

THE CHRISTIAN MINISTER AND HIS LIFE OF PRAYER

We publish this article, a paper from South Africa read by an Anglican religious, a member of the Society of the Sacred Mission—and a grateful reader of ‘The Life of the Spirit’—to a group of ministers of several christian allegiances. In reading it we are listening in, so to speak, to a private conversation between some of our separated brethren, themselves separated from each other. Their language is not altogether ours, nor can we make our own some of their assumptions, but we can recognize at least one thing that we share wholly with them, a faith in and love for Christ Our Lord and a desire to be his disciples. To realise this and apprehend it more clearly is to take at least one step forward towards the unity of all Christian men in the One, True Church.

THIS is a vast subject. I propose to ask St Paul to keep me in bounds, and I shall treat of this matter in the framework of his valediction in the second Epistle to the Corinthians, which itself has passed into a much used form of Christian prayer on the lips of ministers,

‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Ghost
be with you all.’

St Paul is deliberate in the order of his naming of the three Persons. *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ* implies all man’s need of re-adjustment, all the reconciling that the Father in his justice demanded, before man can approach God in prayer. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the favour he had in his human nature is the ground of prayer, and in that ground all who pray must be planted. This grace, embodied and personified in Jesus Christ, he says, hath appeared in the midst of all men, and, after the loving kindness and the humanity of God our Saviour appeared, not because of our own works of righteousness, but according to his tender mercy, he saved us. The first object of Christian prayer, for ministers and people, is to be related to the flesh-taking of our Lord Jesus Christ. To be clothed with Christ, even as Christ put on human nature, is the initial step of Christian prayer.

The putting on of Christ, the making of a new Creature, the sloughing off of the old Adam is the work of God in us. Its initial sign is the laver of regeneration, but it is the business of the Christian minister to relate himself and his people to the mystery of reconciliation which makes this regeneration possible for the sons of men. We must aim in our prayer to know Christ, and to be known of him. Man's faculties of prayer were bestowed and restored for that purpose. For the groundwork of such prayer the reading of Holy Scripture is indispensable, and first in order is the beginning of the Gospel of St Luke and then the other three evangelists. To browse in the rest of Holy Scripture before the clear facts of Christ's Incarnation and earthly life are known in the mind and felt in the heart, is for all but exceptional people, a waste of time. From St Luke's account of the Incarnation we may travel in prayer to the Synoptic narrative proper, and so to St John's exposition of that mystery in his Gospel. Thence we pass to the account of the extension of the incarnate life in the Acts, and the reflections on it in the Pauline epistles. Then the praying soul may well go back to the writings of the Old Covenant. You may think this over-elaborate as the basis of prayer. I do not think anything else is safe and sound; even the flashes of intuitive knowledge granted to mystics in prayer have subsequently to be confirmed and checked in the light of Gospel fact. Certainly Gospel fact cannot be dispensed with.

Such a knowing of Christ is to be reached in various ways. First I suppose comes the liturgical cycle; Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, the Paschal cycle, the Sundays after Trinity, wherein for Anglicans and Roman Catholics, as a matter of liturgical rule, the life of Christ is publicly enacted in Scripture reading and prayer. For those to whom it is ordered this is an excellent way, the spirit and object of it being knowledge and love for the person of Jesus, an active participation, minister and people, in the solemn and regular celebration of Christ's entry into and life in the world. Anglicans must so celebrate in regular company the yearly presentation of Christ among us that ministers and people may be rooted and grounded in knowledge and love of the fact and person. Certainly we can all turn our private prayer to this source, basing it on the Gospels and ultimately on the whole of holy Scripture; *as for me, I gave myself unto prayer.* Until ministers have begun so to pray they will not have the

faculty, being without the eyewitness experience of the Apostles, to proclaim the *Kerygma*, the Apostolic preaching on the Lord's life, death, and victory. Until we preach in the spirit and power of Peter on the day of Pentecost, our churches will be empty. Prayer of this sort is probably the answer to all our problems about preaching; *Contemplata aliis tradere*.^{*} The prime object of contemplation in public and private prayer is Emmanuel. Catholics believe that this sort of communion with the word made flesh is achieved sacramentally at Holy Communion. Wesley's hymns indicate that he endorsed and honoured this activity of prayer. Certainly we are enjoined, in receiving the Sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood, to feed on him in our hearts with thanksgiving, and, in a more ancient phrase we pray that what in the Sacrament we outwardly do take we may lay hold on with a pure mind, that from a temporal gift it may become an everlasting remedy. Such it seems, is the fundamental structure of prayer springing from and directed to the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. It has a sacramental centre, an extension equally sacramental in terms of Holy Scripture, it issues, for Anglicans in the liturgical cycle of the Church's year. I must conclude by looking briefly at one or two secondary ways of access. A love and reverence in prayer for the person of Jesus, his sacred infancy, his holy name, the persons and circumstances of his birth, especially Mary and Joseph, an attraction to him in his mercifulness summed up under the image of his Sacred Heart, all this is evangelical prayer and piety, and Christian ministers have revived the habit of popularising these by such visual aids as Nativity plays and tableaux, pictures, the Christmas crib, Christmas cards, carol services, cantatas; in the hands of a praying minister all these are important handmaids of evangelical prayer. The end of such prayer is the virtue of hope, a firmer grasping of the promises of Christ. It must issue in two things, missionary endeavour, and an insistence on social justice. If Christians would prayerfully apply the implications of the Incarnation to the social order out here the necessary revolution would be less distant, more desired, a leaven at work already in the lives of those who pray.

