

In the place of Jesus: Insights from Origen on prayer

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Growing in prayer is not simply acquiring a set of special spiritual skills that operate in one bit of your life. It is about growing into what St. Paul calls “the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). It is growing into the kind of humanity that Christ shows us. Growing in prayer, in other words, is growing in Christian humanity.

It seems that all Christian reflection, all theology worth the name, began as people realized that because of Jesus Christ they could talk to God in a different way. It was the new experience of Christian prayer that got people thinking, “If Jesus somehow makes it possible for us to talk to God in a new way, then surely there are things we ought to be saying and believing about Jesus.” And so the great exploratory business of theology began to unfold.

That newness of prayer is expressed most vividly by St. Paul in Romans 8 and Galatians 4. “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba!

Father!” (Gal. 4:6). The new way we talk to God is as Father, and that is the work of the Spirit of Jesus. And of course it is the prayer recorded of Jesus himself, the night before his death (Mark 14:36). So, for the Christian, to pray—before all else—is to let Jesus’ prayer happen in you. And the prayer that Jesus himself taught his disciples expresses this very clearly: “Our Father.” We begin by expressing the confidence that we stand where Jesus stands and can say what Jesus says.

Some kinds of instruction in prayer used to say at the beginning, “Put yourself in the presence of God.” But I often wonder whether it would be more helpful to say, “Put yourself in the place of Jesus.” It sounds appallingly ambitious, even presumptuous, but that is actually what the New Testament suggests we do. Jesus speaks to God for us, but we speak to God in him. You may say what you want—but he is speaking to the Father, gazing into the depths of the Father’s love. And as you understand Jesus better, as you grow up a little in your faith, then what you want to say gradually shifts a bit more into alignment with what he is always saying to the Father, in his eternal love for the eternal love out of which his own life streams forth.

That, in a nutshell, is prayer—letting Jesus pray in you and beginning that lengthy and often very tough process by which our selfish thoughts and ideals and hopes are gradually aligned with his eternal action, just as, in his own earthly life, his human fears and hopes and desires and emotions are put into the context of his love for the Father, woven into his eternal relation with the Father—even in that moment of supreme pain and mental agony that he endures the night before his death.

So it should not surprise us that Jesus begins his instructions on prayer by telling us to affirm that we stand where he stands: “Our Father.” Everything that follows is bathed in the light of that relationship. The Lord’s Prayer begins with a vision of a world that is transparent to God: “May your kingdom come, your will be done; may what you [God] want shine through in this world and shape the kind of world it is going to be.” And only when we have begun with that affirmation, that imagining of a world in which God’s light is coming through, do we start asking for what we need. And what do we need? We need sustenance, mercy, protection, daily bread, forgiveness; we need to be steered away from the tests that we are not strong enough to bear.

Origen is one of the early Christian writers who speak and write about prayer starting from this point. Origen (who died probably in 254) grew up in Alexandria and taught in various places around the eastern Mediterranean, especially in

Alexandria and in Caesarea in Palestine. For a lot of his career he was a layman, but he was eventually ordained in Palestine (rather to the alarm of some people who thought he was very unsound); he was imprisoned in the great persecutions of the 250s and seems to have died as a result of the torture and injuries he endured in prison. He was not just an academic, then, but a witness who carried the cross in his own life and death.

Origen's little book on prayer is the first really systematic treatment of the subject by a Christian. And one of the questions he asks is one you probably have asked yourself from time to time: "If God knows what we are going to ask, why bother to pray?" Origen has as good an answer as anyone has given: God knows, of course, what we are going to say and do, but God has decided that he will work out his purposes through what we decide to say and do. So if it is God's will to bring something about, some act of healing or reconciliation, some change for the better in the world, he has chosen that your prayer is going to be part of a set of causes that makes it happen. So you'd better get on with it, as you and your prayer are part of God's overall purpose for the situation in which he is going to work.

It is a pretty good answer—and it is one that certainly keeps us on our knees working hard, which is just as well. But Origen also gives us lots of practical advice about how to do it. He tells us, for example, that we should start our prayer with praise: tell God why he matters—because you need to know that, even if God doesn't. End with thanks. And on the basis of the Psalms—"In the evening, and morning, and at noonday will I pray" (Ps. 55:18, BCP)—pray at least three times a day.

