PRAYER AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

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Abstract: *This essay offers a theological reflection on James Torrance's hymn "I know not how to pray." It explores the notion that prayer is a learnt activity that is best undertaken with a "contemplative posture" and a commitment to "seek the mind of Christ." It concludes with a brief reflection on the possibilities for addressing God in prayer.*

I know not how to pray, O Lord,
so weak and frail am I.
Lord Jesus to Your outstretched arms
in love I daily fly:
For you have prayed for me.

Although I know not how to pray,
Your Spirit intercedes,
convincing me of pardoned sin;
for me in love He pleads
and teaches me to pray.[1]

Included in JB's legacy of published material is a hymn he penned around 1981 on a topic and activity that lay close to his heart: prayer. "I Know Not How To Pray" gives voice to an aspect of prayer that JB stressed repeatedly, based on his reading of the New Testament, namely that prayer, properly understood, is a Trinitarian event involving the mediation of Christ our High Priest and the activity of the Holy Spirit. As such, prayer is a learnt activity. Jesus taught his disciples to pray; and through the Holy Spirit he continues to teach his church how to pray.

1 Verses 1 and 4 of "I Know Not How To Pray," written by James B. Torrance and put to music by Christine Dieckmann, published in *A Passion For Christ* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1999), 53.

Over the course of his teaching career, JB wrote and spoke repeatedly on the subject of prayer and the priesthood of Christ. The purpose of this brief article is not to rehearse his arguments, which can be found in many publications, but rather to explore the liturgical implications of viewing prayer as a learnt activity. In a sense, this article represents the continuation of a conversation I had with JB in 1998 when I visited him in Edinburgh to talk about certain aspects of my own research on the subject of prayer and the priesthood of Christ.

Prayer as a learnt activity

JB's hymn stresses a fundamental truth about prayer, drawn from scripture, namely that we need to be taught how to pray, for we do not know how to pray as we ought. "Lord, teach us to pray," was a need voiced by Jesus' disciples,[2] and it has been a need of his church ever since. Making this the starting point of prayer counters a strong tendency in religious life for prayer to be regarded as just another form of self-expression, whereby *we* come before God in prayer to give *our* adoration, to express *our* needs and to voice *our* concerns. Whilst such prayers might be utterly sincere, reflect heartfelt devotion, and even be uttered in Jesus' name, they tend to lack any real sense of the mediatorial role of Christ and the enabling role of the Holy Spirit. As JB often pointed out, they constitute a Unitarian model of prayer, not a Trinitarian one. They are Pelagian rather than participatory. Such prayers are prone to being unnecessarily wordy and long-winded, especially when delivered extemporaneously. In such circumstances we would do well to heed the warning that Jesus gave to his disciples against heaping up empty phrases as the Gentiles of his day were prone to do.[3] Rambling stream-of-consciousness prayers have no place in public worship.

By way of contrast, it seems to me that a church which takes to heart the need to be taught how to pray is likely to do at least two things: adopt a contemplative posture and seek the mind of Christ.

Adopting a contemplative posture

"Be still and know that I am God," the Lord declares in Psalm 46.[4] Being still in the presence of the Lord necessarily involves slowing down and entering the sort of existential space wherein we might hear the same "still, small voice" that

2 Luke 11:1.

3 Matthew 6:7.

4 Psalm 46:10.

Elijah heard,[5] and take Mary's prayer of submission as our own: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."[6] Being still and receptive in this manner involves an embrace of holy silence, holy because it represents not the absence of noise but rather the presence of the Spirit. Such silence, Thomas Merton once declared, is the mother of speech:

Life and death, words and silence, are given us because of Christ. In Christ we die to the flesh and live to the spirit. In Him we die to illusion and live to truth. We speak to confess Him, and we are silent in order to meditate on Him and enter deeper into His silence, which is at once the silence of death and eternal life — the silence of Good Friday night and the peace of Easter morning.[7]

Directed silence is a time honoured liturgical tool in the church's endeavour to adopt a suitably contemplative posture in order to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church and to acknowledge that, in the church's weakness, the Spirit "intercedes with sighs too deep for words."[8]

Silence is not the only tool of course. Other things help instil in us a contemplative posture and a receptive spirit. They contribute to what we might call the aesthetics of worship, and include such things as architectural design, the physical layout and adornment of the worship space, and the liturgical use of ritual, music, gesture, movement, art, and symbol. Some of these forms will involve words, but many of them will engage us in non-verbal ways. These will vary from tradition to tradition, but one thing they will have in common is the ability to help us contemplate the holy, to convey a sense of mystery, to make deeper connections for us, to open up fresh lines of inquiry, and to somehow encourage us to consider things as they truly are in the sight of God, not simply as they appear to be to us.

Seeking the mind of Christ

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," Paul exhorted the church in Philippi.[9] Praying in the name of Christ necessarily involves discerning, as much as we are able, the mind of Christ, our brother in prayer, and to pray as he prompts us to pray. How will the church do this? I would suggest by prioritising four things: (1) Abiding in him whose prayer life the church shares by the power

5 1 Kings 19:12.