We pass in our survey of the Christian minister in his life of prayer to our second head; *the love of God*. Commenting on, and

* To hand over to others what you have turned over in mind and soul.

exhibiting this love, St John said that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all that believe on him should not perish, but have life everlasting. The culmination therefore of the Incarnation is the Atonement wrought in the Flesh and Blood of Christ on Calvary. If the Incarnation is the spring of Christian prayer, the Atonement is its activity; Calvary is, in the universal language of religion, a sacrifice. It is, we believe, the perfection and fulness of sacrifice in its intention, in its method, and in its achievement. Prayer which fails to take sacrifice into account is outside the run of human efforts at prayer, because it is outside the love of God. Sacrifice then is, in its many forms, man's universal gesture to a god from whom he is aware that he is parted; it is the making over of precious things in the hope that the gifts given will stand for the giver in the sight of the one who receives. The Christian hails Christ, not merely in terms of anthropological research, nor in the course of his biblical studies, but on his knees in prayer; he hails Christ as the final and perfect victim, the one true pure and acceptable sacrifice for all sins and for sin—a victim provided by a just and merciful God, yet a victim furnished externally in flesh and blood by David's lineage, brought to particularity in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Because Christ's reconciling work, his sacrifice, is acknowledged to be uniquely acceptable, plainly all reconciliation with the Godhead, which is the main effort of prayer, can only be effective in and through the Sacrifice of Christ. For the Christian minister, as for his people, at prayer, Calvary is absolutely central, and must be consciously realised and dwelt upon. The life of prayer must be grounded in the saving act of Christ, so that praying, I live, yet not I, but Christ in me, and our (prayer) life is hid with Christ in God. There may be many different ways, as regards details, in which we, the products of different traditions interpret the Lord's command about his redemptive work: *Do this in remembrance of me*, but it would be a great service to the effectiveness of our mutual prayer if we could confess that at the heart of it lies the intention to be identified with him offered for the sins of the whole world. Because the truth is so central and the matter so vital, this relationship of the Lord's Sacrifice to all prayer, we need not wonder that Eucharistic theology has been so much a concern of the evil one, and a battle ground of Christian consciences. Only prayer in union with Christ offered, the

daily concern of the Christian minister, can open our eyes to Jesus in the midst, and set us free, according to our several necessities, from a mechanical slickness of prescribed word and gesture or from, at the other extreme, an individualistic self-projection in prayer. The fact of Calvary as central to the prayer of the Christian minister is the antidote to every form of self-centredness in prayer and returns us continually to the person of Christ, in his nature and in his office, as to the one who prays for and in all who pray.

Our return in prayer to the Christ who prayed in his Passion must be made, and made not merely, as might seem to be the case with regard to the Incarnation, by way of meditation, and memory and searching of the Scriptures, but by means of an objective connection through the use of visible things. The essential element of sacrifice in prayer in the New Testament is connected with the bread and wine that Christ took in his holy and venerable hands on the night before he suffered, identifying it, in a mystery, with his own Body soon to be broken, and his blood soon to be shed. The element of sacrifice in the Old Testament too was bound up with visible things, the ram caught in a thicket, the various sacrificial animals and substances of the old law, the pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons, and connected, more remotely, with all the various victims of every sacrifice ever made, the first fruits, the prisoners of war, black bulls, virgins, all the unhappy expressions of man's fundamental instinct to make over to the deity things precious to him, with the intention that the victim received may stand in the eyes of the receiver for the one who has offered.

Christ offered, as Melchisedek had done, bread and wine. On the morrow he transcended that and gave his flesh and gave his blood. That he did once for all, but the sign of it, the offering of bread and wine, he ordered his associates to perpetuate; 'Do this', he said, 'in remembrance of me.' Certainly those who had been with him at the typical offering of bread and wine, and near him at the oblation on Calvary of his body and soul, were soon together again in the Cenacle at Jerusalem breaking the bread, and sharing the cup, proclaiming, said St Paul, the Lord's death till he come. The book of Acts talking of the pattern of life of Christ's followers at the time of Pentecost records their attachment to Christ's Incarnation, persevering in unanimity with Mary

the Mother of Jesus and with his Brethren; and their preaching and celebrating his saving work of redemption, persevering also in the Apostles' doctrine and the communication of the Breaking of Bread.

