 St Benedict South West 

**Prayer and Humility**

We have looked before at the idea of prayer being a kind of conversation, in which we listen to the Word of God, spoken in silence. We need to learn to focus on the Word, and quieten our distracted minds. But that is not the end of the story. Even if we manage to tame our stream of everyday, irrelevant distractions, there exist more subtle distractions of which we need to be aware.

When we are in normal conversation, we often want to persuade someone else round to our view. We may not be not saying it out loud to the other person, but it will be uppermost in our thoughts, and distracting us from listening to the other person. Even when we think we are really listening to someone, we are also considering what we are hearing, and preparing our response. We are comparing it to what we already think, and deciding whether what the other person is saying is right, whether it is worthwhile.

We might think that this is evidence that we are actually listening to the other person, but wouldn’t it be better to concentrate on simply listening to the other person, and fully understanding what they’re saying, before we start comparing it to what we think? It might be difficult to do this, because our minds work so fast, and we like to think that we can listen and assess at the same time. But, in reality, our act of critically assessing what the other person is saying is just another distraction. We would listen more fully if we stopped doing it.

Now that would be fair enough in a perfect world. However surely not everyone we listen to is speaking some great truth to us, to which we should listen with full attention? Sometimes we really do know best, and the other person just has it wrong. And if I do already know what is right, why take the time to sit there, listening without judgement?

There is some truth in that. We should not be endlessly open to persuasion, turning like a weathervane to the wind. Hopefully we do become wiser as we get older, and realise that a lot of the fashionable opinions we hear will not stand the test of time.

But the risk is that our minds will become closed, and we will only be willing to listen to people who support our view of the world. Truth can come from unexpected quarters, and so it remains important to really listen, to suspend judgement until we have made sure we fully understand what the other person is saying.

So real listening involves humility. We must listen with a willingness to learn something, even to be proved wrong. We should even be *pleased* when we are proved wrong, because discovering what is true outweighs pride every time.

This is the case in normal conversation. But when our conversation is prayer, and the other person is God, complete humility is required. Our relationship to God should be one of complete poverty of spirit. Awe, in the true sense of the word, is entirely appropriate. This is why we should remember the importance of approaching God in silence, with stillness of mind.

This is not to say that traditional, spoken prayers should be avoided, out of concern that they might give us a dangerously inadequate image of God. Said prayerfully and meditatively, they are an excellent way to start the silent conversation with God. They are a ‘way in’. But at some stage, as David Foster OSB points out in his very helpful book ‘Deep Calls to Deep’, we have to move from just *saying* prayers to *prayer*. Prayers are something you do in order to move to a state of attention, a deepening awareness of the spiritual reality of God. This is prayer itself.

So use of the Rosary, for example, or the Jesus Prayer, are excellent ways to make Christ the focus of your entire being – ‘prefer absolutely nothing to the love of Christ’, as the Rule says. But we must be willing to let them subside if God calls us into true silence. Prayer is a conversation, and we must allow God time and space to speak. We must not try to control the conversation, as we often do when speaking to other people. Know that all of your expectations of what you might encounter in the silence of the heart are, at best, inadequate. To pray without expectation of what you will receive is hard, but if the spiritual reality of God is beyond our limited knowledge, then all our hopes and expectations can just be more distractions. Be prepared to leave them at the door.

In Mark 1:40-45, Jesus stresses to people that they must not speak to others of what they have witnessed. Rowan Williams, in his short book ‘Finding God in Mark’, explains that Jesus did not want people to misunderstand what his early miracles meant. Only from the standpoint of the crucifixion and resurrection would those earlier miracles be properly understood (this is why in the Gospel of St John, he refers to the miracles as ‘signs’ - they point to something which has not yet arrived). If his followers tried to develop a full understanding of him too soon, they would risk not understanding the Cross when it finally came. Jesus was telling them that it was a case of ‘for your own good, keep quiet about this for now’.

We could take this advice in prayer. If we make up our minds too quickly about what God is trying to tell us, we will cease to listen with full attention in our time of prayer. Use whatever method of prayer you find most helpful - the Rosary, the Jesus Prayer, contemplating a crucifix - but do so with humility and poverty of spirit, being open to receive whatever may come.

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