

Selected Bibliography

Restoring the woven cord- Michael Mitton (DLT, 1995)

Celtic Saints (Pitkin, 1995)

A History of the English Church and People -Bede (Penguin)

Celtic Daily Prayer -Andy Raine/John Skinner (Marshall Pickering, 1994)

Celtic Night Prayer -Northumbria Community (Marshall Pickering, 1996)

Celtic Worship through the Year -Ray Simpson (Hodder and Stoughton, 1997)

Exploring Celtic Spirituality -Ray Simpson

Also the books of Celtic prayers and liturgies by David Adam, Vicar of Holy Island, published by Triangle: *Power Lines*, *The Open Gate*; *Tides and Seasons*; *The Edge of Glory*; *The Rhythm of Life*; *The Cry of the Deer* (1987); *Border Lands* (1991); *The Eye of the Eagle* (1990)

ALUN BROOKFIELD is Editor of *Ministry Today*

PERSONS IN PRAYER

Philip Clements-Jewery.

Introduction

One of the more regrettable features to be discerned in parts of the contemporary ecclesiastical scene is an apparent decline in the practice of intercessory prayer. This seems to be the case particularly in connection with the public worship of churches whose worship is non-liturgical. The reasons for such a decline are manifold. No doubt some have an emotional or psychological origin, or it may be that we are seeing a reflection of an increasing parochialism in society at large. The liturgical impoverishment of

much free Church and charismatic worship probably plays a part as well. But in view of the fact that the number of books about spirituality and prayer aimed at the popular market seems to multiply, it appears unlikely that in this decline in the practice of public intercession we are confronting "a crisis of piety".³⁴

Nevertheless, we may be permitted to ask whether there might not also be a theological deficiency involved, since the amount of attention given by scholarship to the subject of prayer in general and intercession in particular is relatively small. For this reason I would like to give some attention to the theological and philosophical issues that undergird both the possibility and the practice of petitionary and intercessory prayer. Is prayer open to experiment? As this paper is being prepared it has been announced that scientific experiment is to be carried out to test the efficiency of prayer. However, such an experiment is bound to be flawed and will not prove anything. There are a number of reasons for saying this.³⁵

First, a scientist approaches an experiment with a mind open to receive the result of the experiment, while a person who prays comes to that activity with a heart and mind fixed on God and committed to discovering and submitting to the will of God. On the other hand, the hypotheses being tested in experiments are always held tentatively until they are verified or falsified. No one can expect prayer to be answered on that basis, for it excludes the kind of faith that is necessary for prayer to be effective. Subjecting prayer to a scientific examination might therefore fall into the category of presuming upon God. Furthermore, scientific theories are generalisations, and experiments must always be repeatable. It is doubtful whether the conditions under which a specific prayer are made are ever repeatable. Finally, even if the efficacy of prayer appears to be falsified by the experiment, it would still be possible for believers to say that they were at fault for putting God to the test. In other words, prayer belongs to the kind of faith which nothing can ever be allowed to falsify.³⁶

³⁴ David M Crump, *Jesus the Intercessor: Prayer and Christology in Luke-Acts*, J C B Mohr, Tübingen, 1992, 1.

³⁵ Vincent Brummer, *What are we doing when we pray?*, SCM, 1984, 2-7

³⁶ See "Theology and Falsification" in Anthony Flew & Alasdair MacIntyre (eds), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, SCM, London, 1955, 96ff.

Three basic questions

Any approach today to an understanding of petitionary and intercessory prayer must begin by asking three questions: is prayer necessary; is prayer possible; is prayer conceivable?

It has to be admitted that the force of these questions has led many to conceive of prayer in reductionist terms as being no more than an alignment of the human will with God's will and as a commitment to ethical action in relation to the object prayed for. These are important aspects in any view of the nature of prayer, but they are far from all that can be said about the subject, as I hope to show.

Is prayer necessary?

