

14 Before God with the people on your heart

The prayer of intercession

I was once invited to lead a quiet day at a Christian theological college. My host introduced me and then told a story of some missionaries he knew who used to get up at dawn, spread a much folded map of the world over their living room floor and systematically pray their way across countries and continents. 'They *really* prayed!' he exclaimed, leaving us in no doubt that he suspected this 'Quiet Day' was not real praying at all.

I found the story intimidating rather than inspiring. Their practice was impressive but not one that everyone could achieve or even find helpful. Furthermore, silence, waiting and contemplation are essential if our praying is not to become a busy, repetitive list of needs and problems. It is certainly possible for silence to be a kind of escape (though it never works for very long). But it is equally easy for 'saying prayers' to become a shopping list, or a presumptuous agenda-setting for God.

What that story does remind us is that Christian spirituality is a way of service, not self-fulfilment. When we read that Christ, in glory, lives forever to intercede (see Rom. 8.34; Heb. 7.25), we immediately know that intercession lies at the heart of Christian prayer. It means the centre of Christian living and prayer is not about what we seek for ourselves. It is concerned with God's glory and with the needs of others.

For many though, 'the intercessions' remain one of least inspiring parts of Christian worship. When you hear the invitation 'let us pray' what kind of praying do you expect to follow? It is usually time spent verbally asking God for the needs of various people and situations. Intercession is a costly discipline to be faithfully embraced. But there is no one way of expressing it and there never has been.

What is intercession?

To 'intercede' literally means to go between ('inter' – between, 'cede' – go). 'Standing in the breach' is the way the Bible often pictures the ministry of an intercessor. The greater the need the more God seeks people willing to go there. One of the starkest examples is during the time of Ezekiel: 'I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one' (Ezek. 22.30).

So the word says more about *where* we pray than *what* we pray for. Intercession is expressed as a living relationship rather than a way of saying prayers. It involves the whole of us, not just our lips or thoughts. To truly intercede means being willing to enter into a costly relationship with the world around us. Michael Ramsey defined intercession as 'standing before God with the people on your heart'. This also means our praying is inseparable from the way we live.

Intercession involves seeking to be where Christ already is. It is his ceaseless intercession that sustains all our living, holding us before the Father for our healing and transforming. Far from persuading God to get involved where he is not, intercession is a participation in Christ's costly and life-giving presence in the world. It is such a comforting thought that there is somewhere we are held in a continuous stream of prayer, perfectly understood, in infinite love. Intercession is not speaking or pleading or making requests. It is going to meet someone and to abide with him where he abides, on behalf of others.

I find this very helpfully illustrated in this picture of the cross. Between two painfully broken pieces, the figure of Christ is filling the gap with his own body. His arms are thrust



deep into each piece. In his own being he provides a meeting place. Through him the two separated pieces find a way of meeting. So Christ is actually represented as the gift of a space. One of the meanings associated with the word 'to save' in the Bible is 'spaciousness'. Through the intercessory presence of Jesus, we are offered a space in which reconciliation and a new way of belonging to God and to each other are possible.

Finally, it comes as a relief to realize that God fully expects that this kind of praying is beyond our understanding and will leave us tongue-tied. We should be suspicious if it didn't. Jesus encourages us to come to it with confidence and the expectation that God will hear and answer (Matt. 7.7, Luke 11.5–13). But part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to help us in our attempts to pray at all. '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 . . . the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God' (Rom. 8.26–7).

Ways of interceding

Times and seasons

Intercession is one activity in the wider pattern of our regular praying. But there may be times when we feel called to make intercession our primary activity. There is wisdom in using the traditional seasons of the Church's year. At times such as Advent and Lent we give particular focus to more disciplined prayer and intercession. We cannot live every part of Christian living with equal intensity all the time. There may also be particular times of need when individuals or groups may feel called to spend more concentrated time in prayer seeking God's presence on behalf of others.

Praying with the whole of us

All our senses can be gifts to us when we pray. We have already noted how intercessions are too often dominated by words. Some will find sight, touch and smell helpful. The use of symbols may also be helpful. Lighting a candle is an ancient expression of prayer and vigil, as is the burning of incense. Mime, movement and dance can be deeply expressive where words are hard to find. Writing a letter or holding an imaginary conversation is another way of trying to discern what prayer is needed in a particular situation.

Some will find using a photograph or praying with an icon is a way of drawing heart and mind into prayer. (See also Chapter 3.)

Watching, vigil and worship

We do not need to know exactly what is going on around us to offer intercession.

One monastic community I know feels a call to pray during the night. The darkness of the night is often when people can be most alone and struggling. It is a time when people may be dying. It is also often when new life is born and love is given and received. The night is full of wonders and terrors and we are most deeply vulnerable even in the act of sleep. Between two and three o'clock every night the community prays in the chapel. I joined them once. Out in the night you could hear the nearby motorway traffic and the noises of the world that did not sleep. What was totally unexpected was that all they actually did for that hour was chant psalms. I kept wanting to ask: 'but when are we going to start praying?' Yet I began to realize that in their worshipful attentiveness to those ancient songs that express the heights and the depths of human longing we were praying for the world. Intercession was a loving vigil, in the worship of God, in the midst of the world's darkness.

