



Worth Conference: Abbot Victor Farwell on Prayer

On 10th March 1971, Abbot Victor Farwell gave this talk on prayer as one of the groundbreaking Worth Conferences which examined the implications of the Second Vatican Council. When people arrived as visitors to the Lay Community, this paper was given to them as an introduction to prayer in the tradition of Worth and of its mother house Downside. 50 years later this paper has lost none of its freshness or relevance and so we offer it as part of the LCSB50 celebrations, and also as an encouragement to daily private prayer.

When I rashly agreed to give a paper in this series, on prayer, I very speedily had second thoughts about taking it on. However, I failed to convince the Conference Committee that it would be wiser to find an expert on the subject, so naturally I accepted their decision, but with some misgivings.

Now in the course of a conference on prayer, one can only give a general outline of procedure on the subject. There are no universally valid techniques for prayer, so what I have to say about it will naturally develop along lines that I have found helpful, in the hope that something, somewhere, will be said that is comforting or encouraging for you: for this is what we all want. My paper this evening is about the need we all have in our busy lives to *know* God and *know* human beings: the sort of knowledge that comes through practice, experience and contact, and not from books.

If the spiritual tradition of the Church is unambiguous about anything at all, it is unambiguous about the central place of personal prayer in Christian living. But in these days of renewal and of views expressed on the importance of the liturgy, there is a danger, I think, of being carried away on the tide of it. I mean, with so much emphasis on making the liturgy a corporate form of worship capable of being understood and performed by all of us, people do sometimes make the mistake of regarding prayer as merely a selfish devotion, an extra, quite optional and not really necessary. But of course private prayer was never intended to be a substitute for the liturgy, but it will always remain a means, the most powerful means at our disposal of developing within ourselves a religious sensibility.

No doubt we have all read the earnest admonitions of the spiritual experts, that there can be no real sanctity without systematic private prayer: we have all heard the same urgent warnings. So it isn't that we aren't intellectually convinced of the need for prayer, it's just that everything about it seems difficult. We are dismayed perhaps by the vast literature on the subject, by the notion of prayer as a 'science' or an 'art'. And I suppose it is for this reason that we are apt to be unreasonably gloomy and defeatist on the subject. However, I hope that what I have to say to you this evening will dispel some of these erroneous ideas.



Prayer, we are told, is 'the lifting up of the mind and heart to God'. Now although many people only turn to prayer in times of crisis or distress, I think that it is true to say that all of us in varying degrees have a deep felt need for it, which is perhaps the reason why so often in the scriptures, art and literature, we find a castle or watch-tower perched high on a hill is used as a symbol for something for which man is seeking, even though he cannot give a very clear explanation for it. You remember in the Old Testament it is on a mountain that the prophet seeks to see God: how in the Gospel Christ speaks of a city set on a hill, and how he himself goes up into a mountain to pray.

The lesson for us is surely this. We live in the world of pressures: we know from experience how easy it is in the very busy lives we lead to be submerged in the practical material things of this life, the daily succession of superficial cares, pleasures and pains. From time to time we badly need the stillness and freshness of the mountain air, to be still in soul in God's presence. The temptation is always to live on the surface of life: to be so concerned with the necessary jobs and mundane things of everyday life, that we forget, or don't bother much, about what lies beneath it all. We take comfort from the old adage "that to work is to pray", but however important, unselfish or worthwhile the activity may be, action should be in us the overflow and expression of prayer, not the substitute for it. That is why the most active saints, who never seemed to have a quiet moment, still found time and the need for prayer. So how much more does this apply to us in the hard-pressed lives that we lead?

If we are prepared to take prayer seriously, we shall begin to get to *know* God and not merely *about* Him: to be aware of Him, to live with Him and in Him. We shall begin to understand what love is, what life is: we shall come to see people and things in a new warmth and richer life.

So bearing this point in mind, it is important first to consider our relationship with other people. This is sometimes referred to as the horizontal dimension of prayer, and its counterpart, in the spiritual geometry, the vertical dimension, is our relationship towards God. In other words, one cannot develop towards God by growing away from other human beings; in fact, the exact opposite is true. I can only have a proper and generous attitude to God if I have an unreserved and generous attitude and love for people. Mind you, this is not easy: many of us find it difficult to communicate unreservedly, because it means breaking down all sorts of barriers within ourselves, and sometimes of shyness and reserve. It means that we have to be open to people and not shut up within ourselves. And even deeper than this, it means that we must be willing to spend a lot of time on other people. So often we prefer to remain uncommitted, to stay apart, fearing to get too involved because of the limitless possibilities of being used. We tend to be prepared to put ourselves completely at the service of those we like, and only to others provided that we can be sure of disentangling ourselves if it is going to take up too much of our time. But if we are selfish in our attitude to those with whom we live, and whom we meet, then we shall have little chance of getting away from ourselves and moving towards God. This is common sense, really; but we do also have St. John's word for it. You remember that the theme



of his first Epistle is that our love of the invisible God is judged and tested by our love of our all too visible and tangible neighbour.

