

Prayer as Four Ways of Looking

by Damian Lundy, FSC

It may help to regard the way I spend prayer time as four ways of looking: looking in, looking back, looking forward, looking out. Let us examine each of these.

Looking in

To look in is to contemplate my personal experiences. It may sound too introspective, too self-centred, nothing more than a form of navel-gazing; but this is to regard the activity too negatively. There is in each of us a need to get in touch with our deeper selves, to tear off the masks we wear to impress others, to fool ourselves or to protect our vulnerability. We can learn to love ourselves and to accept ourselves as we are, when we start to appreciate God's love for us, his dear children, made and restored in his own image. I must not be afraid to invite Jesus to make himself at home in my heart, however flawed or 'scruffy' it may be.

Sometimes I am ashamed, regretful, anxious, depressed, unclean: or in a sceptical, ironic, critical spirit, disillusioned and doubtful, aware only of the pockets of atheism in my life (to quote a phrase of G.W.Hughes, SJ) which disillusion and scare me, threatening like black holes to suck in and destroy all that is good and living in myself. At other times, I may be awed by the sense of God's power, presence, love; or simply worn down and exhausted by the tedium and boredom of my everyday existence. But, especially when I am in a negative mood, I must look bravely into the real me, pray as I am, not as I would like to be. I have spent some time dwelling on these negative feelings because they constitute a big obstacle to many people in my experience who, having lost their childlike faith and practices, feel they would like to start praying again but wonder where to start. Start right where you are, I suggest – there is no better, indeed no other place. If you feel this type of prayer is for you, you will find that it offers new ways into the powerful poetry of the Psalms and other Wisdom literature of the Bible as well as into anguish and longings of many of the prophets, like Jeremiah. It can also be a way into once familiar, now discarded devotional practices which you abandoned as childish, stale or superficial. Try exploring again, with new eyes, the different moods and mysteries of human life presented in the Rosary's meditations on the lives of Jesus, his mother and the Early Church; or the different stages of Jesus' own painful way to the Father in the Stations of the Cross.

These are, of course, simple ways of praying the gospels. And I can see my needs spelt out boldly in the pages of the New Testament, when I read this with fresh eyes, sensitively and honestly, looking for Jesus and looking for myself. What does Jesus give? And what does he take away? Who is he?

John 20 shows the risen Jesus meeting with his disillusioned followers: with Mary Magalene in the garden, as she looks for a missing corpse in the empty tomb and does not recognise the living Lord – he takes away her grief and gives her joy, not just for herself but for others: 'Go and tell my brothers....' Then unexpectedly he visits his disciples, locked in the upper room for fear, which he takes away and gives them peace, the power of his Spirit, which they must pass on to others, as they go out to forgive sins instead of staying locked up in themselves, retaining the sins he came to take away and now relies on them to take away; and, eight days later, to the unbelieving Thomas, Jesus comes, taking away doubt, giving a new faith which the Fourth Gospel expresses as its climax: 'My Lord and my God'.

I offer these as examples of what can happen when, using the gospel as a light, I look into myself and offer hospitality to Jesus, inviting him to look in, to enter under my roof. Jesus' most notable gift is that of healing, so I can pray, 'Heal me, Lord Jesus, in the symptoms and in the causes'. Then I can just be quiet and let the Spirit of Jesus move over my life, move into every part of me, conscious and unconscious, renewing and strengthening me, changing me, enlightening me, being the salvation of all my relationships, all my emotions and intentions, all my thoughts and actions, my omissions and my words, whether or not I can remember or own them.

Looking back

Often he will bring these to mind in prayer. Memory plays a key role in the experience of personal prayer, as it does in all forms of celebration and liturgy: 'Do this in memory of me'. In looking back (the second of my four categories) I need not always concentrate on the negative experiences of my life, on the neglect and failure which afflict me. I have much to be thankful for, when I look back into my childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and see the faces of friends and relatives, and re-visit the places and times when I have known joy and peace, where I have been loved and appreciated. This kind of prayer is another exploration of inner space; it involves looking back gratefully, becoming a child again.

A wonderful image of a person at prayer in this mood is given in Psalm 131, which became real for me as the theme psalm of a retreat I made in 1982: Enough for me, keep my soul tranquil and quiet, Like a child in its mother's arms, As content as a child that has been weaned.