Prayer of 'intention'

There will be times we will not be able to consciously pray because we rightly have to concentrate on the task that is before us. The prayer of intention is a way of offering our work or present task as a prayer, asking that the quality and care with which we attend to it may itself be a prayer.

The gifts of the Spirit

If the Spirit is at the centre of our praying, guiding, leading and empowering us, then intercession must include listening – leaving space for the Spirit to guide and prompt in all sorts of creative ways. (See Chapter 16.)

Lists and prayer diaries

The advantage of a prayer diary is that those who need our prayers do not depend on our memory, what mood we are in, or how awake or easily distracted we are. A simple list of names, pausing quietly after each to hold them before God and to listen to the Spirit, may be a very helpful way of

interceding. Lists need to be kept to a reasonable length. They need reviewing from time to time and we must be as ready to take a name off as we are to add one.

Interceding together

Jesus talks about the power of agreeing in prayer about something (Matt. 18.19). This is an important but neglected aspect of praying together. Often we discover what others believe is needed in a situation only when they pray their prayer. What if we don't agree with them, or believe that the real need for prayer lies somewhere else?

Life is rarely straightforward. Some issues are painfully complex. It will not be easy to know what to ask for and people in the group may have very different views. This needs talking through together. Only then can we honestly say 'Amen', let it be so, together. Even after agreeing it will still be important to resist the temptation to supply God with the answer or tell him what he should be doing!

Silence and waiting

Recalling his time as a missionary in the Lebanon at the height of the civil war, Alan Amos speaks of the place of silence in intercession. What he says of that situation could be transferred to many other corners of the world today.

The difficulty is that words have lost their meaning. For instance, if you mention hope, you might as well be talking about despair for all the effect it has on people. Therefore I would talk mostly of waiting upon God and quietly searching for his presence. Real prayer is offering what you can see and grasp of what is happening, however beastly it is, and waiting on God with it, almost as though you have it in your hands.

(From an interview in *Grassroots* magazine, February 1983)

A vocation to intercession

We are all called to intercede but for some it may be a particular calling, which may be costly. The scriptures tell us God looks for people to be intercessors but finds it hard to find them. God laments the lack of an intercessor: 'I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land ... but I found no one' (Ezek. 22.30).

Many of these intercessors and their ministry are hidden from view and rightly so. But two men from very different Christian traditions offer glimpses of this ministry at its most costly and powerful. Both lived and prayed through a traumatic era of European history. Both were recognized as intercessors. They died within two years of each other in the early 1950s.

Rees Howells grew up in a Welsh mining village. As a young adult he had a powerful conversion experience that led him to a radical commitment of his life to Christ. This increasingly drew him into intercessory prayer. He taught that three things were found in intercession that are not necessarily found in ordinary prayer – identification, agony and authority. These are the marks of Christ crucified and Howells understood such prayer as a participation in the intercession of Christ. For him intercession was a participation in the cross of Christ.

Over those same years another young man was growing up in a poor Russian home. He too was powerfully drawn to Christ and became a monk on the island of Mount Athos in Greece, where he was known as Staretz Silouan. For the 40 years up to his death he only allowed himself to sleep in brief 20-minute snatches, sitting upright. His whole life was given to intercession, marked by an almost continuous experience of spiritual warfare and demonic conflict. His biography is not for the faint-hearted! He would have agreed with what Howells wrote about the marks of an intercessor – but he would have added the word 'Glory' above all else.

We can be grateful for God's intercessors hidden in the world. We can pray for them, even if we do not know them. We can pray for the strengthening and sustaining of this way of prayer at the heart of the life of the world. It has never been more needed.

In the prayer of Jesus

The story is told of an American Episcopal priest who shortly after being elected a bishop in her church was diagnosed with cancer. She was someone who had followed a steady discipline of prayer all her life, but now, just when she needed it most, her spiritual life went into darkness and she could find no sense of God's presence or comfort. It was frightening. This continued for some time until one day, as she walked along a beach, she suddenly became aware that 'Jesus was praying his prayer in me.'

If intercession is standing before God with the people on our hearts, we can only be there because Christ is there for ever. In the end there is only Christ praying. It is all held in his living intercession. Jesus is praying his prayer in us.

For thought, prayer and activity

- 1 Do you find the picture of the crucifixion on page 122 a helpful image of intercession?
- 2 'For many . . . "the intercessions" remain one of the least inspiring parts of Christian worship.'
 - (a) Is this your experience?
 - (b) Where does the problem lie?
- 3 Sometimes we struggle with intercession because one particular way of doing it has been imposed on us.
 - (a) Are there suggestions in this chapter that helpfully challenge or creatively develop your understanding of intercessory prayer?
 - (b) Can you explore other ways of expressing prayer for others and the needs of the world?
- 4
 - (a) If you could meet and talk about intercession with Rees Howells or Staretz Silouan and were free to be completely honest, what personal experience would you share and what questions would you like to ask?
 - (b) Imagine how they might reply.

Further reading

Grubb, Norman, *Rees Howells: Intercessor* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1991).
Sakharov, Archimandrite Sophrony, *The Monk of Mount Athos* (New York: St Vladimir Press, 1983).