

What Are We Doing When We Pray?

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My God,
we cry out and complain
 we groan and weep
 we are speechless and silent.
And we beg and implore,
 we wish and we will,
 we crave and insist.
We thank and praise,
 we rejoice and dance,
 we sing and we glorify.

These are all ways of expressing our lives before God. To call them all 'praying' is much too narrow, because the word 'pray' means much the same as 'ask' and 'plead'. But to come to God only with our entreaties is hardly the expression of a true love for God. God is more than our heavenly helper in time of need.

God is our Father because he is the intimate Abba mystery of Jesus, who became our brother. Only hired servants beg from their masters. Children talk trustfully and confidently to their mothers and fathers about the things that are on their minds. As we do in a family, we tell God about our joys and our suffering because we know how lovingly God shares in our lives; for God is a lover of life (Wisdom 11.26). Only servants come to their masters solely with their requests and demands, otherwise preferring to keep well away from them. 'Needs must', they say, and when it is a question of their own distresses they seek out their 'helpers in time of need'; but they show no concern for the 'helpers' themselves.

Friends don't behave to each other like this. They tell one another their joys, and then their sorrows too. Only the person who can share the rejoicing can also suffer in sympathy when it comes to the point. Friends

advise each other in difficulty, when it is a matter of vital importance. They are bonded to each other in affection and respect. Their affection doesn't smother their friend. Their respect for the other person's liberty never turns into indifference. We pour out our hearts to God as we do to an understanding friend. And when we pray for other people, or tell God our wants and desires, we are advising him in his government of the world. But we don't *coerce* our 'heavenly friend' with our plans and intentions; we respect his freedom. Talking to God and listening to him in this freedom, which is the expression of great love, is 'prayer in the Holy Spirit'. This is the way God's friends pray. It is true that in the Old Testament only people who had seen God 'face to face' are called 'friends of God'; but the mystics who found their own selves in 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' called themselves God's friends because they were able to talk, and did talk, to God as a friend does. The servant begs — the child trusts — the friend consults. These are not necessarily stages in our self-confidence which we discern in prayer; but they are certainly strata of self-experience which disclose themselves to the person who prays.

I. Our body language when we pray

Our posture shows what we are thinking and feeling, and at the same time it influences what goes on inside us, for inwardly and outwardly, mentally and physically, we are a single Gestalt or whole. What posture do people adopt when they pray? I shall pick out three, because they are biblically based. 1. In Islam, worshippers prostrate themselves. 2. Christians fold their hands, close their eyes, kneel down. 3. The early Christians stood upright in an attitude of adoration, with raised head, open eyes and outspread arms.

1. The *Muslim* position in prayer is reminiscent of the vassal's subservience before the absolute power of an Asiatic despot. The vassal threw himself on his face before the ruler, presenting his unprotected neck for execution or pardon, and making himself as small as possible. This age-old gesture of subservience is the expression of a religion of absolute dependence on the will of the Higher Power. But the bodily attitude implies more. The person who is praying is making himself as small as possible; he is acting out his own insignificance and assuming the position of an embryo in its mother's womb. What happens from now on is in accordance with the Lord's will. The subject's own will has been withdrawn into an embryonic condition.

But this attitude in prayer is by no means just a political gesture. In the Old Testament people who are overcome by the fathomless divine power 'fall on their faces' before it, in fear and terror. So it was with Abraham (Gen. 17.3, 17), Joshua (Josh. 7.6), Daniel (Dan. 8.17), Moses and Aaron (Lev. 16.22), and so it was with the whole people of Israel: they fell on their faces 'before the Lord' (I Kings 18.39). The New Testament tells us that Jesus 'fell on his face' in Gethsemane (Matt. 26.39) because God was 'far off' (Mark 14.41). His disciples 'fell on their faces' before Jesus when he was 'transfigured' on the mountain of God (Matt. 17.2, 6). Both God's deadly remoteness and his glorious proximity overwhelm people with unendurable terror. That is why they make themselves so small, submit themselves unconditionally, and surrender themselves completely. It is only the grace of the Almighty that gives them life.

2. The *Christian* posture in prayer in the Western church may also have developed out of gestures of political subservience in Germanic culture, although we may presume that Roman culture put a stronger impress on the church in Western Europe, and the hierarchical church evoked its own gestures of subservience.

