



praying against the tide

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God” (Psalm 19) Amen.

How is that for a prayer, a single sentence prayer. The kind of single-sentence prayer we so often need when the language of prayer seems remote and far away. I want to bring those prayers into conversation with a letter that Augustine – the 5th century bishop and theologian from North Africa – wrote to a woman who wrote asking for help. Her question to Augustine was, How do I pray when I no longer know how, or even what I should pray? I think there is something of us in that question, and something for us Augustine’s response.

I have been thinking about the apostle Peter in the midst of events that mark the beginnings of the Christian movement. Our Gospel passage sets the scene for how we think of Peter: the simple fisherman, who – without knowing it – opens a theological window for Christians ever since. Who do you say that I am, Jesus asks. Peter’s answer: You are the Messiah, the Christ. In Matthew’s longer account: You are the Christ, the son of the living God (16.16). To complicate the gospel drama, however, it is only moments until Peter disapproves of Jesus, who involves the disciples and all those gathered nearing him in his pilgrimage to the cross:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8.34).

I think this surely must weigh on Peter. In an episode just before the one we read from the Book of Acts, Peter and the others are arrested for subverting the social order, but are then released for lack of evidence. However, for good order, they receive a

flogging and are given strong warnings about their preaching.

Putting on my dramatist’s hat on for a moment, – I have no doubt that, in that moment, the pain in some way takes Peter back to that time when Jesus spoke of the cross, and to his denial of Jesus near the end. And now, his body racked with pain, does Peter’s mind take him back to that moment when Jesus stoops to wash his disciples feet and Peter says, “Not just my feet. But my hands and head as well” (John 13.9).

What does Peter pray in that moment? If faith is a country, and prayer is its language: how does Peter learn to speak while his body bears the pain of speaking his message against the religious and political tide?

Peter, along with other disciples, receives the teaching and ministry of Jesus. And not only the others who are part of the circle of twelve. If we are speaking of disciples, we must think of the wider circle of women and men who made room, in their homes, at their tables, in their hearts, for what Jesus had to bring; all those unnamed who shaped their lives around the aftershock of Resurrection.

The Church of Scotland minister and writer Kathy Galloway, writes about Peter in her book of reflections titled Getting Personal (pp. 88/89).

Jesus wanted his followers to be seekers, the teaches to be learners, pupils to continue questioning until the day they died. ... their masters to sit as learners. Priests to be penitent; scribes to also be hearers of the Word. ... When choosing Peter, the simple fisherman, unversed in religious language, Jesus did not want a priest or a theologian. He wanted a

fisherman. ... Fishing was in his blood; it was his vocation. In trouble, his instinct was not to pray or organize but to go fishing. It was the fisherman who was needed on [the] road when the priests and the theologians lost the way. It was the language of bread and fish and water and catches that spoke to the ears of men and women, not the pieties of the religious. It was the ordinary man, with the cares and responsibilities that are the lot of most of us, who with his wife and his life with him, affirmed the life of faith as a possibility for all people burdened by life, not just as something for those set aside and apart.”

Today we meet his Peter, who did not retreat into holier-than-thou posturing, who took no refuge in religion and its formulas.

So what does this say to us in this is a sermon about prayer. And about prayers that runs against the tide. Prayers that at times defy our own inability to pray and somehow find a voice in us, even when we don't have the words. Prayer, let's call it, in spite of ourselves. The kind of prayer Augustine speaks about in his letter to Anicia, 5th century Roman woman who writes for help on how to pray.

Augustine was a bishop, who had enjoyed great success a lawyer and academic who only Christian faith later in life, and not until he would utter one of his most famous prayers: “Lord, make me chaste, but not yet ...” At least he was honest. And it is this refreshing honesty that finds Augustine, many years later, and now as a bishop in North Africa, writing to a Anicia Faltonia Proba.

Anicia had been wealthy noble woman, a widow, unusually highly educated, and living in Rome. She was one of the few who was able to escape the city after it was invaded and collapsed in the year 410. She escaped to North Africa where she founded a charity house for women and became a patron of the Church.

Anicia was a refugee, a ship run aground on a foreign shore. Seemingly exhausted from her cataclysmic journey, she writes Augustine saying she no longer knows how to pray, or even what to pray. All conversation with God has dried up.

The reply turns out to be the Augustine's only extended writing on prayer. And it is surprisingly modern. Unlike Peter, Augustine is one of the most educated and illustrious people of his age. But, like Peter the fisherman, Augustine refuses to take refuge in religious clichés. (We have all heard the empty phrases, they say nothing more than, Not to worry: when God closes a door, he opens a window. Let go and let God. God will never give you more than you can handle. God helps those who help themselves.)

Instead, in his letter to Anicia, his correspondent, Augustine writes four counter-intuitive starting for prayer when you cannot pray:

- 1 Don't be surprised if you can't pray.
- 2 Start where you are.
- 3 Words are optional, so pray as you can, not as you can't.
- 4 And be open to be changed by what you pray.

1. Don't be surprised if you can't pray. We walk by faith, and not by sight. And so you find yourself in a struggle to pray. That is no bad thing: it means that you really know, deep down in your guts, that you need help. A desperate heart is a prayer in itself, it seeks help from a “God” above who is NOT simply a bigger version than ourselves. A desperate heart is an autumn leaf that seeks the ground below. We need a God who knows our suffering and hears our cry. And so Augustine writes (elsewhere), “Oh Lord you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

2. Start where you are. Augustine's letter is clear: when it comes to prayer, we are all exiles who have lost our way. Prayer is a foreign language, and it is a wonder any of us can ever pray. Prayer is a direction, an orientation, a turning, sometimes in spite of ourselves, in prayers that can do no more than echo Christ's prayer from the cross: "Father, forgive..."