These are very straightforward bits of advice. But when we then turn to what Origen says specifically about the Lord's Prayer, we discover a great treasury of profound insight. In a very New Testament way, he stresses the spirit of adoption we have received: we speak to God as daughters and sons, and so we speak to God as a God who has—through his own freedom—decided not to be remote, but immediate. He has decided to be our friend—indeed, the word in Greek can be even stronger: our lover—the one who really embraces us and is as close as we can imagine. Very near the heart of Christian prayer is getting over the idea that God is somewhere a very, very long way off, so that we have to shout very loudly to be heard. On the contrary: God has decided to be an intimate friend and to make us part of his family, and we always pray on that basis.

With that in mind, Origen reminds us that our prayer is always in Jesus rather than to Jesus. Then, as now, plenty of people were in the habit of chatting to Jesus as a friend—which is fine in its way; but the essence of prayer as the New Testament presents it is to let Jesus pray in you and take you into the very heart of God the Father.

Just as Jesus empties himself out of love for us, we in return empty ourselves. We push away the selfish desires and the limiting images that crowd into our heads. We make room, we empty our minds and hearts, so that the love of God can fill them. So our prayer is that we may be made one with the will and the action of Jesus. And that means, says Origen, that when we pray we are all of us “priests.” Just as Jesus bears up the suffering and grief of the world to God, so when we pray and join in his activity we are doing a priestly thing, bringing the pains and needs of Earth into the heart of God. And as we pray, therefore, we become images of Jesus the priest.

Origen has more practical advice: you can pray anywhere, he says; don’t imagine it’s restricted to special places. But that does not mean that prayer is just a casual matter; physical stillness and physical solitude matter. Interestingly, he says that it is not just about you as an individual being still and quiet in preparation for prayer; you need to be quiet at a deeper level—that is to say, you need to be at peace with other people before you embark on prayer.

So, he tells us, do your fasting, do your giving—and do your reconciliation, because that is as essential a part of prayer as being quiet. If you are tempted to think that Origen is drifting off into mystical abstraction, remember that being ready to pray is being at peace with other people. Be reconciled and then come and offer your gift, as Jesus says (Matt. 5:24). And in one of his sermons on Leviticus, Origen underlines the fact that generosity to the needy is part of the purification that prayer requires.

Behind all this there is quite a complicated scheme in Origen’s mind, spelled out in many of his longer works, which is all about detaching your spirit—the essential you—from the passions and instincts and desires that crowd in on you. You need to step back from the kind of reactive life that just lets your emotions and instincts flow out in all directions. Be aware; be on guard that your spirit may not be smothered by a welter of thoughts and emotions.

In another sermon—this time on the book of Numbers—Origen talks about the journey of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt as a symbol for our journey to God.

Egypt is a place of temptation; Egypt, as the Bible reminds us, is a place where you find fleshpots. But once you have left the fleshpots of Egypt behind, it is not all smooth sailing. You go into the desert and into a period of struggle. You go into uncharted territory and an uncertain future, and you have got to learn discernment, how to tell good from bad. You have got to learn vision and knowledge. All being well, that inner freedom will lead to what Origen calls “sober drunkenness,” where you are “out of your mind”—removed from your ordinary selfish, anxious, defensive habits. Your ordinary orientations and instincts have fallen away—and you don’t quite know whether you are going to stay upright when you next put your foot on the ground. You do not quite know where you are going, but there is something so exciting and intoxicating about it that you know you are in a different world. It is a long job, and the travel through the desert takes many years; but at the end of the journey is freedom.

Out of all this there begins to emerge a model that became very popular in the early church: a threefold pattern of learning to pray. You start with the “practical” life: learning ordinary self-awareness, the common sense of the Christian life; recognizing when you are being selfish and stupid and acting instead with an increasing degree of generosity. You move on from that to the freedom to see God in the world around you. When you have got your ego and all its fussiness a little bit in its place, then actually you see more; the world is more real and more beautiful. You see order and pattern in it, and your heart and your imagination expand until at last you arrive at the third level, at what Origen rather unpromisingly calls “theology” (by which he does not mean a degree in religious studies).

The intensity and clarity of what you see in the world around you trigger a sort of “leap in the dark”—or rather into the light—and into God. Your vision is clarified; your actions are gradually disciplined; the divine life slowly transforms you; and, to use one of the best expressions that Origen comes up with, we move into a condition where “the whole of our life says, Our Father.”

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