# THE PROBLEM OF PRAYER

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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"You who put the Lord in remembrance, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth."(Isaiah 62:6b,7)

This text touches on a sensitive area. It has to do with prayer, constant prayer. This is sensitive because most of us recognize, on the one hand, that prayer ought to belong to the vital center of the Christian life and, on the other hand, that it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to say our prayers.

Remember the words of Huckleberry Finn: "Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fishline, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work."

I take it that the experience of Huck Finn resembles the experience of many of us. We may have said our prayers as children, but sooner or later we found that we couldn't make it work, and we began to grow away from the practice of daily prayer.

Nevertheless, the feeling remains that daily prayer is essential. And it's a feeling which is strongly reenforced by our text. So let's reexamine the problem of prayer.

I.

Notice first that we pray to the Lord, not to fate. This sounds rather obvious, but it's worth remembering. It points to an apprehension of reality which is distinct, if not unique.

Fate is the name of the classical god. In Homer, for example, there are many gods who do this and do that, who intervene here and intervene there. But behind it all is remorseless necessity, to which even the gods are subject. Man may rebel against his fate, but he never escapes it.

In modern times the gods have been dethroned, for the most part, but the classical god behind the gods, Fate, continues to be venerated. We hear about it most under the name "determinism." You know, of course, that your character was determined at least by age seven and that your values have been determined by the culture around you. According to some, even the very movements of your body are strictly determined. Admittedly, some physicists and biologists and psychia-

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trists look askance at the idea of absolute determinism, but by and large the idea continues to reign in our culture. So we sing, in words if not in music which would have pleased the Greeks, "whatever will be will be."

This we sing even though a good deal of our experience moves in a different direction. We believe that criminals should be punished, for example. That's just. But it could hardly be just if the criminal were absolutely determined by powers outside of himself to do what he did. We also look both ways when we cross the street, or some of us do. And that would hardly make sense if we were predetermined to be run down by an automobile at such and such a time. I suspect that even the most dogmatic determinists look both ways before they cross the street. It's true, isn't it, that our common sense perception of the world presupposes a large measure of human freedom?

Such common sense perception of the world is taken for granted in the Bible. It's even accented. The Psalmist says of man, for example, "What is man that thou art mindful of him? ... Yet thou hast made him little less than God... Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet...."(Ps 8:4-6)

Behind all this in the Bible, clearly, is a sweeping affirmation of Divine freedom. The word "Lord" in our text is a rendering of the Hebrew name for God, Yahweh. And that word probably means: he who creates powerfully, or he who majestically brings into being. That is, in a sense God is the potter and the universe is a never-hardening clay. And God, or Yahweh, is continually fashioning the universe into a shape to suit himself. The story of the Flood, for example, might be taken as indicating that Yahweh can pick up this lump of clay called the universe, smash it, and reform it.

Notice further that the God here depicted is personal. He resembles persons and enters into personal relationships. He isn't blind and deaf. This is why the image, "the Word of God," looms so large in the Bible and in the history of the Church. A person speaks; and, a person hears.

To be sure, the image of personality applied to God is problematic. Personality, as we know it in everyday experience, implies the presence of a body, and that means being limited to time and space. Likewise, personality as we know it can be a pretty fussy, arbitrary thing, from the little girl who takes her doll and goes home to the Machiavellian politician who manipulates his fellow citizens.

So we had better say that God is personal, but without the limitations of human personality. Let's say he is a person with a capital P, perhaps with a small infinity sign following the word.

When we pray, then, we pray in freedom to an infintely powerful

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Person, who is himself free. We pray to the Lord, not to fate.

II.

In the second place, we pray as men, not as angels. You say, well that's pretty clear. But I wonder if it is. I wonder whether our prayer life, such as it is, or such as it has been, has not been infected by a creeping angelology.

In the Bible there's no doubt about the matter. From a biblical perspective you are a creature through and through. You're not an angel slumming in an alien world. From a biblical perspective man is intrinsically a frail creature. The word "hero," accordingly, is not a biblical word. It comes from classical Greece, where men were never quite sure whether a great man were just that or a god in disguise. The Bible, to be sure, has its mighty men. But there's never any doubt that they are men and that they receive what powers they have from the infinitely powerful hands of the Lord.

One story in the Old Testament brings this out especially well. This concerns the mighty leader Moses. On one occasion, according to the story, the Israelites were fighting a battle. And whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; whenever he lowered his hand the enemy prevailed. But then, says the story, Moses' hands grew weary. So a couple of Moses' lieutenants took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Then the two lieutenants stationed themselves on either side of Moses, and they held up his hands until the battle was over.(Ex. 17:8-13)

I just can't imagine such a thing ever happening to Achilles. It would be much too much beneath his dignity. But that's just the point. In the Bible man's dignity is precisely the fact that he is man, made from the dust and free to shape his own world as he is able. Man's dignity is not that he is somehow a god or an angel in disguise.

