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A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

David Torkington

## Personal Prayer and the Liturgy

June 2018

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Forty years ago I was challenged by a canoness. I had just finished a weekend course on personal prayer at a retreat centre in Dublin when she took me aside to share her misgivings with me. Her dedication to liturgical prayer had made her somewhat dismissive of personal prayer which she felt was all well and good for the laity, but not for semi-contemplative nuns like her, whose spiritual meat and drink was primarily and almost exclusively the Prayer of the Church, the corporate expression of the faith of the community. “I have read the New Testament from back to front and many times over,” she said, “but I can find no evidence there for the personal daily prayer that you have been advocating in your talks. Admittedly”, she conceded, “there is mention of Jesus praying at the beginning of his public ministry, and at the end in Gethsemane, but there is nothing to justify the sort of daily private prayer that you have been talking about this weekend, apart from a couple of occasions when Jesus went alone into the mountains for prayer.”

Let me explain what I tried and failed to explain to her, because our spiritual life and well-being depends on it. The canoness was right in this, that after reading the Gospels she could find no evidence for the sort of daily prayer I was speaking about, but she failed to understand the reason why. I for my part had failed to convince her because at that time I failed to understand why the Gospel did not explain in detail the inner daily prayer of Jesus. Now, and this is so important, they did not detail the daily prayer life of Jesus, because they all knew it, and so did everyone else for whom they were writing at the time. They all knew it, because they all learnt this pattern of daily prayer from Jesus himself and they were all practising it every day of their lives – so why stress the obvious?

If you love good food you will undoubtedly be a devotee of Delia Smith, Mary Berry, Nigella Lawson, Gary Rhodes, Rick Stein or some other master chef. No matter whether you read their books, listen to them on the radio or watch them on television, they all

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make an understandable assumption about their students. They not only assume they have ovens, but that they know how to use them, and they use them often, perhaps many times a day. In short they assume they know how to cook. It was the same with all the writers of the New Testament. They assumed, or putting it more strongly, they knew that their readers all prayed regularly every day, as they did themselves. They did not therefore detail when they should pray, because everybody knew. Nor did they detail how everyone should pray, or the prayers that they should use, because they all knew that too. It would be stating the obvious. Nor did they have to describe endlessly how the love they received in prayer would enable them to love others as Jesus had done before them. Nor, for that matter, did they have to keep underlining how these, their daily efforts would become the offering they made with their brothers and sisters at the weekly Mass. This is why for Catholics it is not just the scriptures, but the scriptures and tradition that conveys the full teaching of Christ to successive generations

You do not have to tell fish how to swim, it is what they do. You did not have to explain how to pray to the first Christians, it was what they did. It was the living environment in which they lived and moved and had their very being. The first Christians learnt how to pray each day and throughout the day from the Apostles, who in their turn learnt it from Jesus himself. He for his part had learnt how to pray and when to pray from his earliest years from his parents, like any other Jewish boy. That is how we know when and how he prayed and even the content of his prayer. The Gospels therefore do not spend any time telling their readers how he prayed during what were called the hidden years because it was assumed, because everybody would have known, because that is how they prayed themselves each day.

In the immediate aftermath of the conversions that took place on the first Pentecost Day, the essential features of early Christian spirituality were described by St Luke. "These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). These prayers were the prayers that Jesus had said throughout his life, and with his disciples at the end of his life. Some were said at home, some at meal times and some each day in the synagogue or in the Temple, if they happened to be in Jerusalem. Even after the Resurrection they continued to go to the synagogues to pray, or to the Temple, as they had done with Jesus. The practice is often referred to in the *Acts of the Apostles*. In a short article like this space is inevitably short so a few quotations will have to suffice to make my point.

When Christ appeared to St Paul in the Temple where he had gone to pray, he was told to leave Jerusalem. In answer, Paul told Christ

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that he knew why he was a wanted man, and he knew the reason why. “It is because they know that I used to go from synagogue to synagogue, imprisoning and flogging those who believed in you” (Acts 22 :19-20). In other words, after the Resurrection the first Christians still went to the synagogue to say their daily prayers, and that is why Paul knew where and at what time he would find them. They prayed at the same set times that they prayed when Jesus was still with them, in the synagogue as well as the Temple if they were in Jerusalem. In the very first line of Chapter three of the Acts, St Luke writes, “Once, when Peter and John were going up to the temple for the prayers at the ninth hour” (Acts 3:1). On another occasion when St Peter was on his way to Jaffa St Luke writes, “Peter went to the housetop at about the sixth hour to pray” (Acts 10:9). There are other brief glimpses of their daily prayer life such as, “One day as we were going to prayer...” (Acts 16:16). These texts were not trying to teach their readers that they prayed daily, as they had always done, everyone knew this because that is what they all did. The fact that they were going to pray was not in itself surprising or remarkable. It was just the writer’s way of putting into time and context for his readers something that immediately followed. When the Jews finally excommunicated Christians from their places of worship they had to find their own in what came to be the prototypes of the first Christian churches.

