



## Prayer as Communion

An address for the Cosmic Mass ● 8<sup>th</sup> February 2009 ● Rev Robert

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*

*"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."*

*John 15:1-13*

*I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.*

*We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one.*

*And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.*

*1 John 5:13-15, 19-20*

### Visiting New Delhi

Over the summer holidays both Richard and I found ourselves absorbed in reading novels set in India. Richard read *Shantaram*, and I'm still finishing Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*. Richard was so inspired that he'd like to visit India. For me, memories have been rising up of the trip Louise and I made across India in 1998, on our way to meet up with Antoinette and Richard Mills in Calcutta before heading north together to celebrate the Cosmic Mass with Paramahansa Satyananda Saraswati and the swamis.

Louise and I began our travels in New Delhi. And one of my favourite experiences in Delhi, the one that has stayed with me most clearly and strongly over the years, is a visit we made to Birla House. This was where Mahatma Gandhi spent the final months of his life, and this

once stately home is now a museum dedicated to his life and work. There's a small room towards the rear of the building which still contains Gandhi's simple sleeping mattress, the spinning wheel he used to spin cotton into thread and his round wire-rimmed spectacles.

When you exit into the garden beyond, there is a lawn embedded with terracotta tiles in the shape of small footprints and they lead across the lawn to a low, simple black marble column which marks the spot where Mahatma Gandhi was killed by the assassin's bullets. It is said that as he was dying, Gandhi's final words were: "He Ram!", "Oh, God!" - perhaps the simplest of all possible prayers anyone can offer at any moment in their life.

### **How Do We Pray?**

I'm struck by the simplicity and directness of Gandhi's prayerfulness. And it makes me wonder how it is that we pray. Are our prayers long, complicated, convoluted? Or are they simple, direct and to the point? Are we asking that things may be for us according to our wishes? Are we demanding, complaining? Or thankful for what has been given and what we can make of it?

The mystic Kahlil Gibran urges us: "You pray in your distress and in your need: would that you might pray also in the fullness of your joy and in your days of abundance."

It interests me the role our hands play in the act of praying. If you announce, "Let us pray" in some gathering, people adjust their head and eyes – they also adjust their hands. And in formal or liturgical prayer, placement of the hands (one of our etheric sensory organs) has impact for the person praying and for those gathered with them in worship and devotion. Sometimes we see hands empty before us and begging to be filled. Sometimes, arms are fully extended heavenward demanding, pleading, hoping. Mario claimed at times to have shaken a clenched fist at the heavens in a prayer of rage or anger! And at other times, there is an openness, a balance, and a relaxed relationship with the spiritual worlds to be witnessed and experienced in the liturgical gesture and stance of prayer.

### **Prayer in John's Gospel**

The Fourth Evangelist, John, has an interesting perspective on prayer that he unfolds in his gospel and letters. John sees Christ's heavenly intercession for humanity as being the living core of prayer. For John, it is essential that we abide in Christ (Jn 6:56) by sharing his body and blood, and through this experience a living union with Christ like the union he images in the vine and branches (Jn 15:1-8). Within this living union it is possible to ask what we will, and it will be done (Jn 15:7). The organic union with Christ, depicted in the image of the vine and branches, implies our unity with Christ's will and purposes as a basis for prayer. The branch asks only what it is in the nature of the parent stock, the vine, to supply. In other places in John's Gospel this is expressed as prayer in Christ's name (Jn 14:13-14; 16:23).

Unlike the other gospels, in John's Gospel Jesus has no emergencies in which he prays. From what is reported in Mark, for example, it can be deduced that Jesus has a custom of praying in emergencies, before great decisions, and when he retires from the crowds and his disciples. In Mark's Gospel Jesus does not pray at his baptism, even though the heavens are opened to him and the voice of God is heard (Mk 1:9-11). Nor does he pray in the wilderness (Mk 1:12); nor at the transfiguration (Mk 9:2). And Jesus does not call on God for help to heal or to exorcise demons or to raise the dead (e.g. Mk 1:25, 31; 5:41).

Mark tells us that Jesus retired from Capernaum to pray before announcing his preaching tour (Mk 1:35-38), that he went alone to the hills to pray after feeding the multitude (Mk 6:46), that he prayed in Gethsemane before his arrest (Mk 14:36, 39), and that he prayed on the cross (Mk 15:34). The only prayers of Jesus which Mark records are those in Gethsemane (Mk 14:36) and from the cross (Mk 15:34). Mark's emphasis, then, is upon prayer in critical moments.