Now we come to the actual practice of prayer, the vertical dimension, if you like, in our relationship to God. Two questions need to be considered. What method are we going to use, and how shall we go about it? Abbot Chapman tells us quite simply to pray as you can and not as you can't. And there is a lot of sense in that remark. It is important to remember that it is for each of us to choose the method best suited to our temperament. After all, everyone has his own personality: there are no two of us the same. So it is with prayer: there are no two souls who have quite the same way of talking to God. I suppose the answer in a nutshell is the sort of approach which is an easy personal relationship with God: not an abstract categorizing knowledge, but a warm living engagement of the heart, as between two persons who love each other very much. We may not have a great deal to say, but we just want to be in each other's company.

When we were young, we were taught the usual manner of discursive prayer. In this prayer by 'discourse' we made acts of faith, love, contrition, praise, and gratitude and so forth. But then as time goes on, we reach the point when vocal prayer, meditation and the like, seem to be too unreal and unsatisfying. The need for thoughts and words come to an end: my reason tells me no more about God, my imagination has completely run dry. But surely this is an encouraging sign and means that we are getting closer to God. Unknowingly we have been establishing terms of intimacy with Him and the necessity of expressing ourselves the whole time in words or in meditation is no longer helpful or necessary. In the same way as we treat our own family or intimate friends: we don't make end-less conversation the whole time: we are at ease in one another's company and don't need to keep up a barrage of pointless trivialities.

So the kind of prayer which should follow on as a development from methodical meditation is the prayer of simplicity, of simple regard, or 'naked intent unto God' as the 'Cloud of Unknowing' so aptly describes it. It implies that our prayer has reached the stage of treating God as a Person in our life, and so we will behave in prayer as we do with intimate friends, or those we love: remaining silent before God, listening rather than speaking, looking rather than imagining, loving rather than thinking discursively. You can call this prayer what you like, contemplation or simple regard; the important point is that it is a step forward in personal relationship with God. Meditative prayer is really only knowledge *about* God, knowing about Him indirectly by considering what has been said about Him. But simple prayer is *knowing* God, the personal communication that exists between two people who know each other very well. It implies direct contact. It is knowing Him in person, not considering ideas about Him.

So it is natural that prayer begins to take this form: that we simply hold ourselves in an attitude of waiting on something inexplicable. It's a receptive attitude: a silent waiting on God, my share being that I am ready to trust myself to Him entirely, letting acts come if they do, without



forcing them, calmly, simply, unmeaning and unfelt. Abbot Chapman says "the time of prayer is passed in an act of wanting God. It is an idiotic state and feels like the complete waste of time until it gradually becomes more vivid." "The strangest phenomenon is", he says, "that we begin to wonder if we are addressing anyone, or merely repeating mechanically a formula we do not mean." It used to be thought that this simple form of prayer was an exceptional kind, open only to a few, not to be aimed at by many. Without going into considerable theological literature on this matter, let me just say two things. *Firstly*, it is surely quite against God's plan that only a few of those who frequent the Sacraments And want to follow Him with all their hearts, should be admitted to an intimate form of converse with Him. *Secondly*, I am sure, from my own experience, that anyone who is in earnest can be led to this simple prayer, if given plenty of encouragement and provided they find that meditation no longer helps them. The exception is to find someone who remains at the rudimentary stage of methodical meditation, when faithfulness to prayer is much more likely to lead him beyond it.

And, you know, there is no doubt that if your whole relationship to God in prayer is contemplative, it is admirably suited to leading a spiritual life in the world. You can live close to God without any of the props and aids what meditative spirituality requires. If you do not allow your prayer to progress beyond the level of imagination and discourse, you will need external aids like silence, the right atmosphere. If, on the other hand, you develop your prayer life in the way I suggest, it goes on the whole time in the midst of the cares and anxieties and rush of the modern world.

So what do you have to do? Simply this: you have to make up your mind that every day you will spend a little time (at least a quarter of an hour to begin with) being with God, being aware of Him. You try to make yourself quite quiet: and then perhaps as a starter, with the help of some book, the psalms, or some passages from the Scriptures, to make God very real, you think a little about Him: you can praise and thank and love and be sorry and put yourself in His hands. I always find it helpful to use such a simple scheme as that provided by the word A.C.T.S. Namely: *Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving, Supplication*. In that order because we should adore and thank God before we ask, as the Church does in the Mass. There is no need to keep rigidly to such a scheme as this, but you may find it useful to begin your prayer. For instance, there is no hurry or need to complete the programme the word Acts outlines, if you find yourself perfectly happy to remain in quiet adoration or contrition at any particular time you give to prayer. Some people find they don't need any reading as a preliminary but repeat slowly some little phrase which for them is full of meaning and brings them close to God. Or possibly some do not need any words at all: they can just be conscious of God and send their love out to Him and receive back from Him immense strength in return: and that is the best way of all.

