

TRANSFIGURING PRAYER

The poem, 'I happened to be standing' by Mary Oliver

I don't know where prayers go.
 or what they do.
Do cats pray, while they sleep in the sun?
Does the opossum pray as it
 crosses the street?
The sunflowers? The old black oak
 growing older every year?
I know I can walk through the world,
 along the shore or under the trees,
With my mind filled with things
 of little importance, in full
self-attendance. A condition I can't really
 call being alive.
Is a prayer a gift, or a petition,
 or does it matter?
The sunflowers blaze, maybe that's their way.
Maybe the cats are sound asleep. Maybe not.

While I was thinking this I happened to be standing
just outside my door, with my notebook open,
which is the way I begin every morning.
Then a wren in the privet began to sing.
He was positively drenched in enthusiasm,
I don't know why. And yet, why not.
I wouldn't persuade you from whatever you believe
or whatever you don't. That's your business.
But I thought, of the wren's singing, what could this be
 if it isn't prayer?
So I just listened, my pen in the air.

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WHAT IS PRAYER?

Mary Oliver had no specific religious faith, but her poems speak to us of a spiritual life. Here, it is the singing of a bird which she describes as prayer.

As you will see from the leaflet given you this morning, our Lent theme this year at St Michael's is that very subject – **prayer**.

Christopher Jamison, Benedictine Monk and former Abbot of Worth, *describes it as 'the simple act of addressing God as 'you'.*

Except, it's not so simple is it?

Or if it is, it's the sheer *uncomplicatedness* that makes it difficult.

I am reminded of Archbishop Michael Ramsey who once said that he spent an hour every morning in silence – during which he spent 58 minutes *trying* to pray, and 2 minutes *actually* praying – but those 2 minutes were worth the effort.

We all think we know what prayer is, but the definition is slippery.

Bishop Lancelot Andrewes memorably called it the '*practice of the presence of God*'. And the priest-poet George Herbert had a plethora of names from '*heart in pilgrimage*', to '*heaven in ordinary*' and '*something understood*'.

How can something which is so simple have so many names and descriptions?

Abbot Christopher says the word 'prayer' has both a general and a specific meaning.

In *general* it includes all activity by which people raise their hearts and minds towards God.

But there is also the *specific* meaning of when we speak of saying 'a prayer'. In this meaning, prayer is a specific form of words addressing God - whether spoken out loud or said inwardly.

VARIETIES OF PRAYER

At my ordination a leader in the Church Times said, *'Pray or you're done for!'*. I have found this to be very true for me as a priest, but it is true for all of us as Christians.

Every Christian must pray, we know that, but different times call for different kinds of prayer, and everyone prays differently.

Our Lent preachers this year, will try to tease out the nature of four varieties of prayer, remembered by the acronym 'ACTS'.

The prayer of **adoration**, which is the prayer of praise. The prayer that asks nothing of God, but simply rejoices in who He is.

The prayer of **contrition**, seeking God's forgiveness for whatever faults or errors that get in the way of our relationship with Him and each other.

The prayer **thanksgiving**, in which we number our blessings and see how much He has already given us.

And the prayer of **supplication**, more often known as petition, which is what most of us immediately think of when we think of prayer. This is the prayer of bringing our needs and the needs of other before God, asking for his help.

All the while not forgetting the many other kinds of prayer – of silence, of reading the scriptures, of physical actions such as making the sign of the Cross. There are many *many* kinds of prayer.

Some prayer is spontaneous, natural and in our own words.

Others are ancient and inherited.

Some will prefer one or the other, but the reality is that we all need both.

We need to pray from the heart, but sometimes we need the words of others when we can't find the words to say.

So this Lent our Adult Sunday school looks at some of the most famous prayers of the Church: The Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Grace and the Glory be – and asks:

Where do they come from?

Why are they important?

Why do they mean?

TRASNSFIGURING THE MOMENT

For Mary Oliver, the song of a bird is a prayer that transforms, that transfigures a moment. An instance in daily life when another reality breaks through.

This is another definition of prayer, and we see it also in today's Gospel of the Transfiguration of Christ.

Each day I gaze upon the Transfiguration – not (I'm sorry to say) because of any great spiritual vision - but because it is depicted in the stained glass window opposite where I sit for Morning Prayer.

Around it is are scenes of the Resurrection, Pentecost and Christ as King in Heaven. It might seem odd to put the Transfiguration right in the centre, an event that most of us are hardly aware of, but this is exactly the position given to the transfiguration by Matthew, Mark and Luke in their respective Gospels. They place the event in a central position, roughly mid-way through their text. And this is not by accident.

They wish to say something about the central importance of this event.

It marks a transition, as the disciples come to realise something of who Jesus really is,

and it is after this event that Jesus moves with greater determination and haste towards his suffering and passion – which is why we hear it on this Sunday before the start of Lent.

The Transfiguration helps the disciples see Jesus for who he truly is.

And it is prayer, that transfigures our hearts and minds, helping us to see Jesus and know him as he is.

We might also wonder what Moses and Elijah are doing there.

In the Old Testament, mountain tops are places of divine encounter.

Moses met God when he entered the cloud on Mount Sinai, and Elijah encountered the Lord on Mount Carmel.

But note this: on Sinai, *only* Moses entered the cloud to meet God, and the people are left behind at the foot of the mountain.

But here the disciples accompany Christ to the mountain top and all of them enter into the Cloud.

Through Christ, all of us are brought into the mystery of God.

Now, all of us are invited to pray, and enter into the presence of God.

DO YOU WANT TO PRAY?

Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain – he led them, it's true, but they were *willing* to come.

In all honesty, the question each one of us must ask ourselves is this:

'Do I want to pray?'

We can write about prayer, talk about it, think about it, everything except actually pray.

There are tips and hints, varieties and types, but ultimately prayer is nothing more than the will to be with God.

It helps, maybe, if you remember that God wants to meet you even more than you want to meet him.

We all come to God with a tangled mass of motives and feelings – but we do not have to be bright or pure, or filled with faith or anything else. You don't have to be 'good enough' or 'spiritual' to pray – you just have to want to do it.

If you have this desire, then God will come to you.

If you won't venture up the mountain he cannot do anything for you, but if you take one step up the mountain ... Christ will lead you the rest of the way.

A bird still start to sing

And you will see God's glory.