We who are many, the heirs of different traditions and the victims of many acts of disunion and separation, perform this command of the Lord's differently, with varying emphasis, at varying intervals. But the taking of the bread and the sharing of the cup to show the Lord's death till he come must not be allowed to be held as the point of our departure; certainly any hope of re-union can only lie in the eternal fact of Calvary, the thing that lies behind our common signs. The Eucharistic prayer of Christian ministers should direct them and their people to a desire for unity. The prayer of the commemoration of the Passion, whatever outward form it takes must unite us to the intentions of Christ.

The Communion of the Holy Ghost. The saving work of Christ is communicated by the Holy Ghost. This is the meaning of Pentecost, and this is what is proclaimed by the Apostolic preaching of Acts and the Epistles. The prayer of the Christian minister then, is achieved in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the fellowship, seen and unseen, of those who are joined together in one company by his operation. The fruit of Pentecost is to make men of one mind in an house, to apply to them the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, established by his flesh taking, to shed abroad the love of God in diverse hearts through the gift of the only Son, and to make Incarnation and Atonement operative in the hearts of men; in other words, to keep in function the Kingdom that Messiah proclaimed and established.

The Christian minister must never, in his prayer, lose sight of this great fact. Prayer is not primarily the communing of the individual soul with God, the flight of the alone to the alone, not a laborious method of self-improvement, not a detailed recital, like a shopping list, of particular needs, and particular persons. There is a place for these, but only in the light of the broad scheme of God's redemptive work into which we are placed by incorporation into Christ. The prayer of the Christian minister relates him to the body of Christ, of Christ who prayed on earth and prays in his members, and to the redemption wrought by Christ, which must operate as long as sin and separation

persist; redemption, in the prayer of the Christian minister is not a single final act, but a process once initiated which must go on till 'Thy Kingdom come'. It is unitive, it relates us with Christ, and with his company, saints and angels, spirits of just men made perfect, and with one another.

'Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.' (*St John*, xvii, 11.)

'Neither pray I for these alone' (his ministers), 'but for them also which shall believe on me through their word'. (v, 20.)

'That they all may be one: as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.' (v, 21.)

That is to say, that all may be gathered into one, that they may be brought to perfection in unity.

Such is the prayer of Christ for the unity of all men through his Incarnation and saving work.

The prayer of the Christian minister may not aim at anything less, and it leads to penance and hope.

It is good to examine the principles of prayer in this way. We shall have to accuse ourselves of much short-coming, of dwelling overmuch on details, side issues, irrelevancies of our own devising, both in public and private prayer, and in the ministry of the word, itself prayer. To redirect our attention to the Word made flesh, to be directed again to the saving cross of Christ, will bring us to a sense of our duty to enter into, to labour and pray for, the consummation of that unity for which Christ laboured and prayed among the sin divided nations of the world, bringing us and them under his most sweet yoke.

Has all this talk on the Christian minister and his life of prayer been so much theorising? It is not my business to make particular applications. But certainly here in South Africa the implications of Christian prayer as I have outlined them give Anglicans, for whom alone I may speak, plenty of room for self criticism.

Prayer centred on Christ's flesh-taking in a country ridden by theories of Apartheid and racial inequality makes our own personal attitude to the menace rather feeble, and our concessions to it quite blasphemous. But we can be so occupied with such a challenge that we can forget a deeper anomaly, that we come bearing Christ's gifts of unity and peace, and the pledges thereof, the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist,

as men divided from one another. On the sky line of the locations the roofs and towers of the various denominations print the signs of division and separation. I have no remedies to propose. But it might be well to remark the apparent lack of any prayer painfully and regularly undertaken, for the healing of the wounds of Christendom. Such an end however is the practical outcome of the Christian minister's prayer, if we examine it on the lines I have tried to sketch.

The Church to which I belong directs my prayer quite regularly to the re-union of Christendom. I am fortunate in having a Bishop who has asked all his ministers whenever they celebrate the breaking of bread to pray particularly for this end. But it would help me to know what other ministers are expected to do on such an important matter in their public and private prayers. I know that in Europe the communications of prayer between divided Churches, Roman Catholics and Anglicans, Orthodox and Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Calvinists, Anglicans and Methodists, have, in the past hundred years become deep and strong and hopeful. We should hope and pray that Christianity out here in the mission field may be so constrained by the same love of Christ.