But with the passage of time later generations forgot what was commonplace for the first Christians. It was so forgotten that I had to spend hours failing to convince a contemplative nun that personal prayer was a daily imperative for Jesus, his disciples and the first Christians. I failed to convince her because it was only many years later that I started to study early Christian spirituality for myself and came to discover what might be called for early Christian writers the elephant in the room. Or to be more precise, the elephant beneath the texts, the great assumption that was once understood by all, but which must now be stated explicitly to people who think you are making up something that never was, like my friend the ‘contemplative nun’. The daily personal prayer that was commonplace and understood by all Christians must now be stated explicitly. If it is not we will never understand and therefore be incapable of reproducing the profound mystical spirituality that once set the Christian world ablaze and the pagan world alight with what finally drew them out of darkness and into the light.

Although we do not know a hundred and one things that Jesus did in the hidden years, we do know the most important things that he did. We know when he prayed, where he prayed and how he prayed. We know that he prayed first thing in the morning to consecrate his day to God, we even know some of the prayers and

some of the psalms that he would have used for that purpose. We know that he would have prayed last thing at night too, and some of the prayers and psalms to which he would have turned. Further to this he would have gone to the synagogue each day, to say a prayer called the *Shema*. For the Jews, and therefore for Jesus too, this prayer embodied within it a total abandonment to God by promising to love him with their “whole heart, with their whole soul and with all their strength,” as they had been commanded to do, as the first and greatest of all the commandments (Deuteronomy 6:5). This prayer was said three times each day in the synagogue at the third, the sixth, and the ninth hour. If for whatever reason a good Jew was prevented from doing this then at those same times he would stop his work, or his journey or rise from his sick bed to say the prayer that was meant to dedicate every moment of every day to God. All this was in addition to Tuesdays and Thursdays when a more formal service was celebrated with prayers and readings from the Old Testament when the *Shema* would be recited together. This service was later to form the basis for the first part of the Mass as we know it today. They also said another prayer whenever they came together for meals, to thank God not just for the food on the table, but for the land that was given them. They thanked him too for all he did for them in the past, was doing for them now, and had promised to do for them in the future. This prayer was called the *Berakah*.

The essence of the ancient Jewish prayers was still used by the first Christians after the Resurrection, but they were transformed. The prayers that were once said with Jesus before the sending of the Holy Spirit were now prayed in, with and through Jesus, into whose mystical body they now lived and moved and had their very being. The inner dynamic power and vitality on which the early liturgy depended was the quality of the daily prayer and service of others during the previous week that was offered at Mass, in, with and through Jesus, to their common Father. However, what is supposed to be a liturgical climax can turn out to be an anticlimax if those who come to Mass bring nothing to be offered, because their previous week was barren and bereft of trying to practise the two new Commandments that Jesus gave us. Our daily endeavour to implement them *is* the offering that we bring with us to offer, through Jesus at the weekly Mass. If we come with nothing, then we receive nothing, and the Mass becomes meaningless, not in itself, or for others, but for those who bring nothing to offer when they enter the church.

After Our Lady appeared to three girls in Northern Spain the eldest asked her if she would take them back to heaven with her. She replied, “Whatever for, for your hands are empty.” What would

she say if we arrived for Sunday Mass with our hands empty? Any great enterprise of any moment whether it is a wedding, an anniversary, or even an important game or match, or any crucial event for that matter, will only be as successful as the time given preparing for it. The Mass is no different, except that it is the most important event in our lives, on which our lives depend. Regular failure to prepare for it will lead at best to spiritual stagnation, and at worst to spiritual suicide.

Renewal in the Church does not primarily depend on a perfectly designed liturgy, but on the quality of the spiritual lives of those who participate in it. Let us suppose that I had a magic wand and I could wave it to give everyone the liturgy of their choice each time they went to Mass. It might be the new liturgy as introduced by the Second Vatican Council, with a perfect translation of the text and with all the rites and rituals perfectly designed to satisfy everyone. On the other hand, it might be the old Tridentine Mass in Latin that so many of us were brought up on, or a grand sung high Mass with music by Perosi, Palestrina or Purcell, or the mediaeval Mass that was so loved by some of the greatest saints that have ever lived, or the ancient Mass known to the Fathers of the Church which was said in Greek long before the introduction of Latin. Or what about Mass according to the Chaldean rite said in Aramaic, the language that Jesus himself would have used at the Last Supper. The introduction of any or all of these rites in themselves would do nothing to change us personally and permanently, or the Church to which we belong, unless they are animated and inspired by the same profound daily liturgy of spiritual endeavour as practised by the first Christians in imitation of how Jesus prayed and served the neighbour in need throughout his life on earth.

It is not the outside of the cup that matters, but the inside of the cup, the intrinsic quality of the personal spiritual life of those who participate in the liturgy. Get the first right without the second, and you have a recipe for disaster. Love's daily spiritual endeavour is the offering that makes the Mass what Jesus wants it to become. If you take that away the gongs may boom and the cymbals might clash, but nothing else will rise from us to give glory to God in heaven or on the earth that he created. It is our spirit-filled endeavour, demonstrated in the personal prayer that we have made, and in the good works that we have performed, and all that we have suffered, thanks to the grace we have received in prayer, that we offer through Jesus to the Father when we take part in the Mass. Many years ago I failed to convince a canoness about the absolute importance of personal daily prayer as practised by Jesus and his first disciples. I do hope that I have managed to convince you, because without it we cannot practise the first commandment properly, nor therefore receive the grace to practise the second.