

Why Pray?

Eileen Conway

Prayer (I) poem by George Herbert

Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,
 God's breath in man returning to his birth,
 The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
 The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth
 Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,
 Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
 The six-days world transposing in an hour,
 A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
 Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
 Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
 Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
 The Milky Way, the bird of Paradise,
 Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
 The land of spices; something understood.

George Herbert's sonnet is nothing like what most of us think of when we are asked to explain what praying is all about — at least, not at first. But his rapid-fire slideshow of figures of speech is surprisingly helpful when we try to untangle all the different things that we do think about prayer.

In the most general terms, prayer (usually) has something to do with the coming together of ourselves, and words, and God. It's a kind of speech. But what kind? When someone mentions prayer — what it is, what it does, what it's "for," and why we do it — most people think first (and perhaps only) of the action of *asking* for something, something that we need or want, for ourselves, or perhaps for someone else. We might reasonably say that prayer originates, in one sense, in the newborn human being's cry to be fed, held, or swaddled. But if that is all that we mean by prayer — nothing more than "asking God for something," then what prayer is "good for," as a thing a human being

might choose to do, is logically limited to whether it has *worked* or not: "Did the asker receive what was asked for?" And if, when, that result is not evident, when "nothing happens," then it is easy to conclude that prayer is of no effect, or of no reliable effect; and therefore, not worth doing. So prayer becomes an irrational or foolish coming together of people, and words, and God.

But we also know that there is more to prayer than petition (for our own wants) or even intercession (for others), just as there is more to human utterance than mere demanding. We speak, we use language, for all sorts of purposes besides placing our orders. Even very young humans quickly learn that they can do much more with language than just make their needs known — they learn to greet other people, to name what they are looking at, to describe what has happened, to sing songs, to tell jokes, to say thank you, to apologize, and so on and on.

There is a formal vocabulary for the kinds of speaking that prayer includes: besides *petition* or *intercession*, we name *thanksgiving*, *confession*, and *adoration*. Less formally, prayer isn't just "gimme"; it's also "thank, you," "oops," and "wow." Although our experience of prayer begins with "gimme" in our newborn cry, it doesn't end there. We can also thank God in prayer for what we have been given (even for things we didn't ask for). We can acknowledge our mistakes, failures, and wrongdoing in prayer. And first or finally, the "wow" prayer, the prayer of adoration, of sheer praise, lies very close to the heart of what prayer is all about. We might even see it as the ultimate goal of all our prayer; if we don't begin there, we may hope or intend to conclude there.

We must also consider this: that prayer, like other kinds of speaking, is not just spontaneous — it is also something

that, more or less, we *learn—*are taught—*how to do*, if only by imitation of others. As children we are given forms of words to imitate and learn, to make into our own means of expression. In prayer, too, we learn how to from other people. Many of the forms we learn, such as the Lord's Prayer, include the four modes of prayer in their own rhythm. The Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father," moves through petition and confession, but begins and ends with adoration.

The process of learning to say forms of prayer broadens our understanding and our experience of what we are doing when we pray. The broadening happens in two ways: we become acquainted with God, our conversation partner in prayer; and we get to know the community, the family, among whom and from whom we have begun to learn to carry on the conversation.

Because prayer is, at its heart, conversation, not a solo performance. And we come to know God, the one to whom we speak, not only from what others have said *about* God; but also from what God says, and from God's silences, in our conversation.

God's silences are like silences in other conversations. They leave us room to speak in all sorts of ways — assertion,

question, invitation, lament; but they also invite us to be attentively silent in our turn as well – to "let God get a word in edgeways." This experience of Perseverance in prayer – keeping on with it even when we seem to have been put on hold – is both urged upon us and modeled for us by Jesus Christ. Prayer is a practice for the long haul, in which it transforms our faith more and more into the lived experience of trust, of confidence that we are known, loved, and actively heard.

Prayer, then, is not just non-casual, ritual speech performed in our moments of tranquil, trusting piety but our attentive presence to God in those times when we are overjoyed, angry, terrified, desperate, or simply dumbstruck. In our mute times, we believe, God in the Holy Spirit hears us, speaks to us, and indeed speaks *for* us. The practice of prayer can indeed become as kaleidoscopic as the torrent of images in Herbert's sonnet, making room for all of kaleidoscopic human experience in the loving presence of God.

Eileen Conway is an Anglican priest in Edmonton.

Question for discussion

1. Have you ever passionately prayed for something or someone?