Why is it necessary to pray? After all, we believe in an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God. We might, therefore, think that God might be expected to provide what he knows his children need without first being asked for it. The need to pray seems to call into question either the goodness or the knowledge or the power of God - or all three.³⁷

The same question about the nature of God arises also in connection with the problem of evil. There are a number of strands in the reply that might be given in the case of prayer. To begin with, we may need to re-define God's omnipotence and omniscience. Many writers today see divine power in terms of a persuasive influence rather than a coercive force. We can no longer conceive of God simply overriding the freedom he has allowed to his creatures. This implies a degree of self-restraint in God that limits what is possible through prayer. God requires the free cooperation of the prayed-for as well as of those who pray.

So far as the divine knowledge is concerned, it is necessary to distinguish between God's knowledge of past and present actualities and his knowledge of future possibilities. These are two different modes of knowing. But knowing the future as actuality is a logical impossibility, so that to say that God does not know which future possibilities will become actual does not lay an unacceptable limitation upon him. The importance of the point lies, again, in the need to preserve the freedom of human being in the choices they

³⁷ See the full argument in David Basinger, 'Why petition an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God?', in *Religious Studies* 19 (1983)

make. The consequence however is another restriction upon what is possible through prayer.

The other strand in the reply to the question concerning the necessity of prayer brings in the personal nature of God and our relationship to him. One argument makes a distinction between God simply bringing about a state of affairs for someone impersonally and God giving something in a personal way;³⁸ Usually it is animals or inanimate objects which have things done to them without asking (giving water to a plant, for example), but there is no question of a personal relationship being involved. To give something personally, however, can only be done in the context of a personal relationship, and this brings us to an argument that has to do with the development and growth of such relationships.

God may refrain from giving us everything we need without our asking for it in order not to spoil or to dominate us. Our growth to maturity includes taking on an increasing responsibility for our own lives. Asking is an expression of such an attitude. It indicates that we are aware of our need and are willing to take some responsibility for it. The prayer of asking, therefore, is an expression of a mature personal relationship with God.³⁹6

Is prayer possible?

We come now to the question whether prayer is possible or not. The issue here is the classic view of the immutability or impassibility of God. If God is not susceptible to worldly influences, then it is difficult to conceive of God being able to respond to prayer.

However, in the twentieth century the doctrine of the divine impassibility has been almost universally abandoned. The reasons for this are partly historical. This century has seen war, genocide and human suffering on a scale not previously known. If God is love, then it seems inconceivable that he does not feel the pain of suffering humanity, since a personal love involves the suffering of the one who loves. The central place of the cross in the Christian faith also leads us to the conclusion that if God was in Christ, then

³⁸ Brummer, *What are we doing*, 47

³⁹ For a development of this argument, see Eleonore Stump, 'Petitionary Prayer' in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16.2 (1979). Basinger's articles cited above is a reply to Stump

God suffered in the cross of Christ. Furthermore, the modern scientific world view sees the world as coming into being through a long process of change and development that has included a degree of vulnerability and struggle, with God working from within his creation and so exposing himself to suffering.⁴⁰

In spite of such arguments, it is important that we do not throw the baby out with the bath water. The classical doctrine of divine impassibility preserved important insights about God that ought not to be abandoned. At the very least, we ought to be able to say that nothing can happen to God that is outside the control of God or, if indeed we want to say that in some sense God is acted upon in a causal way by the world, that nothing can happen to God that will simply overwhelm his will. Nevertheless, there is nothing to prevent us from saying that in response to influences from the world (among which we may count prayer) God may change himself or even allow himself to be changed. A modified doctrine of divine impassibility is thus not incompatible with a belief in the efficacy of prayer.

Is prayer conceivable?

When we pray, we expect that something will happen in the world that might not have happened had we not prayed. The notion of asking God implies a belief that God may act in a specific way in answer to the prayer. This raises the issue of how we conceive God's providential activity in the world, given that this is a concept that has been very much called into question by modern scientific discovery and historical understanding.

