

Author: Paul F. Bosch [paulbosch31@gmail.com]
Series: Worship Workbench
Issue: Essay 264 + July 2021
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RE-IMAGINING PRAYER

1 I continue with this posting my series of reflections on the essentials of Christian faith. I confess to a certain heterodoxy in these pieces, but I hope I remain steadfastly within the broadest of Christian traditions. My series so far includes:

- 2 Essay 254 Re-imagining God
- Essay 258 Re-imagining Holy Week
- Essay 260 Re-imagining Jesus

3 Much more can be said about each of the above topics. So also with this one. These re-imaginings are altogether a work in progress. They are by no means finished.

4 With all of the above in mind, I turn now to Prayer. Is there a place for Christian prayer? Is there "...a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will.. "? Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act Five, scene 2.

5 Or do we go with Cassius in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Act One, scene 3: "...The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings..."

6 I suggested in Essay 254 above that perhaps what Christians have come to call God is merely a metaphor for three Important Principles in anyone's life, Goodness, Truth, and Beauty. Is this position simply atheism? If so, what is the place or profit in prayer?

7 Every week I try to catch Nature on PBS-TV. The picture I get from this splendid series is pretty grim, from one perspective. The lion eats the impala, an antelope. That's how the lion lives. And how the lion feeds its young. The impala has no voice in the matter. Each week on Nature, some animal is eating another animal.

8 Aside: One of the strongest arguments against vegetarianism is the insight that the carrot screams when you pull it out of the ground. Where did I hear this? I can't remember. I heard it long before I began to subscribe to Harper's magazine, with its fascinating feature "Findings", always on the last page...

9 So nature is “red in tooth and claw”. That is undeniable. The natural world is pretty unforgiving and brutal. I have also heard this understanding was the source of Charles Darwin’s renunciation of Christian faith. And maybe the source for many moderns’ also.

10 But to think of God as a metaphor: Does this help at all? Is there any sense or profit in prayer?

11 Is there any consciousness, any Person, behind the metaphor?

12 I am forced to conclude, yes and no. First, no.

13 Imperical evidence from the natural world is pretty conclusive. There is no reason to suppose, on the basis of the imperical evidence, that there is a God, much less that that God is benevolent or loving. Earthquakes, floods, tornados, wild fires. All these cause terrific, indiscriminate human pain and sorrow. Romantic appeals to the sparrow who feeds her hatchlings at her own expense fall on deaf ears.

13 So I’m with Cassius here: “...The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars...” Or any where else. The universe is indiscriminately ruthless.

14 How about the answer Yes? What case can be made for this possibility?

15 I’d appeal here to human history. There was a time, in human history, when civilized nations gathered in the public square to watch a human hanging as punishment for a crime. And as public entertainment! To watch a beheading! To watch a human burning at the stake!

16 I’d be willing to argue that, whatever the cause of this, we’ve come a certain distance from those days. Human moral perceptions have been enlarged, through the years. They continue to be enlarged and, you could even say, refined. (The USA remains one of the few so-called civilized counties in the world – China is another -- that hold to the death penalty for certain crimes.)

17 I predict the days are coming when there will be no war.

18 The death penalty, armies facing each other across a battlefield, even unoccupied drones doing their deadly work – these are simply too ghastly to contemplate today.

19 Yes yes yes. The “old Adam” is still within each of us, as Luther would remind us, and always will be. That need not mean we have not actually improved in moral perceptions!

20 And on the micro level? There’s been moral improvement there as well. I would never claim, as I have heard a celebrity maintain, that when she drives her car downtown, she prays to God she will find a parking place, And sure enough, she finds one, right next to her destination.

21 For myself, I would be willing to testify that my own moral universe has expanded during my lifetime. Whatever the cause, I find myself much slower to judge, much quicker to accept and to excuse – and to forgive.

22 You can select your own feelings, within limits, my wife Kathy would maintain. I have come to endorse that view. Two human individuals can experience the same misfortune: an accident, a health emergency, a personal or professional setback. One can bemoan and bewail the cruelties of fate, and make life miserable for everyone. The other can accept and embrace the misfortune, and determine to learn from it. One can frown, the other can smile.

23 Now how about prayer? Is there any value or virtue in prayer, with God as metaphor? Yes, on several levels.

24 First, prayer helps the one who prays. To pray is to rehearse your values, what you hold dear.

25 It is no accident that the second petition of the Lord's Prayer is "Your kingdom come." When we pray, we are affirming that. We are affirming an Eschatological Prolepsis. See Essay 246 above: "This is the way things should be. They're not that way now. But this is how life should be."

26 But does prayer do any good for the one for whom you're praying? Here is a second reason to pray. I take this reason from the story in the first three Gospels of Jesus' healing of the paralytic.

27 You recall the story. Jesus is healing and teaching in presumably a private home, and the place is crowded. No one can enter by the door. So these un-named friends carry the paralytic to the roof, where they lower him on his pallet to Jesus' feet.

28 Now (Surprise!); In all three of the Gospel accounts, there is a plural pronoun: "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Rise, take up your pallet and go. Your sins are forgiven..." That's "...their faith...", the faith of the friends on the roof! Here's a sign – there are many more in the Bible when you look for them – that one person can come to wholeness and health because of the faith – of others! That we are somehow all connected. You have seen it in your life, I have in mine.

29 When I am wounded, you bleed. When you prosper, I am blessed. We live in a human matrix that assumes a corporate identity.

30 That's an important insight into prayer-for-others. We cannot avoid the realization that we are all bound together. Individualism has its place. But Intercessory prayer simply acknowledges the claims of our corporate life.

31 What is still required of us all – living as we all do in this "vale of tears", is that "leap of faith". I hope the above is faithful to Kierkegaard and to Tillich, if not to others

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