

## Trinity 6 2019

### St George's Windsor

**One of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'** Words from today's reading from St Luke's Gospel. **One of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'** I shall return to those words a little later. Let me begin, however, with a poem by the seventeenth century priest-poet, George Herbert.

The poem is called **Prayer**. It is in fact the first of two of his poems that bear the same title, and it is the better of the two. It is a sonnet in the course of which Herbert, leaving all verbs aside, provides us with what one commentator has described as "an ecstatic and delicious list" of prayer's qualities; the "images, each of them a delicious surprise, come tumbling out headlong".

I shall not read all of the poem but, by reading the final six lines, hope to give you an impression of the whole. In his attempt to describe what prayer means to him, he writes:

"Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,  
Exalted Manna, gladness of the best,  
Heaven in ordinary, man well dresst,  
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,  
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,  
The land of spices; something understood."

You can understand immediately that, for Herbert, prayer has nothing of the daily grind about it; it is something to be enjoyed profoundly.

If I had chosen to read to you the first part of the poem, you would have heard a description of prayer that might have puzzled you. The second line of the sonnet goes as follows:

"God's breath in man returning to his birth".

"God's breath in man returning to his birth".

George Herbert was a theologian who knew his Bible. He was remembering the story of the creation of Adam in the book **Genesis**.

"The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

It is God's breath within us or, as it can also be translated, God's Spirit within us, that animates us; makes us alive and human.

That Spirit always and naturally seeks union or re-union with the Father, and conformity in us to the Father's will. There is something essential to our human nature that aches for God. Prayer, so Herbert seems to say, is a kind of exhalation that allows our fundamental human nature free expression.

"God's breath in man returning to his birth".

Prayer is an entirely natural activity. In the Early Church, a rather simple saying was in circulation. It went as follows: "Birds fly, fishes swim, and human beings pray". As it is natural for birds to fly and fishes to swim, so it is natural for the likes of you and me to pray.

Jesus Christ, the one in whom and through whom we catch sight most vividly of what it means to be a human being, was a man of prayer. St Luke, from whose Gospel our reading came today, draws attention, more than any other Gospel writer, to Jesus's habit of prayer. Jesus prayed at his Baptism, before his choosing of the twelve apostles, at the Transfiguration, in Gethsemane and upon the cross, as well as at other times, not least the occasion when his being at prayer caused that disciple to ask him, '**Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples**'. From the New Testament accounts, it seems that Jesus sought lonely places in the early morning to commune with his Father. Prayer was at the very heart of his ministry.

When that disciple asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he gave voice to a request that rings bells with us. In each and every one of us lives an impulse ('God's breath in man returning to his birth') that we feel (for we are only human after all) but cannot quite give expression to, and find focus for. We need understanding, encouragement and guidance. **Lord, teach us to pray**. Jesus gave what we have come to call 'The Lord's Prayer'.

'God's breath in man returning to his birth' is leading us to worship – 'hallowed be thy name'. 'God's breath in man returning to his birth' is leading us to long for a reign of peace, justice and love – 'thy kingdom come'. 'God's breath in man returning to his birth' is leading us to confess our neediness – 'give us each day our daily bread' – to confess our waywardness – 'forgive us our sins' – and to pledge ourselves to kindness – 'as we forgive others'. 'God's breath in man returning to his birth' leading us to plead for guidance and protection at every step along the way – 'do not bring us to the time of trial'.

And through our worship, longing for the reign of peace, acknowledgement of need and of constant guidance, and our commitment to kindness, we are shaped, formed, moulded into the human beings we were ever meant to be. And that of course is at least something of what prayer is; a means by which we become more conformed to Jesus Christ, the man of prayer, and the expression of our true humanity.

Of course, there are many questions to be faced and answered, especially at a time when so many people seem to turn their backs upon the Christian Faith. It yet remains true that, down through the centuries, men and women who have trusted the deep impulse of the human heart as being 'God's breath in man returning to his birth', and have looked to Jesus Christ for understanding, encouragement and guidance, have impressed upon our history an undeniable sense of what it really means to be a human being.

When George Herbert first composed those words, 'God's breath in man returning to his birth', he did so as a kind of celebration of prayer. (It was, of course only one of his many ejaculations about prayer made in the course of his sonnet!) I believe that we Christians, as we say our prayers day by day, can feel that same sense of celebration. Wherever we might be, in this Chapel, in a church, in our bedroom or in the course of a morning walk, we can hold our heads high and, on behalf of a very confused world, make a substantial statement about our human vocation.

We cannot know, and we must not know, what the effect of that statement might be. But we trust that it should always be made, and that as people are shaped by its making, our world will be drawn ever closer to the destiny that God, whose Spirit inspires us, has in mind for us.

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