



# Priestly People

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*“May the Son of God who is formed in you grow strong and immense in you and become for you great gladness and exultation and perfect joy.”*

– BLESSED ISAAC OF STELLA, 12TH CENTURY CISTERCIAN ABBOT

# Biblical Images of Prayer

When we look beyond theology, form, ritual and law for an understanding of the practice of prayer, we discover that our Judea-Christian heritage conveys a deep and powerful experience of humanity's fundamental openness to the Divine and the Divine urge towards union with humanity. Properly understood, we might find the courage to say that prayer is our participation in the ongoing Kenosis of God's self-emptying love. Human history, the events of individual lives being realized and coming to fruition within history, is the arena within which this union- takes place. Prayer is a surrender to this most basic Divine/human imperative; a "yes" to our deeply felt need for union with the Divine; a "let it be" to the Divine overture to be united with us.

Abraham/ Sarah; Moses and the prophets; Mary and the Apostles, are the figures, their lives the models, through which we apprehend this mystery of Divine / human engagement realized through the cooperation of historical human lives. Each in their own way was confronting the mysteries, the imponderables surrounding and impinging upon their sense of meaning and purpose in the rush of historical events. Using these historical images as a base we come to an understanding of prayer and its function in our lives.

As so often happens in the religious realm, thoughtless, uncritical acceptance of theological Formulas or conventional expectations lead to mindless repetition and empty practice. This taxes our resources of time and



personal energy without a corresponding restoration. The practice of prayer becomes a mere vestige of truth, carried along on the crutch of compulsive adherence to law and formula or cultural religious conventions. Prayer becomes one more anxiety producing, guilt ridden burden imposed on an already anxious, guilt ridden existence. Under these circumstances, the practice of prayer often gives way to a self-justifying increase of enervating work in order to reduce guilt of not praying. This ploy allows one to maintain a vestige of religious propriety. "I am too busy..." "I am too tired..." "My people put too many demands on me..." "Becomes the litany of one who has lost contact with the life giving recreative energy of a personal encounter and relationship with the God who continually unfolds and deepens life.

Perhaps worse, the formalities of prayer can be co-opted into the service of our hungry ego seeking affirmation of a self-righteous virtue masking our unresolved inner emptiness. Even our God-given hunger for wholeness can be a trap when the ego is not drawn into a transforming and purifying relationship with the Word. Prayer can become a personal turf where one's ego reigns supreme, unassailable and impregnable to all outside interventions and influences.

The devastation of inauthentic prayer, or a prayer that dies under the weight of too many self imposed professional, cultural or ministerial "urgencies", prayer trivialized to the proportions of our limited perceptions, is incalculable. The human spirit instead of being energized by new possibilities, new visions, is narcotized. One is deluded into a false sense of security and well-being; a false sense of being right with God, even as relationships, compassion, a prophetic sense of justice, and zeal for ministry diminish and finally disappear. Ministry with all its tasks and responsibilities becomes routinized, and, like our prayer, co-opted by the ego. Prayer and public worship become conveniently organized and programmed into tidy spaces where they are allowed as little as possible to intrude into zones of personal comfort. Inauthentic prayer so anesthetizes the spirit that one can live wrapped in a false sense of personal security, encapsulated in a safe space where "god" and the individual dwell together in mutual admiration. Prayer, instead of being an opening of the mind and heart to God, becomes a series of self-serving rituals closing the mind and heart on themselves.

Ultimately the heart becomes sealed off, the mind closed, becoming one's personal kingdom, insulated from Divine as well as human intrusions.

The first universal and essential element of authentic prayer found in all our models is openness. To be open before

the mystery of the Divine is to accept an attitude that acknowledges our spiritual poverty. To open (raise) our mind and heart to God is to accept the reality of our limits and boundaries to our knowledge and understanding as well as our efforts.

To be open is to be receptive, vulnerable. It is to accept the possibility of a relationship with a Dynamic Other with all the possibilities for change that a dynamic relationship entails. There is an element of passivity, a willingness to be worked on, to be modified or changed. This attitude might not be conscious or fully articulated; however, all of our models were subsequently drawn into situations and tasks that they had not fully envisioned or willed. We are saying in effect that our defenses are down and we are open to receive more information that might cause us to change, to modify our present knowledge and behavior. In short, we open ourselves to become that which we had not previously thought we could become, to do that which we had not considered possible for us to do; e.g. Moses, Isaiah, the Prophets; Mary and the Apostles.

Our chosen models all shared a common willingness to listen, to move beyond previous perceived limitations. They were able to respond to alternative ways of acting in a given set of circumstances. They got in touch with deeper realities and new options, in circumstances that others had grown accustomed to and accepted as their lot. They did that which they would not have chosen to do; they went where they would not have chosen to go.

The soul of Mary of Nazareth exulted in the awareness that God's promise could and would be fulfilled in her. She intuited that because of the new life in her, the self-styled mighty with all their power would be toppled. Elizabeth's salutation to her should echo in our hearts saluting all who dare to believe that those promises made by God to his people can continue to be fulfilled in them. A person grounded in an understanding of God's desire to be one with us in prayer will not hesitate to proclaim with Mary: "The Lord has done great things in me". Through our prayer the Church, by means of individuals opening their hearts to God, continues to be the womb in which God takes on flesh and action in history.

In all of our biblical models we find examples of God's Word, eternally sent, finding fertile soil in hearts and minds opened to the Good News of new possibilities for humanity. The restoration of union of divinity with humanity re-establishes the law of Divine Wisdom as the guiding principle of the historical process. Our traditional formula of prayer properly understood describes a process through which our minds and hearts, all minds and hearts through the sweep of history, are drawn into a personal encounter with the living, creative power of God's Divine love poured out through the Word. The fruit of our prayer takes us



beyond ritual, law, formula, sacred times and places to a direct meeting with the Lord of all time and space. Through prayer our limited time and place is opened and filled with the eternal divine. We become our prayer. We become the temple suffused with God's presence. Our entire being becomes a manifestation of God's sovereign rule present in compassion, a thirst for justice, human energy invested in the building of the Kingdom. Prayer transforms the mind and heart so that our actions become sacramental actions mediating Divine Wisdom.

Throughout history the word continues to be sent into the darkness and void of our own chaos, the confusion of our unenlightened hearts to bring order, truth, beauty and harmony to our time and place. Again each of us is called in the tradition of Abraham/Sarah; Moses and the Prophets; Mary and the Apostles; the saints, mystics and prophets of our own time to be open before God. We are challenged to be still in the Divine presence, to attend and respond to the silent whisper of new possibilities even within the discouraging and disheartening confusion of our day.

Together as a community of prayer we are the womb through which the chaos and confusion of our world receives the seed of new life. Individually and corporately, we are a womb capable of being impregnated with new opportunity for the Divine Word to continue finding flesh. Prayer is a surrender of our lives to the Divine initiative seeking to take on the configuration of our body, mind and spirit to redeem and heal history, continuing the work that has been begun when God said: "Let there be..."

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