



Priestly People

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*Without Prayer
there is
no salvation*

Biblical Images of Prayer: Exodus 2:23 – 3:12

Prayer, we learned in catechism, is a lifting of the mind and heart to God. The lifting of the mind and heart indicates an opening of our deepest self to a God whom we believe listens to the cry of our heart. There is an expectation that we will be attended to. Our cry, we believe, is important to the God to whom we open our heart and mind.

The most fundamental image we have of prayer is one of a dramatic dialogue being acted out on the stage of human history. We begin our understanding of prayer not by theological definitions or abstract propositions. We learn from the drama of a human struggle with political, social and religious tyranny. The encounter between Moses and the God of Israel is a paradigm of humanity's struggle to give meaning to life, to reach beyond the time bound, earth bound frontiers of human experience. Prayer, in our tradition, is not a mandate from without, but rather an imperative imprinted deep within our fleshed humanity. Our understanding of prayer arises from a dialogue between a people agonizing in their oppression and a God who self-reveals in a response of compassion and mercy that lifts the people to an unprecedented leap into freedom. From the depths of their misery and oppression they discover an inner power for self-direction, an autonomous existence under the sovereignty of their Lord in whose image they are made.

As we follow the drama, we discover that we are witnessing the unwrapping of a two sided revelation exposing to our view not only a new and startling image of God, but an equally astonishing new revelation of humanity. A fundamental principle of our Judea-Christian faith emerges: Divine self-revelation unwraps in the same process new dimensions of human reality. As God self-reveals with in the folds of the historical moment, so too is humanity led to probe deeper into a realization of what it means to be human, created in the Divine Image, endowed with godlike qualities urging themselves forward into human consciousness and historical action.

Our understanding of prayer is one that has its roots deep within the enfleshed human struggle to bring order and life to the chaos and darkness that surrounds us. As we eavesdrop on this unfolding drama between Moses and the God of Israel, we discover a God who is intimately engaged in the historical tensions and the unfolding struggles of a people who taste bitterly the failures and poverty of their human efforts to find meaning and understanding even within their darkest moments. As their bitterness flows over them we see them discover a long forgotten reality, a truth hidden deeply within the remote memory of the human

person. That is that the pain of the present predicament is in itself a reminder of their long forgotten dignity. Their natural longing for freedom is itself a reminder of a lost and forgotten space in their heart that will not allow them to rest content in their slavery.

As they cry out from the deep of their misery to their God, they, by that very cry coming from their heart, awaken to the possibility of freedom. Their suffering is transformed into energy, a fiercely focused drive for the freedom and dignity for which they have been created and without which they will not rest.

From our privileged vantage point, we discover something about what our faith tradition tells us of our own relationship with God. We plumb the depths of a theology of prayer and faith, life and action in a world that oftentimes appears to be just too much to bear; too confusing and chaotic; a world and a life that we oftentimes are tempted to despair making sense of. Is it any wonder that throughout human history we have succumbed to movements that seek to place God, salvation, peace and happiness beyond the frontiers of this life onto a realm of otherworldly spiritual bliss and carefree beatitude? There seems to be an innate desire to split reality into pieces. To separate spirit from matter, body from soul; God, heaven, bliss from time and earth. Our determination to tidy up reality into categories of good and bad, ugly and beautiful, sin and grace, prevents us from seeing life even in death; beauty in ugliness; hope where there is despair. We fail to see the possibility of grace in the ugliest sin; the saint in the worst sinner; and yes, the sinner in the greatest saint. The sad result is discouragement, despair, cynicism. As we gaze at the turmoil and chaos of the world around us, we are overwhelmed by the sheer immensity of the problems of our time. It is so tempting to seek the comfort and solace of the promise of a time and place removed from the pain and despair of the present.

As we peer into the meaning of the most fundamental image of humanity's relationship with God, we realize we are being turned, not away from the struggles of life, but squarely into it. There we find the God who redeems, who leads to freedom, not away from, but into and through the tears, the sin, the pain and the struggle of this fleshed existence. The drama of Moses and the Israelites presents us to a two sided tapestry revealing God and humanity mutually engaged in the creative and unfolding of human history. In this gutsy engagement of a reciprocal divine/human revelation we must come to grips with the stark and uncompromising fact that in our tradition God and humanity encounter one another in the blood, sweat, dust

and tears and sin of history. In the divine/human dialogue God is revealed, but so too is the lost and hidden aspect of humanity that makes us kin to the divine.

We bear deep within us the divine qualities of freedom, compassion and justice; in a word, Charity. Through these qualities we most fully realize our reciprocal relationship with God. As we pursue our natural and innate desire to experience meaning, to grapple with the mystery of our life, we encounter the presence of God living in and sharing our own fleshed life.

At the same time we uncover the hidden power of the truth of our own unrecognized and unrealized humanity created in the Divine Image, destined to live in union with God here, now. Our lives are ordained to give presence and redemptive action to God through our own godlike qualities of freedom, justice, and compassion. Charity sums up the reality of humanity and divinity coming together and living as one.

In this episode, Divine Compassion is revealed in redemptive action, and the drive for liberation and truth is revealed in the cry of the heart. This human struggle is the matrix from which divine revelation unfolds. As the divinity self-reveals through the endless "sending" of the divine word to redeem and call the heart of the people to God, deeper and deeper layers of the human heart are revealed as containing ever new possibilities of human potential. Human revelation and divine revelation are warp and woof of the fabric revealing the divine/ human enterprise evolving in ever greater and clearer detail throughout history.

In our individual lives the drama of the divine/ human enterprise continues. Each of us fits into the tapestry. Our lives enter into and become part of the drama. Our pain, our tears, become one with all the human tears, sweat, blood of people throughout history. As our hearts and minds are raised to God, so too are the tears and struggles of humankind.

Moses is the prototype person whose heart is filled with the pain of the people. The heart opened to the plight of the human struggle is the heart touched and empowered by God. Through the heart of Moses, God returned in power



to the people and broke the bonds of slavery.

When the human heart seeks to narcotize the pain of the search for meaning and order, to turn from human suffering and confusion, God is denied entrance into our affairs. The heart is denied the power of grace and comes increasingly closed in on its impoverished resources. When this happens on a social or cultural level, human affairs fall ever deeper into chaos and darkness. The situation becomes increasingly hopeless to our limited perceptions. The only solution is increased narcotizing behavior on the part of more and more persons.

The redemptive moment comes when the heart and mind are broken from their self-protective and counter protective stance of denial and avoidance. What has previously been a demoralizing and enervating stance now becomes transformed into new energy. Like Moses, the Prophets, we allow the Divine One to have the moment. In the surrender, Divine Power sweeps into the spaces of our broken heart. New possibility is glimpsed, courage is awakened, action is forthcoming and a new humanity is born.

Moses is our prototype. He is a threshold person imaging not only the power of God, but the power of the person united to God through a total surrender of mind and heart. Our image of prayer is, before all else, of a person immersed in, a realistic engagement with the historical moment; an honest assessment of one's impoverishment and a surrender in faith to a power beyond one's self-narcotizing efforts. True prayer is dynamic, re-creative empowerment plunging us deeply into our own center where we encounter the abyss of God's infinite power and ultimately into unprecedented and unpredictable prophetic action.

In each one of us, a new humanity awaits to be born. Each of us is a new possibility for all humanity. Prayer is the threshold through which we meet God and the true self-created in the Divine Image.

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