Once again I pray this now, looking back over my retreat notes and recalling two more scripture references: Isaiah 30:15 For this says the Lord Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel: Your salvation lay in conversion and tranquillity, Your strength in complete trust; And you would have none of it. and Matthew 18:1-4: "So Jesus called a little child to him and set the child in front of them. Then he said: 'Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'". And I might also have difficulty entering not only the kingdom of heaven, but the classroom or the living-room or street – wherever children are. Personally, I prefer to pray at night, at the end of the day, sometimes setting off on a journey with Jesus to explore the landscape of my day, peopled with characters and situations and events I may have barely thought about but which are now a part of me. It can take a few minutes; it can take half an hour or more; it is a more positive and open alternative to the 'examination of conscience' familiar from childhood. I can invite Jesus to lead me, by the power of his Spirit, to re-visit in my prayer the pattern of today, however blurred or confused, starting from the feelings I have as it draws to a close. I can ask that I learn from it as I offer it, unfinished but authentically mine, to the Father through Jesus my brother. And I can look to tomorrow, praying that where the Lord leads I shall follow, more alert, more ready, more aware.

Looking forward

Looking forward is the obvious corollary to looking back. A favourite film of mine is Franco Zeffirelli's *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. In my room I have a poster of the open face of that film's Francis of Assisi, whose famous, difficult prayer is printed underneath: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' This is the prayer of hope and expectation, of searching and uncertainty, of openness to God's will. It presumes not just a readiness to ask the question, but a willingness to act on the response he may give, an answer which may be only very gradually discerned. This is a lifetime's work, which may cost more than I am prepared to give at this moment (or even dare to think), but it is also a task for each day, to be examined in my prayer, faced in God's presence, so that when he does call clearly, I will be ready to respond.

To pray a gospel passage like chapter 21 of John, one of the most beautiful resurrection stories, helps me see how in this unexpected meeting of Jesus with a group of his disciples, And in particular with Simon Peter, the different forms of looking back and forward are symbolically represented. Jesus sees his (former) disciples fishing. They have passed the whole night, wasted it, you might say, catching nothing. As the sun rises, there stands Jesus, unrecognised at the lakeside, calling out to the men in the boat, who at his word cast their net on the right side, and to their surprise take a great haul of fish. This unexpected delight is followed by the moment of recognition. 'It is the Lord!' cries the beloved disciple, and Peter dives into the water in a gesture of great enthusiasm. When the boat reaches the shore and the fish have been landed, Jesus invites his friends to come and have breakfast with him around the charcoal fire he has prepared. They know it is the Lord. In this very familiar and friendly scene, Jesus is revealed as the Lord of the unexpected, and of the present as well as the past. (The scene recalls other such meals shared with him.) But the near and painful past is also present like a shadow, symbolised (for Simon Peter at least) in that charcoal fire; for in John's Passion account Peter's denial of Jesus is set around just such a fire; at night. It is now the early morning of a new day, and the conversation between Jesus and Peter which follows breakfast is a sacrament of reconciliation: it involves looking back, as the threefold denial is recalled and forgiven in a threefold confession of love (rather than sin); it also involves looking forward; the change of job from

fisherman to shepherd of Jesus's 'little flock' will take Peter away from the familiar lake to a new and painful ministry, a call to follow Jesus.

And meeting with Jesus will involve some looking back and some examination of our relationship in whatever state it happens to be. And there will always be some looking forward. It happens without softness and sentimentality: always his acceptance of me as I am right now, and always a challenge to follow Jesus more faithfully and to live out a fuller, more costly relationship with him in the service of his people.

Looking out

One of the classic dimensions of prayer is intercession, a looking outwards in loving concern for others, bringing them to the Lord in my prayer, as Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus (Jn 1:41). Let me now remember especially the sick, the troubled, those with whom I have lost contact, those I have hurt, neglected, failed, wanted to help, those who have hurt me or caused me pain, those I need to forgive, those recommended to my prayer. I name them to the Lord in my prayer from time to time, asking him to come into their lives with his healing, reassuring love. I can do this on a bus, at work, whenever I have got a bit of time... doing the ironing, driving the car, walking along. St John Baptist De La Salle urged his first idealistic Brothers, who were trying to cope with the very difficult and awkward pupils they were attempting to educate, to pray very often for those students who proved most resistant to their efforts. This has the double effect, as any teacher who has prayed this way will tell you, of bringing the Lord's love in a mysterious way not only into their lives but also into mine, especially into my relationships with these people who so try my patience; my attitude to them will become more positive, more tolerant and forgiving, since it is bound to reflect the love and prayerful concern expressed in my intercession.

Sheila Cassidy, headline news after her experience of imprisonment and torture in Chile, has shown how I can pray through newspaper headlines or through the television news, as I watch it reflectively, making the appropriate response to God in these situations; anxiety, concern, gratitude, intercession.

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