Some theological responses to this question amount to little more than a modern restatement of deism.⁴¹ However, the most fruitful way forward may lie in a development of the theory of "double agency", whereby human actions also ascribed to them the character of divine action. This development involves making a distinction between the necessary and sufficient causes of an event. The sufficient cause of any human action is the human

⁴⁰ For modern contributions about the immutability/impassibility of God, see Paul S Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1988; Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, SCM, London, 1974; Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility & Corporeality*, Kok Pharos, Kampen, Holland, 1992.

⁴¹ For example, Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World*, SCM, London, 1986.

choice made by the agent, but God may still be able to provide some of the other necessary, external (though not fully sufficient) conditions for the action. This enables us see "double action" as a matter of co-operation between agents rather than as manipulation or puppetry. It also enables us to suggest that out of the full set of necessary and sufficient conditions one (which we ascribe to God) may be selected as being of overwhelming importance. Thus it is possible to give God the credit for an event without denying human responsibility.⁴² If God provides this supremely important condition in response to prayer, then we have ground for affirming the possibility and efficacy of intercession.

The other objection to the conceivability of prayer has to do with its metaphysical foundation. It is difficult to conceive the way prayer "works" in a universe that is viewed in mechanistic terms. An alternative metaphysic is that provided by process theology. Whatever else might be said about process thought, it is at least able to give an attractive and coherent account of prayer.⁴³ The point is that in a universe seen in process terms, everything to a greater or lesser degree exercises an influence on everything else, including God. No action therefore, including prayer, is without consequences. To pray is to change the reality of the world with which God works, resulting in prayer making the realisation of certain possibilities more probable than they would have been had the prayer not been made. Prayer may therefore be seen as part of the interaction between God and his creatures.

Some biblical considerations

In the Gospels, it is Luke above all who emphasises the prayer life of Jesus. According to David Crump,⁴⁴ the Lukan portrait of Jesus at prayer is primarily guided by christological considerations, but there is no doubt that Luke also portrays Jesus at prayer as a model of piety. In this portrait, the emphasis is upon praying according to the will of God, so that it is through prayer that God reveals his will. The challenge of prayer therefore lies in the willingness to seek and submit to that will of God. "Thus prayer,

⁴² This argument is fully explored in Vincent Brummer, *Speaking of a Personal God*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, chapter 5.

⁴³ There is a fine account of prayer in terms of process theology in Maarjorie H Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*, Crossroad, New York, 1989.

⁴⁴ Crump, *Jesus the Intercessor*

according to Luke, is the means through which God gives to his children what he has determined for them.

It is clear from Luke (and also Acts) that God does respond to human prayers that are in accordance with God's will. This suggests that to pray is indeed to ask for a real intervention by God in human life. Luke 11.13 tells us that this intervention is through the gift of the Holy Spirit. A possible way forward for an understanding of prayer, therefore, may lie in an exploration of the biblical language about the Spirit.

An examination of the prayer passages in the Pauline letters ⁴⁵ reveals a concept of prayer as a three-way network of intercession linking Paul, the churches and God. It is through this network that the power of Christ is released. Phil 1.19 tells us that the partnership that is prayer becomes effective through the agency of "the Spirit of Jesus Christ". The operation of this network is seen in a negative fashion in 1 Cor 5.3-5 where we see that it is "with the power of the Lord Jesus" that Paul's spirit is mediated to the Corinthian Christians gathered in a church meeting to carry out a matter of Church discipline. Here again it is the power of the Lord (i.e. the Holy Spirit) that provides the link between Paul and the Christians in Corinth in a way similar to intercession.

C.F.D. Moule ⁴⁶ argues that Paul's use of the term *pneuma* implies that human beings in general have an intimate capacity to recognise and to receive God and that there is therefore an aspect of the human personality capable of responding to God. If we apply such an insight to an understanding of prayer we may conclude that through the network of intercession established by the Holy Spirit, answers to prayer come about as the Spirit impinges upon persons. Prayer is a supremely personal activity. And this brings us back to what was said earlier about prayer being the expression of a mature personal relationship with God.

