

Along the track

Does Prayer Make Any Difference?

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about prayer is just how consistently it has been part of human history and experience. It has been around for a very long time! The followers of Islam pray five times a day, shaping the lives of believers. Observant Jews pray three times a day and the weekly practice of Sabbath leaves room to enjoy God's presence. Most practising Christians at least begin and end their days with prayer and many gather together on a regular basis for communal prayer and worship. Non-theists like Buddhists also pray with great devotion. The famous Metta prayer of loving kindness ("May we all be well and happy") is designed to highlight the need to spread compassion. In heated moments of anger and frustration, even total non-believers cry out to or blame God!

It would seem that praying is in our bones. But is there any point to it? C.S. Lewis said while his wife was dying, "Prayer doesn't change God, prayer changes me" (at least Anthony Hopkins said so while portraying him in *Shadowlands*). While he may have a point, prayer has a much more profound influence on our lives than that. Prayer is much more than talking to God or simply asking God for something! At its most fundamental level, prayer flows from a recognition of what we might call 'the mystery of life' - that we live our lives with a deep need for some sense of the sacred, some sense of awe and wonder, that we are not the sole masters of our own destiny, that there is something greater than ourselves, a spiritual force or power beyond ourselves. Without such sense of the sacred, prayer can be empty ritual, divorced of any great meaning. Another 'secret' to understanding prayer is that prayer does not try to make God present to us, but rather when we pray we come to realise that God is already here, present in our lives and in this.

Secondly, prayer is one of the most significant acts that links human beings. Praying together with others is a great source of unity and harmony – we come together at a much more intimate and profound level. One of the great images of the Jubilee year in 2000 was the gathering of the leaders of all the World Religions at Assisi. Pope John Paul II was surrounded by the leaders of Christian and non-Christian religions, theist and non theist faiths. He returned to a theme he had written about years before:

Every authentic prayer is under the influence of the Spirit... We can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person, Christian or otherwise.

Pope John Paul II Address to the Roman Curia
Christmas 1986 after the World Day of Prayer for Peace
in Assisi

Shared prayer – especially between people of differing beliefs - can be very moving and a source of great harmony. Isn't it interesting, when those who lived in 'the old days' of the Church talk about those times, the ban on praying with members of other churches, or being forbidden to go to weddings or funerals or celebrations in those churches still rankles. It is still a source of hurt or anger or even shame. We still feel deprived that we could not be part of such a profound stage of peoples' lives.

We belong to what might be described as a 'communal faith', that is, we are called to gather as a community and to be a community that together explores what it means to be a follower of Jesus at this time and in this place. A vital part of that process is worshipping together, praying together, together bringing God to our own concerns and joys. It involves reflecting on the Gospels, meditating on the message of Jesus. Such prayer can often be completely wordless, it can be simply rejoicing in the presence of God. At other times such 'wordless prayer' can be a response to an experience or realisation of the awe and wonder of God. It can be a response to an image or reading from Scripture we have just heard or to the Spirit within during times when we feel a bit overcome or at a loss for words or direction:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Romans 8:26-27

When our prayer has no words, we don't ask for any particular thing to happen, we don't come with our agenda, our view of what ought to happen. Setting time aside to be in God's presence takes practice and dedication but it is arguably the most profound and intimate prayer of all. At times like these, surprising things can happen – a solution no-one thought of presents itself. Attitudes that seem set in stone begin to change. Is that God answering our prayers? Who knows!

Regards
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