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THE ART OF BIBLICAL PRAYER

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For Ellie

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Introduction

A biblical scholar is not the best-qualified person to write on the subject of prayer. I have ventured to do so for two reasons. First, as a result of a call by the Bishop of Sheffield for the churches of his diocese to hold special prayers during the period from Ascension to Whitsun 2010, I have preached, and continue to preach, a series of sermons on prayer and the Lord's Prayer at Beauchief Abbey. I wanted the congregation to be able to read the substance of what I have said in these sermons. Because the material in the chapters has originated in sermons, a popular form of address will be found in some sections.

Second, although I pray almost every day, I do not regard myself as particularly good at prayer (whatever 'good' means in this context). When I read books about prayer by experts, I feel that they belong to a different world from me. I feel that there is a need for a book about prayer by someone who is not very good at it. Perhaps such a book will help others who are not very good at it. I have also tried to deal honestly with questions that arise from the theory and practice of prayer. If there are aspects of inadequate coverage (for example, I have not dealt with worship as a separate subject), that must be put down to my inadequate grasp of the subject. At the very least, my friends in the congregation at Beauchief Abbey will have the opportunity to read and reflect on what I have said over several months.

Miss Mary Hodge has read a draft of the book and has made many helpful comments and suggestions. I am most grateful to her.

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What is prayer?

'Prayer' is a word that is used in a number of different ways. For many people it means essentially petition or intercession. When we say, 'I'll remember you in my prayers,' we mean something like, 'I'll ask God to bless/heal/support you.' Understood in this way, prayer easily becomes an 'extra' – something that is not essential to Christianity, but something that some Christians do sometimes, as the need arises, when they are not in church. Later on in this book there will be a chapter on intercessory or petitionary prayer; but for the moment it will be argued that prayer should be understood as inseparable from Christianity in the sense that to practise Christianity is to practise prayer and vice versa. How can this be?

In his *Reality and Prayer*, J. B. Magee writes that 'prayer is a gift of God and a work of his grace'.[1] This quotation will be the driving force behind much that follows in these pages. In the first place it puts a question-mark against the idea that prayer is primarily petition or intercession. In these latter activities it is *we* who take the initiative in bringing our concerns before God, not God who gives us something through which grace is worked. The way in which I want to spell out how prayer can be thought of as a divine gift is by comparing it with a special language.

I do not have in mind a foreign language, but the language that has to be learned if a person is to become a specialist in

[1] J. B. Magee, *Reality and Prayer*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958, p. 40.

a particular trade, profession or creative sphere. My father, who studied at night school to become a carpenter and joiner, and for whom I spent many hours as a boy holding, fetching and carrying items, taught me terms such as architrave (the moulded rectangular frame round a door or window), nogging (brickwork set within a frame) and tenon (a protruding piece of wood to be inserted into a mortice, a mortice being a specially cut cavity). A niece of mine who is studying dentistry uses a formidable array of technical terms in her written course work.

It is important to stress here that I am not talking about something that is intellectual and elitist. Unfortunately, when it comes to Christian faith, there seems to be a presumption in the Church not only that it would be too much to expect 'ordinary people' to master any distinctive concepts fundamental to Christianity, but also that this would be undesirable in principle. It is true that while Dietrich Bonhoeffer was detained by the Nazis in prison in 1944, he wrestled with the question of whether it was possible to formulate a version of Christianity that did not require any distinctive theological concepts and thus a special type of Christian language; but it is doubtful whether this, if possible, would be any more likely to succeed than an interpretation of, say, Islam, that avoided any mention of the Qur'an, Muhammad or the pilgrimage to Mecca.[2] Bonhoeffer was probably criticizing 'religion' in the sense of a set of widely held beliefs deemed both inside and outside the churches to be an essential part of Christianity. I would

[2] See D. Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1951, p. 179; ET *Letters and Papers from Prison*, London: SCM Press, 1953, pp. 122–3. Bonhoeffer considered the possibility of a non-theological interpretation of Christianity, which has often been (mis)represented in English as 'religionless Christianity'. See further the essays by P. Selby, 'Christianity in a World Come of Age' and G. B. Kelly, 'Prayer and Action for Justice: Bonhoeffer's Spirituality' in J. W. de Grouchy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 226–45 and 246–68.

agree with his criticisms. When I speak of a distinctive language of Christianity and prayer, I have something else in mind.

I have in mind a particular way of looking at the world. That way is best arrived at, in my opinion, by considering some of the best-known parables of Jesus. These are stories that are easily remembered and which express an understanding of the world that is challenging and inspiring. I begin with the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin in Luke 15.1–10.[3] These 'Parables of Human Instinct', as Oliver Quick called them, set out from human feelings. We have all temporarily lost something at some time in our lives – keys, watches, mobile telephones, books – and we have had feelings of frustration and loss out of all proportion to the fact that we had *not* lost the overwhelmingly vast remainder of our possessions. Again, the joy and relief of finding a lost object, when we do so, is out of all proportion to its insignificance as a part of our possessions; yet we want to tell others that we have found what was lost, and want them to share our joy.

In the two parables exactly this same thing is described. The shepherd forgets that he has 99 sheep that are safely in his care, and goes after the one lost sheep because he feels somehow incomplete without it. He may even put the safety of the 99 at risk, but in such situations instinct can overrule calculation. When he finds the lost sheep he is overjoyed and calls on his friends and neighbours to share this joy. Precisely what the woman has lost is disputed by the commentators. Was it a coin from a kind of necklace that was her insurance against her husband divorcing her? Was it part of scarce savings? Was it a comparatively valueless object? It makes no difference to the parable. People can feel as incomplete and frustrated over the loss of a trivial item as over the loss of a valuable one. Whether

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[3] The interpretation of these parables offered here is indebted to O. C. Quick, *The Realism of Christ's Parables*, London: SCM Press, 1937, pp. 29–32.

valuable or not, the lost item causes the woman to search exhaustively in the house, and when she finds the coin she calls on her friends and neighbours to rejoice with her. At the end of each story Jesus used these human emotions to describe what happens in heaven in connection with human behaviour. There is more joy in heaven (a possible way of saying 'God', observing Jewish conventions about treating the word 'God' with respect) over one sinner who repents than over 99 who do not need to do so. Similarly, in the case of the Lost Coin, there is joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Quick draws out the implications of this memorably:

> 'You belong to God', he [Jesus] seems to say, 'you are in fact his property, his children. Can you suppose that men care more about their property and their own children than God cares about his? Can you believe that he implanted these instincts of ownership and parental affection in man's soul, and that they are not dim reflections of something infinitely more glorious in himself?'[4]

The realization that our best human instincts may also be a clue to God's concern for us may, for some, be a starting-point for Christian faith. It is certainly fundamental to the way of understanding the world that affects the language of prayer.

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11–32) is different from the two parables that precede it, in that some human instincts are shown not to be clues to the nature of God. The elder brother no doubt sums up what many people would instinctively do if they were in his position, and I have known people to be deeply offended by what they perceive, not unreasonably, to be the unfairness of the parable: that the wasteful, good-for-nothing son seems to finish up better off than the

[4] Quick, *Realism*, p. 34.

hard-working son who was loyal to his father. In actual fact the parable clearly marks out the difference between a world that is based on strict justice and what is deserved, and one that takes seriously the implications of repentance and forgiveness. The elder son represents justice and what is deserved, but cannot bring himself to forgive his brother. This inability to forgive would have been bad news for the prodigal if he had been met on his return not by his father but by his brother. Light is shed on the saying of Jesus that if we cannot forgive others, God cannot forgive us (see Matthew 6.14–15). The father's reaction in welcoming home his wayward son seems to create injustice and to overlook loyalty, but they are necessary if the prodigal is to become what he had ceased to be, namely a son in his father's house. Two theological technical terms are implicit in the father's treatment of the returning son: justification and sanctification. Justification in the parable means that the broken relationship between father and son has been restored, and restored by the undeserved mercy extended by the father to the son. Sanctification means that the son has returned to the one place where he can become a loyal son once more; where he can turn his back on the 'loose living' that had devoured his fortune, and be remade because of his father's mercy and love.

A fourth parable that is relevant to this chapter is that of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20.1–16). Much light has been shed on this story by recent research into the social and economic background to the New Testament.[5] This has explained why the owner of the vineyard did not employ sufficient workers at the beginning of the day, but visited the market place on four occasions, the latest being one hour before the end of the working day. Workers engaged

[5] L. Schottroff, 'Die Güte Gottes und die Solidarität von Menschen: Das Gleichnis von den Arbeitern im Weinberg' in L. Schottroff, *Befreiungserfahrungen: Studien zur Sozialgeschichte des Neuen Testaments*, Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1990, pp. 36–56.

later than the beginning of the day were entirely at the mercy of any employer as to what he would pay them (see Matthew 20.4). An unscrupulous employer could keep his wage bill down by employing few workers at the beginning of the day for the agreed daily wage, and more workers later in the day for much less than the daily rate. In the parable, the owner of the vineyard pays the agreed daily wage to all the workers, whether they worked for twelve hours or for one hour. This naturally causes resentment on the part of those who worked for twelve hours, but the employer seems to have been mindful of the fact that it cannot have been pleasant for men with dependants to support to have stood idle in the market place all day hoping that someone might give them work. The parable shows that in the kind of world in which we live, generosity that is intended to do something about the injustices that people suffer, will itself create injustice for anyone with no room for compassion.

A particular view of the world begins to emerge from a consideration of these parables. It is a world in which justice and what people strictly deserve have to be tempered by forgiveness, mercy and generosity. Where this is done, it becomes possible for people to find their way back from the many equivalents of the riotous living in the far country, to the welcome and healing of the father's house. It gives hope to people who would otherwise have no hope. The parables outline the alternative: the equivalent of the repentant son being turned away from the door; the exploited workers going back empty-handed to hungry families. But this world epitomized by hope and compassion is not simply one that could be thought of and endorsed by sensitive humanists; it appeals to human instincts to look beyond human hopes and aspirations to a divine order that itself can be thought of in terms of longings for restoration and wholeness. It is this fact that links this view of the world to prayer. Prayer can have many definitions, but whatever else it means, it is about uniting human hopes for a better world

with the divine dimension to which the human experience of losing and finding points. It is within that union of human hope and divine reassurance that the special language of prayer emerges, and enables people to express their hopes and aspirations. Some of these special items of language have been mentioned. It is time to mention them again and to define them more closely. I shall discuss forgiveness, grace, mercy, repentance, justification and sanctification.

Forgiveness is not about forgetting the past; it is about handling the past creatively. An unforgiven past can become like a festering wound in the memory of an individual or group. It can enable the past to dominate the present and future as old grievances are continually given fresh life and enabled to nourish feelings of bitterness. Forgiveness is not a matter of forgetting about past wrongs of injustice. Where possible it is about putting them right. It may involve the admission that wrong was on both sides, not merely one side. Forgiveness is about overcoming evil with good. It is not about using the word 'sorry' as though it were a truce word whose mere utterance cancels out any responsibility there might be for the damaging of a relationship. Forgiveness is always the more difficult option. It is easier to let the past blight the present and future than to rob the past of its power to cast a shadow over the present. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the elder brother is unable to forget the past; the father does not forget it either, but ensures that it does not prevent the returning son from beginning a new life.

Grace is a free gift offered by the giver without any intention or expectation that any obligation should thereby be created. If someone says to another, 'Because I have given you this and that, I expect you to be loyal to me and respect me,' then whatever else was being exercised in the giving, it was not grace. This can be illustrated by the elder brother in the parable. No doubt he had the right to expect his father's gratitude. But to the extent that he expected his father's gratitude,

his service was not an act of grace even though it was undoubtedly praiseworthy. Grace therefore has about it an element of irrational and exorbitant generosity, but this is what gives it the potentiality to transform lives and situations.

Mercy is closely allied to grace and forgiveness in that it sees the limitation of justice in a world that is shot through with structural unfairness and the maintenance of double standards. The owner of the vineyard in the parable is merciful in the sense that he sees the limitations of the economic rules that apply to day labourers and the powerful advantage that these rules give to employers. He deliberately does not apply the rules. The mercy of God means, among other things, that God sees the shortcomings and dilemmas in terms of which people have to live out their lives and passes upon them a judgement that is sensitive to these factors.

Repentance is often wrongly understood in terms of the Greek word *metanoia*, which means to change one's mind, as opposed to the Hebrew concept of *t'shuvah*, which means 'turning' or 'returning'. The Hebrew verb *shuv* is simple and graphic. It means 'turn' or 'return', the underlying idea being that someone is going along a false or dangerous path and needs to turn back or to turn onto a better path. It has to do with acting, not merely thinking. In the parable the prodigal certainly changed his mind; but more importantly, he retraced his steps and returned to his father's house. This was costly. There was not only the uncertainty of how his father or brother would react, but also the shame that he would feel when he met those who had known him. Suppose his father *had* made him one of his hired servants (cf. Luke 15.19)? If forgiveness and grace are costly, so is true repentance.

Justification is a word that comes in the letters of Paul (see Romans 3.26). It means that a person who in no way deserves to be accepted by God (the whole human race) is, against all the odds, in fact accepted. The word has legal overtones, and these have led to discussions about how guilty individuals can

fulfil the just demands of God's laws and the penalties for breaking them. This, in turn, has led to theories about the death of Christ fulfilling the demands of the law on behalf of repentant sinners. The view taken here is that such an approach is hard to reconcile with the teaching of the parables discussed in this chapter. The father does not require anything to be made good or any penalty to be paid before he can welcome the returning prodigal as his son. Similarly, the parables about losing and finding point to a great longing on the part of God to accept those who repent. In the spirit of these parables, justification will be understood here as what happened when the father ran, embraced and kissed the returning prodigal. Against all the odds, a person who did not deserve to be accepted, was accepted.

Sanctification is another term from the letters of Paul (see 1 Corinthians 1.30), and refers to the process of becoming holy, in the sense of learning to live for God and for others rather than only for the self. In the parable of the Prodigal Son it is what we can presume happened to the prodigal once he had returned home. He was in the best situation to begin a new life of loyalty and service.

Some readers may be surprised at the terms that have been chosen for this description of the language of prayer. They may wonder what has happened to terms such as adoration, confession and praise. These are words that clearly have to do with prayer; but from the point of view that will be followed in this book they are secondary rather than primary terms. The terms that have been chosen and defined are intended to establish a framework or view of reality within which activities such as confession and adoration (which will be addressed in later chapters) are, or can be, carried out. This framework derives from the view of God that has been extracted from the parables that have been discussed. It is a framework that is different from a hard-nosed competitive world-view, where the weakest goes to the wall and 'knocking heads together' and