6 Luke 1:38.

7 Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Shambhala Publications, 1955), 274.

8 Romans 8:26.

9 Philippians 2:5.

of the Spirit; (2) Keeping the prayer that Jesus gave his disciples at the centre of the church's prayer life; (3) Allowing the scriptures to mould and inform the church's prayers; and (4) Drawing upon the church's own rich heritage of prayer.

Let us now reflect briefly on each of those aspects.

Abiding in Christ

The language of abiding in Christ is a striking feature of John's Gospel. As the Son abides in the Father so those whom the Son calls abide in him. How do they do this? By feeding upon him who is the very bread of life, for as Jesus declares: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."[10] The eucharistic connotations of this declaration are clear and go a long way toward explaining why the "breaking of the bread" or the Lord's Supper was so quickly established as a defining characteristic of early Christian worship.[11]

Many years later, in his *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ*, John Calvin used the language of "nourishment" and "participation" to describe the core purpose of the Lord's Supper: It is *nourishment* for the soul, preserving and strengthening, confirming and fortifying us in the promises of salvation and the benefits of Christ's death on the cross and, at the same time, delivering us from condemnation. And it is an essential means of *participation* in Christ's humanity and eternal life. Calvin brought together these notions of nourishment and participation in a simple declaration that "in order to have our life in Christ our souls must feed on his body and blood as their proper food."[12]

For many churches today, a rediscovery of the importance of abiding in Christ (and not merely following his example) will be bound up with a recovery of a robust sacramental theology and practice, especially in relation to the Lord's Supper. Such a recovery will be concerned not just for asking, "How often should the sacrament be celebrated?" but more importantly, "How do we see ourselves in relation to the sacrament?" Moving towards a more regular celebration of communion might be a good thing for many churches to do, but it will not in itself address the second question, which goes to the heart of our ecclesiology. What do we believe actually takes place around the Lord's Table?

10 John 6:51.

11 Cf. Acts 2:42.

12 Calvin, *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1540), section 13.

Is the Lord, through his Spirit, truly present? Do we believe, along with Calvin, that a real spiritual union with Christ occurs at his Table? And, do we see Word and Sacrament, pulpit and table, as being integrally related to one another in Christian life and worship?

Keeping the Lord's Prayer at the centre of the church's prayer life

When Jesus responded to his disciples' request to be taught how to pray, he didn't just give them a lesson on prayer; he gave them an actual prayer. Although the Matthean and Lukan versions of that prayer vary somewhat, there is a high degree of consistency between the two, and it is clear that the prayer formed the basis for subsequent catechetical instruction and liturgical recitation in the early church. It still has much to teach us, not least of which in relation to its form of address, its succinctness, and the nature of its petitions. Hallowing the Father's name, yearning for his Kingdom, relying on him for life's basic necessities, knowing we are forgiven and cultivating an ability to forgive others, confessing our vulnerability before the forces of trial and temptation – these are all core aspects of living the Kingdom-life and of understanding the mind of Christ. We pray according to his instruction, confident that this prayer has not only been given by him; it is fulfilled in him.

Allowing the scriptures to mould and inform the church's prayers

In Luke's account of the Emmaus journey (Luke 24), the risen Christ comes alongside two disciples, engages them in conversation about what they have heard but do not yet understand and, beginning with Moses and the prophets, proceeds to interpret himself to them through the scriptures. The church has long held up this story as a model for the ministry of the Word, but it can be applied equally to the task of liturgical preparation. Preachers and liturgists alike are called to approach scripture not for the purpose of analysing, mastering, applying, and appropriating a given text, but rather to indwell it and to listen for, and to convey, the voice of Christ through it. The ancient monastic practice of *Lectio Divina* encapsulates this approach. It consists of four phases of engagement (reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating), each of which is conducted in, with, and through Christ, the one to whom the scriptures bear ultimate witness and from whom they derive their deepest meaning.

Approached in this way, scripture becomes a fertile ground for prayer. It not only offers us a rich store of prayers, including of course the Psalms, but also many of its texts lend themselves to being given fresh liturgical expression through song, chant and prayer. The widespread appeal of the kind of meditative singing that is characteristic of the likes of the Taizé Community is indicative of the effectiveness of this form of liturgical engagement with scripture. Harold Best helpfully argues that "the prayers of Scripture should be studied and assimilated as our prayers, and we should learn to craft parallel prayers, using these as templates and using our best thought and best language."[13] And perhaps we should add, our best music.

Drawing upon the church's rich heritage of prayer

A church that takes seriously the need to be taught how to pray will look not just to the scriptures but also to the legacy of prayer bequeathed to it by the communion of saints, including mystics and theologians, pastors and poets, liturgists and intercessors. It will mine a range of liturgical traditions and compile a suitable repertoire of prayers, ancient and modern. It will thus draw upon the wisdom of the saints as it seeks the mind of Christ for its own time and place.

Behind this great heritage of prayer, of course, lie countless godly lives, from which we can learn much. Some of these folk will be celebrated heroes of faith, but others will be much closer to home, including parents and grandparents. Knowing this to be the case, churches have much to gain by encouraging and cultivating the habit of family devotions, for it is in the home that so many things are modelled for children by their primary caregivers and imparted to them, including the discipline and joy of prayer. Indeed, this was precisely the childhood experience of JB and his brothers Tom and David. As David once described it: "Our love for the Scriptures and our theological education started from a very early age with our parents' teaching . . . Our parents had a steadfast faith in God, a love for the Word of God and a firm belief in the power of prayer. Every day we met for family worship which was led by one of our parents. This continued from our earliest days of infancy until one by one we left home."[14]

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13 Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 102.

14 *An Introduction to Torrance Theology*, ed. Gerrit Scott Dawson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007), 2.

To whom do we pray?

When prayer is understood in terms of a Trinitarian activity, it is clear that although prayers may be addressed to any person of the Trinity, for all three persons are fully divine, our primary form of address must be to the Father, for it is to him alone that the Son and the Spirit direct our worship, and it is to Him alone that the Lord's Prayer is addressed. That said, a question arises concerning the many other ways of describing and addressing God in Scripture and in the life of the church: Are they rendered obsolete in light of the Trinity?

In the final chapter and Appendix of his book, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, JB helpfully addressed the issue of God-language and worship. He correctly pointed out the distinction between referring to God by the name that God has decreed and the use of biblical similes and other metaphors to convey certain characteristics of the one whom we have been instructed to address as Father. Thus understood, Trinitarian language does not prohibit the continued use of similes and other metaphors, but it does provide a normative reference point and interpretive framework for them. A PCUSA paper, "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing", puts it this way:

> The language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rooted in scripture and creed, remains an indispensable anchor for our efforts to speak faithfully of God. When secured, an anchor provides both necessary stability and adequate freedom of movement. If our lifeline to the anchor is frayed or severed, the historic faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church risks being set adrift. With this anchor in place, however, we are liberated to interpret, amplify, and expand upon the ways of speaking of the triune God familiar to most church members. We are freed to speak faithfully and amply of the mystery of the Trinity. We may cultivate a responsible Trinitarian imagination and vocabulary that bears witness in different ways to the one triune God known to us from scripture and creed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Faithfulness to the gospel frees us to honour and continue to use this faithful way of speaking of the triune God even as it frees us to adopt other faithful images. Rather than simply repeating the word "God" in prayer and liturgy, we are free to broaden our vocabulary for speaking of the triune God, emboldened by the rich reservoir of biblical and traditional terms, images, and metaphors.[15]

The provisional nature of prayer and the language it draws upon is expressed very well in this footnote to all prayers, penned by C.S. Lewis:

15 "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing," Office of Theology and Worship, PCUSA, 2004, lines 330-342, www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/trinityfinal.pdf.

He whom I bow to only knows to whom I bow
When I attempt the ineffable Name, murmuring *Thou*,
And dream of Pheidian fancies and embrace in heart
Symbols (I know) which cannot be the thing Thou art.
Thus always, taken at their word, all prayers blaspheme
Worshipping with frail images a folk-lore dream,
And all men in their own unquiet thoughts, unless
Thou in magnetic mercy to Thyself divert
Our arrows, aimed unskilfully, beyond desert;
And all men are idolaters, crying unheard
To a deaf idol, if Thou take them at their word.
Take not, O Lord, our literal sense. Lord, in thy great,
Unbroken speech our limping metaphor translate.[16]

Conclusion

Acknowledging a need to be taught how to pray, and adopting liturgical practices that facilitate this process, are critically important for the church if it is to avoid the twin dangers of self-expression and activism in relation to the act of public worship. These dangers are acute, due partly to the prevalence of western culture, which in many respects is alarmingly frantic, pragmatic and self-focused, and due partly to the realities of institutional decline and the resultant pressure to try harder and to do more. So much public worship today suffers from verbiage and from being reduced to just one more activity among many. In many ways it has become, as JB observed, Unitarian, insofar as it "has no doctrine of the mediator or sole priesthood of Christ, is human-centred, has no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit, is too often non-sacramental, and can engender weariness. We sit in the pew watching the minister 'doing his thing,' exhorting us 'to do our thing,' until we go home thinking we have done our duty for another week! This kind of do-it-yourself-with-the-help-of-the-minister worship is what our forefathers would have called 'legal worship' and not 'evangelical worship' – what the ancient church would have called Arian or Pelagian and not truly catholic. It is not Trinitarian."[17]

16 *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, edited by George Appleton (Oxford University Press, 1985), 70.

17 Torrance, J. B., *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 20.

How might we respond to this dilemma? What I have sought to argue in this article is that at least one critical aspect of our response will be found in that ancient prayer request of the disciples, which JB faithfully and persistently kept before the church, "Lord, teach us to pray!" followed perhaps by a simple prayer of confession: "Almighty God: you have no patience with solemn assemblies, or heaped-up prayers to be heard by men. Forgive those who have written prayers for congregations. Remind them that their foolish words will pass away, but that your word will last and be fulfilled, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."[18]

18 *The Worshipbook* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 202.