What are we doing when we kneel down to pray, fold our hands, lower our heads and close our eyes? We are withdrawing into ourselves, assuming an attitude of contrition, and are crouched down as we are when we are doubled up in pain. We are acting out our helplessness, our unworthiness and our humility. We are making ourselves smaller than we are, and seem to be sheltering from the sublime majesty of God and his representatives on earth. Subjects were never permitted to look their ruler in the eye. When the ruler arrived, his subjects had to cast down their eyes so that the potentate might remain unrecognized. Folding the hands shows that they are unarmed, and incapable of a sudden attack. The folded hands grasp each other; they are in firm control of one another, so to speak. To bend the knee is a sign of homage and an expression of profound humility. To be 'weak at the knees', so that one is forced to sink down before the supreme power of the Almighty, is a demonstration of one's own powerlessness.

In the biblical traditions, to kneel down is a way of showing that the body is sinking to the ground while the spirit rises adoringly to God: 'O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!' (Ps. 95.6). The same gesture is used into [*sic*] illustrate the promise of Christ's universal lordship: 'At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow' (Phil. 2.10). But to see people at prayer who have crawled into themselves and are bowed down is to be reminded of the image of the

sinner used by Augustine and Luther: 'The human being bent in upon himself' (*homo incurvatus in se*). That person looks anything but redeemed. Anyone who is so bent in on himself can't breathe freely. He looks as if he is a burden to himself. What is being demonstrated here is an oppressive religion of inwardness. The senses are closed. The human being seeks God in solitariness, in his or her own inward being, in the heart or soul.

3. We see a completely different way of praying among the *adoring early Christian figures* depicted in the catacombs in Rome and Naples. They are standing upright, heads raised and eyes open. Their arms are stretched above their heads, their hands open, palms upwards. It is the attitude of a great expectation and loving readiness to receive and embrace. The people who in this posture open themselves for God are free men and women. That is why they are standing upright and looking up with heads held high and eyes open. They are growing beyond themselves, as it were — growing tall. The raised arms expand the chest so that the person can breathe. To stand upright is the starting point for movements in space, and invites the person to walk, stride and dance. The person who prays in this position is praying especially for the coming of the Holy Spirit: 'Come, Creator Spirit ...' It is the attitude of Orthodox priests at the *epiklesis*. So it is not by chance that the Pentecostal movement has adopted this bodily position, and demonstrates it.

I would assume that this was the way Jesus stood in front of the disciples on the mountain where he was 'transfigured', for 'his face shone like the sun' (Matt. 17.2). It will also be the stance of people who are filled with messianic faith, and who in the uncertainties about the world's future wait for the coming of the Redeemer: 'Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near' (Luke 21.28).

People look to the future with open eyes if for them praying means being awake, *watching*: watching in a world where so many people are suffering from nuclear and ecological numbing, out of fear of possible — or possibly inevitable — havoc.

The adoring posture of the early Christians shows the Christian faith as 'the religion of freedom', demonstrating this in a way we can enter into and feel with our senses. It is because this is a religion of freedom that in the catacombs we find a striking number of women in this posture, which expresses grandeur and self-respect, not humility. The upright stance before God is the most astonishing thing, and quite unparalleled. God is no longer feared as a superpower, and no longer exalted as the Lord of heaven by way of the worshipper's self-humiliation. Here God is like the sun that

rises and shines on those who stand up to welcome it, or like the rain which the parched land receives, and which makes everything green and fertile (Matt. 5.25). To say the same thing without images; here God is Yahweh's *ruach*, the breath of life which confers life, and the wisdom of love for life. People who pray like this are laying themselves open to the wind of the Holy Spirit, and are driven by the Spirit. That is incomparable freedom before God, with God, and above all *in* God.

When we look at these three attitudes of prayer one after another, in the sequence presented here, and if we enter into each of them in our own person, we become aware of a movement that seems precisely tailored to many of the stories about Jesus in the Gospels, and is typical of them. People come to Jesus humiliated, bent down, crippled. They 'fall on their faces' in front of him and ask him for healing. And Jesus raises them up. They open themselves. They straighten their backs. They no longer look up to other people out of their misery. They look them straight in the eye. They can see again. They can walk again. They can love their lives again. They laugh and rejoice and praise the God of Israel (Matt. 15.30f.). The 'raising up' of the crippled woman is a prime example (Luke 13.10-17): 'And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and praised God.' In the power she receives from Jesus, she gets up by herself and praises God in her own words.

If we begin to pray in one of life's defeats, cast down by deep disappointment or abysmal grief, it is good to begin with the first posture, and to fall on our face, roll ourselves into a ball like a child in the womb, cover our face with our hands and weep, so that the pain and anger can flow out of us. After that we rise to our knees, examining our hearts as we implore God to be near us. But healing only begins when we stand up completely, breathe deeply, raise our hands above our head, and experience with open eyes the coming of the life-giving Spirit.

These three postures can be practised when we are by ourselves, or together with close friends. They can be danced to meditative music, or painted. We can accompany them with our own voices, with sighs, prayers and rejoicing. In changing over from one posture to another it is important to listen to the language of our own bodies and to tune into it. We can also say aloud the first three petitions of the Lord's prayer in these three different positions. We shall then feel how differently the petitions are interpreted through the different postures. Isn't the adoring posture the body language that interprets them best?

Thou hast turned for me my mourning into a round dance;
thou hast loosed my sackcloth
and girded me with gladness,
that my soul may praise thee and not be silent (Ps. 30.11f.)

In 'round dances' we can dance shared experiences of God. To dance before the gods, in order to give them pleasure and to find pleasure in the gods oneself, is general practice in all cultic religions. We can still see this today from the temple dancers in India and the danced demonstrations in Africa. Israel, too, danced its experiences of God: 'Then Miriam the prophetess ... took a tambourine in her hand and all the women went out after her with tambourines in round dances' (Ex. 15.20). But the people also danced round the Golden Calf, until Moses destroyed this image of power (Ex. 32.19). Jeremiah makes God call out in the messianic era of salvation: 'You shall take your tambourines and go forth to the dance of the merry-makers ... Then shall the maidens rejoice in the round dance' (Jer. 31.4, 13). God is praised 'with tambourine and dancing' (Ps. 150.4). In the shared round dance the Lord's name is praised. Ever since the early Middle Ages, the church's prayer has certainly still been sung, but it is no longer danced; and this is an impoverishment of body language. How can the body be a 'temple of the Holy Spirit' if it is frozen into rigidity and is not permitted to move any more? People who are moved by God's Spirit move themselves, and people who experience grace move gracefully.

2. *Coming awake and praying*

Modern men and women often think that praying is something peculiar, and that in order to pray one must have a special religious aptitude. The person who goes to church is going there to pray. It is only behind monastery walls that prayer is unceasing. But modern men and women help themselves by *working*. That is why German calls the pain of grief 'the work of grief' (*Trauerarbeit*) and the experience of guilt 'mastering the past' (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), while self-knowledge is known as 'working on oneself' or 'self-realization'. For modern people, prayer sounds too passive. And men often think of it as 'something for the women'.

But this modern impression is quite wrong. There is nothing specially religious about praying. It is something generally and essentially human. In fact praying isn't even just something human: the whole creation prays without ceasing in the breath of the Spirit.

A sigh goes through the world

When people are seized by God's Spirit and begin to long for the redemption of this unredeemed world, they become sensitively aware, with freshly awakened senses, that this longing fills all the living who want to live and nevertheless have to die. This is the big surprise which Paul describes in his Letter to the Romans (8.19ff.); 'All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God', he had said earlier (8.14), and we think: 'Great for us!' But then he sets this human experience of the Spirit in the context of a universal cosmic expectation: 'The creation waits with fearful longing for the revealing of the children of God ... because the creation itself desires to be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God' (8.19, 21). Together with the whole of creation, 'fearful' because of evanescent time and the destiny of death, we long for the redemption of the body. The torments of death and the yearning for life make all earthly creatures sigh and groan, and join in our sighing and groaning. For where these sighs and groans are heard there is still hope for redemption. Where everything in and around us is struck dumb, hope dies too. Sighs and groans are hope's signs of life, in opposition to death. That is why, according to Rom. 8.26, God's Spirit, the life-giver, also intercedes for us 'with sighs too deep to utter' when we ourselves feel we can't go on, and are struck dumb. But this means nothing other than that God himself suffers in his creation and with his creation, and sustains it through his sym-pathetic suffering and sighing patience, until the day of redemption dawns and his glory is revealed in all creatures, so that there is no further need to remember 'this time of suffering'.

So when in the Spirit who is the life-giver we human beings begin to complain of death and to weep for our dead, we shall wake up and hear how the earth weeps, and how all its creatures groan and cry.

When we come awake in God's Spirit, we also participate in God's sufferings in this world and with this world, and wait for the future of his redemption. In this sense praying simply means doing what the earth with all its living things does, and doing what God himself does in the world through his Spirit. It is not praying any more that is the singular thing, because it singles out silent human beings from the crying and groaning earth. Not to pray any more means not to come awake, but to be numbed by God's absence.