For this reason the biblical writers take the material side of man's life with utmost seriousness. Not only the human soul, but also the human body is good: eating is basically good, sexuality is basically good, no less than thinking and the life of the spirit.

Hence when we pray the Lord's prayer and ask for our daily bread, that's precisely what we're asking for. That's what the petition originally meant. It doesn't refer to spiritual bread or any such thing(some of the Greek church fathers said that it did). It refers to the bread that goes into your stomach, and to similar human needs.

With all this, from a biblical point of view, ought to go a certain stubbornness on the part of the person who is praying. Our text suggests that <u>we</u> should take no rest in our praying. Daily

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prayer, -- a fairly common and a relatively acceptable idea. But our text also suggests that we should give the Lord no rest.

In other words, if you're a young man who's especially interested in a certain young woman, and she's continually on your mind, don't make believe you're an angel. I mean, don't pray all the time for world peace or for food for the hungry in Asia. Tell the Lord about her and about your feelings for her. And don't worry about repeating the same thoughts night after night. Give the Lord no rest.

Likewise, if you're going through one kind of crisis or another, don't make believe you're an angel. Lay your whole crisis before God in no uncertain terms, and ask for justice. And if nothing seems to happen, ask again. Even say with the Psalmist, "Why dost thou stand afar off, O Lord? Why dost thou hide thyself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1)

This all may sound rather egocentric. Perhaps it is. But maybe that's the very human context in which your prayers and mine should begin to grow. If you have most of your own petitions off your chest when you come here Sunday morning, then you'll really be prepared to join in prayer for the whole world.

So when we say our prayers, we pray as men, not as angels.

III.

In the third place, we pray in a covenant relationship. "You who put the Lord in remembrance, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth." These words refer to a specific Divine promise, to a covenant the Lord has made with his people.

Very simply, the idea is something like this. Perhaps through some weekday contact, a certain father takes an interest in a young boy, not his own son. The boy, it turns out, has no home of his own. So the man decides to adopt the young man, and he says to him, "I will stay with you through thick and thin, and I will share with you all that I have." The man's benevolence, love, and power thus establishes and defines the relationship from the very beginning.

This is somewhat the way the relationship between Israel and God, or the Church and God, is depicted in the Old and New Testaments. This, then, is why Jerusalem is mentioned the way it is in our text. In the Book of Isaiah Jerusalem is not only the center of the people of Israel, but it is intended to be the center of a renewed world. The establsihment of Jerusalem is understood as the crowning stone of the establishment of God's will of peace and justice for all men throughout the world. And that, according to the Old and New Testaments, is what God the Father has promised for all his adopted children.

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The New Testament is pointing at the same thing when it suggests that our prayers should be in the name of Jesus, -- he who is the bringer of peace on earth and good will toward men. The New Testament sees in Jesus and his Resurrection the final establishment of all God's promises from of old, the final adoption of us all into God's family.

If, then, our prayers can freely begin to grow in the context of our own frail petitions, they ought to be shaped at the same time by the covenantal relationship. Every true prayer, from a biblical perspective, however stubborn and egocentric sounding it may be, always ends, implicitly or explicitly, with the petition, not my will, but thine be done.

So Jesus prays just before his crucifixion, "My father, if it be possible. let this cup pass from me." That is the definite human side of prayer. No one really likes to suffer. But Jesus also adds, "nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."(Mt. 26:39) Here the human prayer is shaped by the covenant relationship. Jesus trusts everything to God and to God's mercy.

We might say, then, that the best song to sing, if we are to sing any in this connection, is not whatever will be will be, but the familiar hymn, whate'er our God ordains is right. That's the covenantal shape of genuine prayer.

IV.

"Miss Watson," says Huck Finn, "she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so."

There's something quite biblical in Huck Finn's experience. Prayer is conversational. We are addressing our Lord, not the blank wall of fate. Also, prayer is human, not angelic. Ask God for your daily bread, or for fishline and hooks. But at the same time it's well to remember that genuine prayer is not a simple device to get you out of a crisis or to get you something.

Genuine prayer is much more the conversation between a small son and his gracious, powerful father. And although the son may not understand it, it may be the will of the father for the son to live through hard times for awhile. Therefore the son prays: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."

Let this be our prayer, too.

"You who put the Lord in remembrance, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth."