

Prayer

Richard Dawson – Sunday, 29th May.

Adoration

There is a significant difference between praise and adoration. Praise expresses thanksgiving for what God has done. Adoration revels in who God is. Praise focuses on deeds, adoration focuses on character. Thus a prayer of adoration prays back to God who He is. For example, Daniel 9:4 says, "And I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, and said, 'O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him and with those who keep His commandments.'" God doesn't need to be reminded of who He is, but we do. It's for our benefit, not His. We need to remember that we have a great and awesome God who is faithful and merciful.

Confession

The word confession in Greek is the word *homologeō* which means "to say the same thing," or to agree or concur. When we confess we therefore "say the same thing as God." In this respect the scriptures provide us with a wonderful basis for confession since they represent the Word and as we pray them we confess. Confession does mean admitting our wrongdoing to God but it is more than this since it should also include agreeing with God about what is good and right and worthy.

To confess we need to lay aside our opinions and agree with God. We must give up all sense of self-justification, all blame, all excuse. In confession we begin always by agreeing with God. Confession should also involve a desire not to indulge in the activity one confesses again; in others words it should also involve **repentance**. Finally it should also involve restitution if need be. This may be as straight forward as an apology or as substantial as a paying back for something damaged, destroyed or stolen.

We confess largely so that we may see as God sees. Yes, confession is needed for reconciliation but its primary fruit is a healing of the mind since when we agree with God we are enabled to see as God sees and to understand and God understands and, eventually, to love as God loves.

Thanksgiving

We pray prayers of thanksgiving because we have so much to thank God for. Thanksgiving is a major theme of the Psalms of which 74 of the 150 are Praise and Thanksgiving related and 12 of those 74 are specifically devoted almost entirely to thanksgiving.

In 1 Thes 5 Paul says this...

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Thanksgiving then is meant to be a mark of faithful service – a sign of our faith in God. If we believe in a God who is gracious and loves all then our hearts should overflow with thanksgiving. And yet, somehow, they don't. Why not?

The easy answer is sin but I think we are also people of our time and culture. Though superficially our culture is one which teaches its people and its children to give thanks, if we scratch the surface we quickly find a people who are far more committed to competition than to commendation. We understand how to be accusers better than we understand how to acknowledge one another positively.

Thankfulness is, at base, a form of acknowledgment or, put another way, a form of confession. It is positive confession. When we thank God we are saying, in effect, 'You did this for men or for us; You are God; You exist and your nature is loving and gracious towards all You have created.' When we are thankful we open ourselves to seeing more of God because when we confess what we see we show that we are ready to see more.

Furthermore thanksgiving is a major element of our witness to God. As we give God thanks so we testify publicly to the One in whom we believe. Isaiah 12 says this...

**³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴And you will say in that day:
Give thanks to the LORD,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.
⁵ Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.**

This we open our heart to know more of God as we give thanks and we witness to who God is effectively when we give thanks.

Finally it would seem that right praise begins with thanksgiving. Thanks is a form of praise and indeed is the biblical way of beginning praise. Psalm 118 says this...

**¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.**

What is the gate which the righteous shall enter through? It is the gate of thanksgiving. Through thanksgiving we enter into the Presence of the Lord.

Prayer

Catherine Marshall, wife of Peter Marshall the great American preacher and chaplain for some years to Congress, and author of many many wonderful books on the Christian life once wrote **“One can believe intellectually in the efficacy of prayer and never do any praying.”** We preach prayer, read about prayer, leap for prayer in times of crisis but I really wonder whether we do **believe in prayer** if we don't pray. Belief is a central concept in the Bible and it is so for one simple reason. Our beliefs really do determine our actions. Most people don't leap out in

front of trucks deliberately quite simply because they **believe** that to do so will mean almost certain death. Most people take the elevator from the top of a multi-story building to get to the bottom rather than jumping. Why? Because they believe that to jump is to invite certain death in most cases. We act on our beliefs even when at times we involve ourselves in dangerous practices such as going to war because though we believe that this may involve death we have a higher belief in the need to protect our loved ones and our freedom. So when Christians don't pray it betrays something... **unbelief**. The truth is, when we don't pray we proclaim our disbelief in prayer **and** our belief in something else... and that something else is usually our own ability to procure what we're after whether for ourselves or for God. Our lack of prayer illustrates a principal very close to the one illustrated by G K Chesterton when he said this of the Christian faith...

"The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

For many of us prayer is so difficult it is left untried and there are two basic reasons why we find prayer – which on the face of it seems ridiculously easy –so difficult.

