving the ashes a sign of our willingness and desire in this regard.

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<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:10

<sup>11</sup> Rowan Williams, **Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer**, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, pp73-74.

<sup>12</sup> Joel 2:12-13

<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, **Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer**, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, p78.