

A Reflection on Prayer and Intercession

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Romans 8.26-27

The Apostle Paul thinks that *prayer* is one of the most essential *practices* of those of us who profess the faith of Christ. He understands ‘prayer’ to be more than mere words – it is not an ‘activity’ as such: rather, he commends the possibility of ‘*praying without ceasing*’ (cf 1 Thessalonians 5.17). This suggests that St Paul’s understanding and experience of prayer is not as something we *do*, but is a *state of being*: it is part of *how we are*. In this sense, it is more meaningful to describe ourselves as people who seek to be constantly prayerful, rather than as people who ‘say their prayers’ from time to time – although most of us will have found that keeping a *pattern and rhythm of prayer* going is one of the main ways of nurturing the character of prayerfulness to begin with.



Some of us say prayers of a formal kind at the start and the end of the day (for example) – the traditional basis of *Morning and Evening Prayer* which comes down to us, ultimately, from the disciplines of prayer as they were maintained in the monasteries, themselves houses of constant and continuing prayer and prayerfulness:

that is their very *purpose*. Others among us may keep *lists* of the people and situations which we maintain in our private prayers, just as we keep lists of those whom we hold in our public intercessions during the liturgy in church. That is to say, there is at the heart of prayer a *glorification of God* – but also the on-going and intentional holding before God of those people and places where we know there to be *need*. Intercession, as it is called, is itself at the heart of the life of prayer – so that if we think of the Apostle’s exhortation to pray without ceasing, this means, apart from anything else, that we maintain a continuous *holding before God* of the needs of the world. It is not necessarily conscious or verbal; rather, it is

the deep intention of our innermost being, during times of consciousness and unconsciousness, while we are awake, but also *while we sleep* (cf Song of Songs 5.2, which describes a state of spiritual alertness which remains even while our senses themselves are dormant and at rest). You could call it the *state of mind* which underlies every other part of our intention and deliberation. Those of us who have sought to establish a rhythm of prayer as a gateway to the condition of prayerfulness, have found that it is not fanciful to describe things this way. We maintain the spiritual practices which will become habits and then fundamental patterns of mind.

But the Apostle Paul describes this as a process in which we do not always know what we are doing: it takes us to the limit of our self-possession; to the place where we are no longer in control, but are in the *hands of God*. 'We do not know how to pray', he says; but the Spirit of God steps into that place of hesitancy and utters the prayer *on our behalf*. To be more precise, it was the Spirit of God who was *already* praying unceasingly, inserting *his* prayer into our own. True prayer, then, is not for us to speak constantly what we think God wants to hear, but, rather, to open ourselves to the prayerfulness which exists within the nature of God. It is *God's* prayer in which we participate; not something which we bring to him, as if he were not already somehow aware.

'Intercession' – our prayer on behalf of other people or situations of need – is the intention (spoken or unspoken) which expresses itself *between* God and the need itself. It is good for us to vocalise this when we can; but the idea that we could ever name every need to which our intercession should apply is absurd, since they are needs beyond name or number. Our intercession – our continuing and continuous prayer: our *prayerfulness* – becomes a matter of holding and considering things before God, knowing that they are already held before God, and sharing in the Holy Spirit's disposition towards them. So it is that prayer and intercession are not really our own doing at all, but, in the profoundest sense possible, they are the activity of God working in us. When we pray, we slot in and out of the prayer which is constant within the heart of God, and in that sense it becomes easy to see how it is something which never ceases.

May we all have a sense of being *held in the endless prayerfulness of God*; and when our prayers falter, to know them gathered by the Holy Spirit who is already there, speaking in us and with us and through us.