John's Gospel provides a markedly different perspective on Jesus' prayerfulness. In this Fourth Gospel, unlike in Mark, Jesus has no emergencies where he prays. Rather, Jesus gives thanks over the loaves and the fishes (Jn 6:11). He lifts his eyes in thanksgiving before raising Lazarus from the dead. John records no prayer in Gethsemane, unlike the other gospels. Nor any prayer by Jesus from the cross. In John, Jesus does not pray "Thy will be done" because his whole ministry has been an act of conformity to God's will. The Johannine picture is of a Christ who is at one with God and aware of his divine will and informed with his power.

Jesus' own life of prayer and concern for his disciples is summed up in one chapter of John – chapter 17, his prayer for the church. The essence of Jesus' prayer is that the oneness shared between himself and God may also be shared by the disciples with him and with one another. This prayer is grounded in communion, and it seeks communion. It is, perhaps, the pinnacle of biblical prayer. It is summed up in the reading I read to you earlier – 1 John 5:15-13 – which assures us that through our belief, knowledge and confidence in Christ, in whatever we ask according to the will of the Son of God we are heard and answered.

Prayer in John's Gospel then is about a living relationship with God through Christ. Prayer is an act of communion, in which we are aligned to the divine will. And as a consequence of this communion and the intimate relationship it establishes and sustains, we live and act with spiritual integrity and power.

### **Words John Uses for Prayer**

In the New Testament the word most frequently used for prayer is the Greek word *proseuchē* or *proseuchomai*, which particularly applies to "asking God" for something. It is a more religious term than the other frequently used New Testament word for prayer: *deomai*, which means "a request" or "to ask".

In John's Gospel neither *proseuchomai* nor *deomai* are used to denote prayer. Both these Greek words imply subordination – that a request is being made of someone superior or more powerful. This implied sense of subordination is not in keeping with the Johannine picture of Christ who is at one with the Father, aware of his will, and informed with his power. John mainly uses the Greek verb *aiteō* to denote prayer. *Aiteō* may be used of asking anyone – another human being or God – and it suggests intimacy of relationship with God. It carries something of the sense of a friendly conversation or chat between friends or colleagues.

Bill Hybels, in his book *Too Busy Not to Pray*, encourages us with the words: "God wants us ... to talk to him as to a friend or father – authentically, reverently, personally, earnestly."

The very language John uses reinforces the picture he presents of Christ and the Father in an intimate, living relationship; the image of prayer as an act of divine communion that permeates and extends through the whole of one's life, expression and action.

### **Gandhi and Rama Nama ... Ceaseless Prayer**

Mahatma Gandhi died uttering one of the names of God. One of his aides, a Mr V Kalyanam, tells us that Gandhi would often say, "I wish I could die with the name of Ram on my lips". Gandhi's final utterance, between the assassin's second and third bullets, was indeed an exclamation of one of the names of God: "He Ram!" "Oh, God!"

Gandhi was assassinated around 5.10pm on the evening of January 30, 1948 as he walked across the garden at the rear of Birla House. Gandhi was going to lead an ecumenical prayer meeting he had been conducting each evening for some days.

Writing in the month before he died (December 1947), as if in anticipation of his death, Gandhi wrote: "In the end it will be as Rama commands me. Thus I dance as He pulls the

strings. I am in his hands and so I am experiencing ineffable peace" (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 90:273).

Gandhi often expressed the desire to die with the words "He Ram!" on his lips, and in his last prayer meetings he often described "Rama Nama", or the constant invocation of the name of Ram, as the "best medicine". Gandhi had been taught the art of Rama Nama – we can perhaps equate this with what is described in Christian tradition as prayer without ceasing – in his childhood, although he lapsed from the practice of Rama Nama and did not return to it till later in his life when he began to engage in his various social and spiritual experiments. In the last few years of his life, Gandhi enthusiastically advocated the spiritual practice of Rama Nama to the wider public as an "unfailing remedy".

Gandhi was aware, though, that the practice of Rama Nama – repeating the name of God as a mantra – could easily be debased, becoming nothing more than a mere mechanical exercise. Gandhi always warned against uttering the name of Rama except as part of a process of self-realisation, or as an effort to call forth the divinity within oneself. Gandhi also recognised that human beings can become subject to weakness, and so he conceded that communion with God could in the beginning be "just lip repetition of his name even disturbed by impure thoughts. But ultimately what is on the lips will possess the heart" (M K Gandhi, *In Search of the Supreme*).

Gandhi even went so far as to liken Rama Nama to a "mathematical formula" suggesting that its impact and efficacy extended well beyond the individual who practised it to benefit society as a whole, transcending the barriers of space and time.