Mind you, I am not saying that the time doesn't come when we have to face difficulty and suffering, when you will begin to doubt whether this is real prayer. But I still say that doesn't matter. You haven't yet got used to your new approach to God. You have been accustomed to



getting into contact with God by word or thought, but now it is not so much me going to God, but God coming to me.

Yes, this is the painful part of this stage of prayer. For instance, we may have a great desire to pray, a need for it, but when we go to our prayer, we find it doesn't work, or at least not to our satisfaction. It is as if God brings us to His feet and when we get there, He leaves us alone. Yet the odd thing is (and I am sure this is the test as to whether our prayer is genuine) when that time of frustration is over, we look back at it with a vague sort of pleasure, almost contentment and even look forward to the next occasion with a sense of pleasure, although we know it will be more than likely as dry as dust. I always find it comforting to remember that even the great mystic St. Teresa admitted that when she prayed, she often shook her hourglass to make the sands pass through more quickly.

But then sometimes, on rare occasions, I suppose realising our weakness and the difficulty we have of keeping up an effort for so long, God seems to give us a slight touch when we are completely still in His presence. It is difficult to describe what happens, only that it is a real consolation of God to us. Abbot Chapman calls this experience "flashes of the infinite" when he says, "for an instant a conception passes like lightning, of reality, of eternity leaving an impression that the world is dust and ashes." But we know from all the spiritual writers that we mustn't count on this. If we want consolation, sensible feelings, then we are thinking about our own satisfaction, and prayer is intended as an unselfing, of getting closer to God.

The longer, then, we can remain simply and contentedly in His presence so much the better. Maybe we are doing nothing much to believe in God and love Him, but the time is being very well spent in His eyes even though we don't elicit one illuminating thought. The French peasant who asked what was going on when he sat praying before the tabernacle and replied "I look at Him, and He looks at me", had evidently got the secret of it.

I think St John of the Cross gives excellent and encouraging advice, which is worthwhile considering as a guide in prayer, and is never out of date.

He gives two rules

1. Don't force yourself. 2. Don't hold yourself back.

This means that we should be absolutely natural, keeping ourselves in the Presence of God and being quite content to stay there. "In rest and quiet", he says, "we make great advancement, but it is sad to see those souls who instead of leaving themselves to the love and protection of God, hinder Him rather by their indiscreet behaviour and resistance."

But you may say "this prayer is not for me. I feel so empty and dry and distracted: everything seems to be running backwards and forwards through my mind." But I still say, just sit there and repeat "My God, I love you," or "Be merciful to me, a sinner", or some other phrase that appeals to you. You may feel a perfect fool, but that doesn't matter a bit. It's grace we are



needing during the day, not our own feeble human efforts and resolutions, and we don't want to encroach on the time we are giving to God by cramming it up with our own activity. But St John of the Cross answers that question far better than I can, and with much more authority. He says, "though they may have scruples that they are wasting time, and it may be better for them to do some other good work, seeing that in prayer they become hopeless: yet let them be patient with themselves and remain quiet, for what they are uneasy about is their own satisfaction and liberty of spirit."

So if any of you have been suffering from the feeling "it is no good praying like that", I say, hold on to it and be like St Peter, "Lord, Thou knowest that I love you." Even if we feel completely cut off from God, we know we are in His presence so we can still rest in it. If prayer ceases to be restful and becomes a burden, it is not what God intended. After all He told us that if we go to Him weary and heavy burdened He will give us rest. And you know, the difference one sees in people when they persevere in that sort of prayer is remarkable. God seems to grow into them in spite of their weakness: and though they never know it themselves, they have an amazing influence and calming effect over others; they seem to send out waves of spiritual power to all who meet them.