1. It is offensive because it doesn't lend itself to any means of self-aggrandisement.(glory)

Prayer is essentially offensive to the human ego. Because the structure of prayer is largely an appeal to someone else (God) anytime prayer is 'successful' there is never a direct connection between the pray-er and the answer. In other words, we can never really claim much merit even from answered prayer. And if we can't claim merit then we can't really gain anything in the way of personal gain from prayer. Prayer resists any attempt to commercialise it. Few people will pay for prayer though some might claim a kind of magic for their prayer this has never been well established in the Christian faith. Indeed the closest we might have come to this which was the paying of priests for absolution in the pre-reformation era was one of the things which gave rise to the reformation which totally rejected any idea of paying for heavenly favours through a priest.

Prayer is simply not self-serving and we who are inherently selfish find it, therefore, not to be attractive.

2. It is misunderstood since the connection between prayer and reality is never a linear one.

The connection between prayer and its answer is always a mystery. Answered prayer always requires faith to see the answer. We may discern a relationship between a prayer we have uttered and something that happens but to say that our prayer has been answered is always to call on faith since we cannot make a linear connection between our utterance and God's action. Yes we can say 'we prayed and this happened' but to then imply God's action is to go beyond what we've seen into a faith statement. God's acts may be said to reveal God but they do not expose God to human examination. God's revelation always contains a hiddenness which cannot be drawn back by human thought or action. In this sense, at least, God defies our rationality which is not to say that God is irrational – not in the least. It is only to say that God is the sole arbiter of God's own revelation – He remains in control of it – not we.

But we struggle with that which we cannot see or control. What we can see we can usually explain or control. We like to be in control. This is also why marriage is always a struggle for human beings. God has made each person sovereign to an extent which is, a reflection of the fact that we are made in the image of God. But marrying a sovereign person means that we must relate to someone who it is not intended that we should control and this can be problematic if we disagree or if we, for some reason, don't wish to live without control.

Prayer is not about control. Prayer is not about control – it is about relationship. Prayer is the engagement in a relationship with a God we cannot control. It is not simply God doing what we say. Rather it is us discovering what God is doing and wants to do both in us and in others. Prayer is an entering into the utterance of God – joining, if you like, the choir of God's prayer and beginning to sing as God sings. And God's choir is not quite like the

choirs we know of here on earth. God's choir can sing a multitude of songs all at once which, when they are sung as the great Choirmaster would have them sung, all fit together into the most wonderful harmony. In that harmony is included every spirit filled, faith defined prayer ever prayed and they all fit beautifully together in that choir.

Learning to pray is like learning to sing in a choir – it requires not only the ability to sing but also **the ability to listen**. As we contribute according to the will of the Father so we contribute to a beautiful song which changes things in the here and now. The funny thing is that often those of us who are good with linear relationships find prayer difficult or more difficult often than those of us who are more simple thinkers which illustrates that prayer is less an activity of the logical mind and more a relational skill which, with practice, we can pick up and become proficient at if we are prepared to practice.

It is high time we realised that the mission God calls us into is beyond our human ability to complete. Yes God does want to partner with us but the nature of that partnership is largely to seek God's action in and for a world that is so desperately needy. **Let us pray!**

Supplication/Intercession

The word supplication comes from the same root as the word 'supply' and so when we pray prayers of supplication we are praying about our supplies, our needs, our desires. Now some may have some problems talking about praying for our supplies and especially for our needs or desires but the scriptures have no problems here. Indeed we are encouraged to pray not only for our necessities but for our desires as well.

**⁴ Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 34)**

**¹⁹ He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;
he also hears their cry, and saves them. (Psalm 145)**

**²⁴ What the wicked dread will come upon them,
but the desire of the righteous will be granted. (Prov 10)**

**¹² Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life. (Prov 13)**

This, however, does not mean that our desires are all blessed by God. This is not a baptism of desire for God does not bless our desires when they are evil or dangerous. Desire must also be in accord with the will of God for it to be blessed but to desire something is not wrong in and of itself.

⁹ Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. (Eccles 11)

The truth is God loves for us to rely on Him and to bring to Him our prayers for ourselves and for others. Indeed, in many ways this defines the ministry of the Church and of Israel. We were and are meant to be intercessors for the world which God so loves. We were meant to bring to God the needs of the world in a living act of prayer when the world could not or would not pray for itself.

So we called then to pray on behalf of a suffering world both for their needs and for the root cause of their suffering which is that they refuse to know God. We are also called to enter into the answer to that prayer by incarnating the prayer through our self-giving sacrifice.