So start where you are, and ...

3. Pray as you can, not as you can't. Prayer, is hard. And maybe, Augustine says, you can pray for a happy life, it's what many people pray. (In a sermon to his local church congregations, Augustine brings this down to this: "Love God and do what you will." [On the 1st letter of John, Tract VII.8.]) But when you do, says, Augustine, please pray also for me. And may the Lord, who is able to do far more than we can ask or think, listen to your prayers!

But if he must hear your silence, pray silence; if all you have is tears, pray your tears. If you have sighs, then pray that too. Prayer is a pulsating heart. Sometimes a murmur. Our sighs, groaning, or murmurs are not hidden from God. Sometimes all you can do is breathe. Start there. God breathe the world into life by his Word at creation. Our words are an afterthought.

4. Be open to being changed by what you pray. I think many times, or perhaps at times in our lives, Church is a self-selecting leisure activity. There are many other places we could have been today, and there is lots going as we wind down the summer in London. And yet, we are here. To be changed, reconfigured by the meal we are here to share around the communion table.

The Catholic writer von Balthasar says, in his book on prayer: "To be human is to be a creature carrying in one's heart a mystery that is bigger than oneself. It is to be built like a [sanctuary] around a most sacred mystery. ... It needs an effort – the contemplative effort of prayer – to clean it up and make it

habitable for the divine Host. But the room itself does not need to be built: it is already there and always has been, at the very core of our being" (Prayer, p. 23, abv.).

That's all well and good. But then comes the coffee hour. The church coffee hour. Is that, too, a time to reconnect? I see it as a rehearsal we are to each other when we stand around the eucharistic table. When we look to our left and to our right and we realise: "This is a person whose company God longs for" (Rowan Williams). We might only do this after the service in patchy conversations and awkward starts. But then we find ourselves extending a bit of compassion, exercising words of care, or sharing in someone's joy, or in their concerns for the week ahead.

But it takes a transformation of perspective to see the coffee hour as a vital rehearsal of Christian virtues. I am not always ready for conversation. But the reality is that, there too, the other person holding a coffee cup is a person whose company God longs for. To know that is to be changed. And so be ready to be changed by what you pray.

There is a new translation of the New Testament that has raised some controversy by providing a changed perspective on the Lord's prayer. The theologian David Bentley Hart translates the prayer of Jesus to read as what he calls "a prayer for the poor."

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
on earth as it is in heaven:
may your kingdom come,
and your will be done,
Give us today our daily bread. ...

Why that double mention of "today" and "daily"? Bentley Hart says we lose the bite of that double phrasing, attuned to the socio-economic conditions that Jesus spoke into when he first uttered the prayer. He insists that we think specially of those caught up in cycles of debt. When we spiritualise the Lord's Prayer, we blunt its judgement of

power, for the prayer means something different for the poor who struggle for daily living than it does for everyone else.

Give us our bread today,
a ration sufficient for the whole of the day.

Grant us relief from our debts,
and to that degree, help us grant relief
to those who are indebted to us.

And do not bring us to courts of trial,
but rescue us from the wicked man.

Here, in saying “the wicked man,” Bentley Hart has in mind the corrupt money lender, the loan shark (see <http://churchlife.nd.edu/2018/06/05/a-prayer-for-the-poor/>).

It is easy to understand, obviously, how it is that over the centuries the Lord’s Prayer should have come to be something else in our Christian practice—something less specific, less concrete, more comprehensive, more unrelated to any specific economic conditions or any particular station in society.

John Bell, of the Iona community, has a prayer in the middle of the communion we will be singing after the peace. You have the order of service with you: take a look at the final verse: “Lord, your summons echoes true whom you but call my name. Let me turn and follow you, and never be the same.” Is this a prayer we can really say? Is the change it promises something we can really face? Do we really want to “turn” from where we are heading, face in a different direction, to “follow” Jesus and “never be the same.” I wonder how each of us will pray that single sentence when we sing it as a hymn?

There are times when all we can do is a one sentence prayer, spoken in words we are just about able to borrow. And so, Annie Dillard give us this prayer in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974): “I go my way. And my left foot says ‘Glory’. And my right foot says, ‘Amen’.”

So, where have we been:

- 1 Don’t be surprised if you can’t pray.
- 2 Start where you are.
- 3 Pray as you can, not as you can’t; words are optional.
- 4 And be ready to be changed by what you pray.

I want to close, then, with the prayer of the poet and farmer Wendell Berry. It is his manifesto for faith the runs against the current of unbelief, unrealized promises for someone who has been deeply politically engaged, and, so for him, prayer in the face of the unrelenting attacks on nature he was worked his entire life to overturn. Berry was asked in an interview, why do you still pray. In his response, he read from his poem “The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer” (<https://onbeing.org/blog/the-contrariness-of-the-mad-farmer/>). Prayer is ultimately for Berry a turning, all evidence to the contrary, face-first towards toward God’s unending grace.

I am done with apologies. If contrariness is my inheritance and destiny, so be it. If it is my mission to go IN at exits and come OUT at entrances, so be it. I have planted by the stars, in defiance of the experts, and tilled somewhat by incantation and by singing, and reaped as I knew: by luck and Heaven's favor in spite of the best advice. The said, ‘I know my Redeemer liveth’. [Then] they told me ‘God is dead’. I answered, ‘He goes fishing, every day, in the Kentucky River. I see Him often ... So be it. Going against [the tide]. It is not the only, or the easiest way, to come to the truth. It is one way.

Prayer is going against the tide. It is not the only, or the easiest way, to come to the truth. It is one way. And it is only the beginning. Amen.

Ivan Khovacs