Distractions are inevitable, and I think we tend to make far too much fuss about them. But I would like to point out three things and urge them very strongly. *First*, my distractions may not satisfy me, but it does not follow that they are displeasing to God. *Secondly*, a prayer that I find distracted and from which I get little pleasure is thoroughly unselfish. To pray at all is an excellent thing: to go on praying in spite of the constant effort to control distractions is most pleasing to God, for the "Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." *Thirdly*, if we expect to have distractions we shall run less risk of being discouraged by them. The things that distract us are usually things which are weighing on our minds: and goodness knows all of us have enough of those. I always find it helps when outside the time of prayer, to try to cultivate an awareness of God's presence. I mean, to get into the habit of referring the details of your life with all its problems to Him. It won't be easy at first when so many engrossing occupations and worries tax our energies and crowd in from all quarters: and some of you may think I am being impractical and idealistic to suggest this to you. Yet St Paul tells us "We must be alive to God through Jesus Christ Our Lord" that "we must pray without ceasing", and these words were addressed to all Christians without distinction. Obviously I am not suggesting that we are expected to think directly of God all the time. What I am saying is, that if the awareness of God, this openness to Him is always at the very centre of our mind during the day: not as something forced or unnatural, but as a perfectly normal approach and way of keeping in touch with God, then when we go to pray there is no need to fight against distractions, but rather admit them: speak to God about them if you like, and so turn them into prayer instead of distractions from prayer: and then, their insistence temporarily satisfied (and blessed by God incidentally) one can turn quietly aside to other thoughts.



A further point I ought to stress and which I haven't yet mentioned, namely, the prayer of petition. Our Lord taught us to pray, and petition is included in the lesson He gave us, to minimise its importance is to run the risk of not obtaining what we badly need. Not only is it right that we should lay all our desires before God, and pray for others, but Christ tells us, "If you ask the Father anything in My Name He will give it to you. And as all blessings come to us from God, so it may well be that God waits for us to ask before giving us what we need: if we do not receive it could be our own fault for failing to ask, or to ask with sufficient fervour. I can never understand why some people complain they don't get answers to their prayers. Don't you find, as I do, that God always says 'Yes' or 'No' to one's requests? So petitions should always be made for all our needs, natural or supernatural, briefly, simply, humbly and with readiness to accept Gods' decision regarding what we ask. The trouble with us is that we think we know what is good for us and our prayer of petition tends to be like that which was attributed, rather unfairly perhaps, to the Calvinists, "Lord, grant that I may always be right, for Thou knowest I am hard to turn."

Finally, I must briefly mention the importance of spiritual reading. I think it was de Caussade who said, "if you have half an hour for prayer, it is better to give a quarter of an hour to spiritual reading and a quarter of an hour to prayer." Yes, reading about God is very necessary to ensure that our thoughts do not wear thin. But one of the problems is to make a choice of book that is really going to help us. And here we have to be careful. There are so many empty and even harmful books that have been written, so much sentimental and unbalanced hagiography going under the name of spiritual reading. There is no reason why we should put up with fifth rate. If you have particular favourites and they really help you, then don't hesitate to go back to the same ones. After all, it doesn't matter how limited our list may be so long as we find something we can digest for our good and which is helpful to prayer. And I think that word 'digest' gives the key to the whole method of spiritual reading. Like food, we must digest what we read, and therefore only read what agrees with our needs, whether it is the Scriptures, the masters of the spiritual life, or for a lighter diet, well written lives of saints.

Prayer, then, is really a very simple affair, so simple that only those who have learnt simplicity will understand its true meaning and value. "Unless you become as little children you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven": there the point is made. We have to learn from them, learn the art of being single minded in our prayer even though it may take a lifetime to achieve. Once we get down to persist in prayer as part of our day, the evaluation of ourselves will grow more realistic, and also will my peace of mind increase. It is one of the quite remarkable rewards God gives back to us - a deep calm in mind and soul. I shall find more satisfaction in my work, more happiness in my day. Progressively, I shall find more of God in my activities. Someone said, and I think it was Tennyson, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of". And this is exactly true: decisions and problems are startlingly easier to make and solve, and the strange thing is, that once we get into the habit of praying (rather like smoking) it is difficult to give up,



and one feels completely lost without it. Abbot Chapman used to say, "The less you pray the worse it goes." Conversely, one can say, "The more you pray the better it goes."

But prayer is not intended to be an easy hobby, all the masters assure us of that: in fact, it involves a lot of courage, a great deal of perseverance and patience. Nor is prayer something odd and unhealthy for dreamers: no, men of prayer are realists, they know what they have to do, and they are going to do it, and nothing under the sun will stop them. Prayer is something we all ought to do to the limit of our capacity if we are to be fully alive to St Peter's words when he reminds us "That we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, God's own people." Our Lord told us that "Many are called but few are chosen." We might well apply that to prayer - few are chosen because few want to be chosen at the cost that is asked of us.

Much of what I have said this evening may be very obvious to you. If I have said anything new, I hope I have not sounded too dogmatic about it, because if there is one thing one learns in practising prayer it is that one knows very little, and of that very little one has only an incomplete mastery, as you will discover, when I try to answer your questions. The only thing I am certain about is that we must be careful to be very human and very open with each other and with God. If we approach each individual as an absolutely unique and lovable person, then we can be sure that God will become real to us, and that we shall get very close to Him in prayer. That, after all, is all that matters.