Persons in prayer

The biblical concept of a network of intercession linking God, the pray-ers and the prayed-for finds metaphysical support in the

⁴⁵ See Gordon Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers: The Significance of the Intercessory Prayer Passages in the Letters of Paul*, CUP, 1974.

⁴⁶ C F D Moule, *The Holy Spirit*, Mowbrays, Oxford, 1978, chapter 2.

philosophy of John Macmurray. In his Gifford lectures ⁴⁷ Macmurray argues that human beings become personal only in relation to one another. His analysis of this concept leads him to the conclusion that ours is a personal universe in which the human community of persons finds its unity in a supreme, universal personal God who stands in the same mutual relationship to every other person. This allows us to conceive a way for God to act in the lives of others in response to our prayers of intercession.

Intercessory prayer is a way of relating in a personal way to other persons who are separated from us by some distance. It is an expression of our being in community with them.

This has affinities also with the concept of prayer developed by process theology. Prayer belongs to the interaction of God and his creatures. A similar concept was advocated by the personalist theologian H.H. Farmer,⁴⁸ who argued for something akin to Leibniz' monads to express and enable the rapport God has with the creation. Through this rapport God may initiate events in response to prayer which therefore can and does make a real difference to the world and especially to persons.

As we saw earlier, the concept of "double agency" is useful in helping us understand how prayer "works". Both prayer and answers to prayer may be seen as the outcome of the freely-offered co-operation of human persons with God. Such prayer is likely to be most efficacious when both pray-er and prayed-for consciously acknowledge their relationship to God, but even those who do not acknowledge such a relationship may nevertheless co-operate with God in bringing about his will in relation to any prayer that may have been offered because, as we have suggested above, it is standing in some sort of relationship to God that in fact constitutes their personhood. Of course, it is necessary to preserve human freedom and to avoid any suggestion of unconscious manipulation on the part of God. This can be achieved if we remember the earlier point about God's power as always persuasion and never coercion.

⁴⁷ John Macmurray, *The Form of the Personal: 1. The Self as Agent; 2. Persons in Relation*, Faber & Faber, London, 1957 and 1961.

⁴⁸ H.H. Farmer, *The World and God*, Collins (Fontana)

As well as influencing a person directly, God, in response to prayer, may also exercise an indirect influence by bringing about the necessary but not fully sufficient external conditions for a particular human action. It may also be that the totality of such necessary conditions for the action may include one of the overwhelming importance that the eventual outcome may be regarded as God's answer to prayer, while at the same time leaving room for the free human decision that is the fully necessary and sufficient condition for the event. Again, there can be no question of divine manipulation of human beings.

As for the possibility of God influencing the non-human creation in response to prayer, part of the answer is given by the assertion that God is able to bring about external conditions for human actions. Process theology, with its assertion of God's intimate involvement and interaction with all created entities, also provides a means of envisaging the impact of prayer upon the non-human world. In addition, process theology speaks of God as the "soul" of the world, thus providing an analogy of prayer in terms of the messages that pass between the mind and the body. However, the main way in which prayer may impact upon the non-human creation is probably indirect, as in response to prayer God influences human decisions and choices in accordance with his will for the creation as a whole.

In conclusion, we may see intercessory prayer as a means by which God enlists freely-given co-operation in the realisation of his purposes. Prayer gets certain things done in a way that may not have been fully possible had the prayer not been made because of the way prayer reinforces the personal nature of the universe. Intercession is a personal partnership, not only between God and the pray-er, but also ideally between God and the prayed-for, with the aim of producing more fully personal human beings. It is thus a prime instance of faith working through love. Persons who pray may therefore have every confidence interceding with a personal God with whom every other person also stands in some sort of personal relationship. They may have every expectation that their prayers will make a difference to the world through the God who both influences and is influenced by the creation.

The Revd Dr Philip Clements-Jewery, a Baptist minister, is Director of the Christian Enquiry Agency. He lives in Essex.