Eastern Orthodox Christians have long been praying a prayer called the "Jesus Prayer", or prayer without ceasing. The prayer itself goes like this: "Lord Jesus Christ" (while breathing in), "have mercy on me, a sinner" (while breathing out). This is done repeatedly until all is stilled within. As it is repeated, it often unconsciously reduces down to "Jesus" while breathing in and "mercy" while breathing out. If other things come to mind, leave them aside and return to the prayer. The Jesus Prayer grew out of Luke 18:13. You can see the obvious link with a prayer we are familiar with:

<i>Kyrie eleison</i>	(Lord have mercy)
<i>Christe eleison</i>	(Christ have mercy)
<i>Kyrie eleison</i>	(Lord have mercy)

Prayers that use breathing this way probably go far back in history, with early breath-prayers based on the refrains of the Psalms. They are brief, simple expressions of the longings of the heart, tied into the one thing you can't stop doing when in prayer: breathing.

The discipline of utilising such prayers works to cleanse and purify our astral levels. And the rhythmic nature of such prayers (breathing) helps to strengthen our etheric levels.

### **Prayer as Communion**

In each of these approaches to prayer – Gandhi and his Rama Nama, John's depiction of the prayerfulness of Christ, and the ceaseless Jesus Prayer of the Eastern Orthodox – prayer is seen as an act of communion. Prayer is an intimate, ongoing relationship with divinity – in the heavens and within the human heart.

Such prayer is transformative not only for the individual who engages in it, but also for the community in which they live and with which they interact. It brings forth new growth and fruitfulness – as depicted in John's image of the true vine.

John presents the prayer life of Christ and the intimacy of relationship with the Father which this establishes, sustains and makes manifest in this world as a model for what each one of us must create within ourselves in our individual journey to Christhood.

## Implications for Us in the Year of Prayer

What can we each draw from all of this that will assist us during 2009 – the Year of Prayer: Spiritual Practice and Sacred Service?

Prayer can be simple and direct. Martin Luther said: “The fewer the words the better the prayer.”

Prayer can be a friendly dialogue or chat with our spirit, our I AM, the Christ, God, the spiritual worlds ...

Prayer is not just something to fall back on in times of emergency or tragedy. True prayerfulness leads to an ongoing intimate relationship with the divine. True prayerfulness is also the outcome or expression of the ongoing nature of that relationship.

Prayer is an act of communion. And it leads to unity – within one’s being, between us and the spiritual worlds, and amongst us here in this world.

As Rev Antoinette said in her New Year reflection, prayer is:

*... an activity of the spiritual will, and the only means by which the knowledge of the head can become the experience of the heart. It purifies the astral and fills the etheric with spiritual substance. It is a selfless and sacrificial work and yet it strengthens the self and fills it with energy, power and understanding.*

We have witnessed the truth of this in the life and work of the evangelist John, and in Mahatma Gandhi and many other prayerful people down the ages. May we too so engage in a prayerful life of communion with the divine that our life and work may be filled with spiritual power and serve the purposes of Christ.

And may we remember the words of the mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg and make them a reality within our being:

*Prayer is naught else but a yearning of the soul ...  
when it is practised with the whole heart, it has great power.*

So shall it be.

**COLLECT PRAYER (Psalm 51:10-12)**

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from thy presence,  
and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of thy salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

In Christ's name:

So shall it be.

## PRAYER OF INTENTION

O mighty God,  
who sent the Christ into the body of Jesus  
and through this act made the world your own,  
we pray that you will receive  
that which we now offer to you,  
for this bread and wine are the embodiment  
of the precious life and power of your son.

Especially today we bring before you  
all those souls affected by the bush fires.

We offer and present to you  
all who have died and broken through the cycle of time  
into the boundlessness of eternity.  
May they be able to enjoy your presence  
in ever greater and clearer awareness,  
and prepare themselves for those lives  
which they must still live on this earth  
before they will be praising you  
in spirit and truth for evermore.

We offer and present to you  
all who have been burned and injured,  
those who are in need, sorrow, and pain.  
Renew your spirit, O Lord,  
in their physical and finer natures,  
and grant the joy of your presence  
to grow within them.

We offer and present to you  
the firefighters and emergency workers,  
those caring for the sick and dying,  
those who have been bereaved,  
those made homeless,  
all those affected in some way by the fires;  
may the power of your mighty spirit  
comfort and sustain them.

This we pray through Jesus Christ,  
your son, our Lord.

So shall it be.

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