

PRAYER

July 23, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Let my prayer be set forth in your sight as incense....

(Psalm 141:2) The rising smoke of incense is an ancient symbol of prayer, yet prayer is not an abstract matter. It is an intensely personal spiritual experience. Although the Prayer Book advises that to pray is *our bounden duty*, most of us find that, of all our duties, this is the most difficult. One aspect of the difficulty is found in the pace of our daily living. We have less time and less privacy and so seldom pray except in a time of emergency.

Another feature of our difficulty is that, in our hurry, much of the time, our prayer takes on one of two characteristics: an impersonal and detached formality, or an emotional purgation. Too often we rely completely on the Prayer Book to say our prayers for us, or we pour out our anguish, despair and remorse in a flood of incoherence, but words are *not* needed. We don't even need to kneel. All we need to do is realize that we are in the presence of God and offer him our minds and hearts as receptive instruments. Our Prayer Book is a guide to personal prayer, not a substitute for it.

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True prayer is not easily defined, but the most satisfying definition is found in the Catechism: *Prayer is responding to God, by thought and deed*, to respond to the ceaseless outpouring of love and concern which comes from God. Prayer takes many forms. It may be formal or informal; long or short; ordered or free. Our preoccupation often makes it difficult to remove ourselves from the center and let God be there. We usually think of prayer as an offering. It is equally *hospitality*. We are asked to daily and completely yield ourselves to God, so that his will may be done.

It is significant, I believe, that every prayer and Collect in the Book of Common Prayer uses the first person plural pronoun. No Christian ever prays in total isolation. It doesn't matter whether we are in the congregation of Grace Church at one of our Services or in the privacy of our home. When we pray, we become a part of the total praying body of Christ, together *with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of Heaven*. We are never alone.

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The Collect for the Day you heard read at this Service is, in my mind at least, one of the most lovely, graceful expressions of prayer in the entire Book of Common Prayer. God knows *our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking*. When we turn to God in any way, God knows the totality of choices, chance, thoughts, action, hopes, fears and desires leading to this moment.

There are a couple of spiritual insights we can derive from this: we can realize our total dependence on God, and at the same time see that, because we are known through and through, we can be utterly honest before God. We're sort of like the author of the 139th Psalm who wrote (3) *Indeed, there is not a word on my lips, but you, O Lord know it altogether*. (4) *You press upon me behind and before and lay you hand upon me*.

Then, the prayer has us speak of our weakness or limitation. First is our own sense of unworthiness, and second is the fact that the total context of life is always hidden from us. Because of these limitations that are part of our humanity, we sometimes

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simply don't know what we should pray for. The very thing we may be passionately praying for may well be the very last thing for our ultimate good. Our prayers are always answered. Our not getting a prayer answered on *our* terms may well be the richest possible blessing to us. Sometimes the answer is no.

For reasons totally unfathomable to us, sometimes the answer is no, **No, NO**. And so, until God says *Yes*, or until we move on from the hurt of knowing we have received *no* for an answer, until then, we sometimes decide there might as well be no God. A *yes* can be exalting; a *no* can be devastating.

Accepting this as children of God is easier than understanding it. We can accept it because we know God through Jesus Christ. We know that he loves us. We know he wants our love, freely given, in return. We know that we live and move and have our being in him. We know that he will heal our hurt. When Jesus heard the disciples plead with him, *Lord, teach us to pray*, he gave them what has come to us as the Lord's Prayer. *When ye pray, say Our Father...not my will but thine be done*. When

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Jesus struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said *not my will, but thine be done*. As he hung on the Cross, he said *Father, into thy hands....* And it is through prayer that *we* are to learn his will and into his hands that *we* are to put ourselves. Prayer is more trust than utterance, more an attitude of heart and mind than of body. Prayer is listening as well as talking. Prayer is giving thanks for prayers answered.

Jeremy Taylor in his *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* (Rules for the Practice of Prayer, paragraph 5, page 234) first published in 1649, had much to say including this: **All prayer must be made with faith and hope; that is, we must certainly believe we shall receive the grace which God hath commanded us to ask; and we must hope for those things which he hath permitted us to ask, and our hope shall not be vain because we shall at least have an equal blessing in the denial as the grant. We are sure of a blessing, but in what instance we are not yet assured.**

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One of our constant and continuing prayers is that we may grow in grace and in love and knowledge of him, *for now we see through a glass darkly*, Paul wrote, *but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known* (I Cor. 13:12).

And knowing, we shall understand.

AMEN.