The world is full of praise

There would be no fear of death if there were no delight in life, and there would be no sighing in the world if there were no love for life there. Indeed the stronger the delight in life, the deeper the fear of death, and the more passionate the love for life, the louder the sighs and groans. The sighs and the song of praise are not contradictions. They reinforce each other mutually. The pain of death is simply the negative, reverse side of the positive love for life.

The world is full of praise, for God is in this world. God is not far off, in the Beyond, but is himself the life in the world. Israel expressed this by saying that God's Spirit, God's Wisdom and God's presence fill everything created in such a way that all things live from God and have their existence and continuance in God. 'The Spirit of the Lord fills the world' (Wisdom 1.7). His Wisdom 'reaches from one end of the earth to the other in goodness' (Wisdom 8.1). 'God's immortal spirit is in all things' (Wisdom 12.1). But one day 'the whole earth will be full of his glory', as Isaiah 'saw' in his call vision (Isa. 6.3). So nothing is so far from God that it does not hold God 'within itself', as Aquinas said, and God is so close to all things that, together with human beings, in him 'they live, move and have their being' (Acts 17.28). How do we perceive this? All created things praise, love, glorify and adore God by rejoicing over their existence before him, and by enjoying their life in God. 'All thy works give thanks to thee' (Ps. 145.10). 'The field exults and everything in it. All the trees of the wood sing for joy' (Ps. 96.12). 'The heavens are telling the glory of God', says Psalm 19, and Job 26 is the record of a wonderful hymn of creation.

It is only for modern men and women that the world has become dumb, for it has now come to be seen merely as material for research and technology. The modern world for its part has led to what Rachel Carson called 'the silent spring', and has turned the song of praise of living creation into the stillness of the dead and ravaged world. But the world is not mute. All creatures speak, even if human beings can no longer hear them. All creatures are aflame with the present glory of the Lord, and reflect his glory in a thousand different mirrors, but 'we are blind, we have no eyes' said Calvin, as did Francis of Assisi.

People who thank God every morning for the new day in their lives, people who praise God through their delight in existence and glorify him through their love for life, are not doing something singular. They are only doing what all creatures do, universally and unceasingly, each in its own way. With the lives they live these people are joining in with cosmic

resonance of God's goodness and beauty. To pray like this means to wake up out of the mute world of modernity and turn back to the cosmic solidarity of all created being.

Praying means coming awake. So praying also means *awakening the senses.*

Awake, my heart, and sing
the Maker of all things,

wrote Paul Gerhardt, and:

What the great God so greatly does
awakens all my senses.

People used to call this 'nature mysticism'. Nowadays the phrase is 'creation spirituality'. If this is not to get stuck at the level of religious poetry, we must develop a new theological understanding of nature which will teach us to read nature — from matter to human beings — as God's sign language, so that we may learn to hear and see, taste and feel God in all things and all things in God. As creation, nature is more than an information system which we make out so as to master and reproduce it. The genetic code and our cultural code point beyond themselves to God's sign language, just as this sign language can gather up the genetic and cultural codes so that they take on a new quality.

The laughter of the universe is God's delight

When in the company of all other created beings we praise God for our existence, and when we glorify him through our lives, we are praising his goodness as Creator and his marvellous patience with us. He leaves us time and gives us living space. But he also gives us an experience of God which takes us further than that: the knowledge of the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead, and his transfiguration in the coming glory of God. It is the experience of 'the power of the resurrection' out of which we ourselves are born again to a living hope. This is the overture to the transformation of this temporal creation into the eternal creation, and this mortal life into eternal life. In this overture, all the harmonies and melodies of the future symphony of the world in God are already sounded. From it a supernatural joy springs up which overcomes the sighs, and gathers into itself the songs of praise of this creation. The joy is not restricted to the Easter faith, for this human Easter faith is set in cosmic dimensions.

Adoration in 'wonder, love and praise' is outdone yet again by the '*Easter laughter*'. This was originally a medieval custom, a way of translating the Easter joy into earthly pleasures too. The congregation was to be made to laugh through jokes and fun. We can still hear this laughter echoing in the words and tunes of Easter hymns. The Easter laughter springs from the completely unexpected and totally surprising universal turning point which God initiated when he raised Jesus — the Jesus whom the powers of this world had crucified, and whom the women who followed him had buried. At first, certainly, the women and the disciples were simply shocked. But the laughter at this turn of events, which already fills the community of the risen Christ here and now, will one day ring through the whole universe, when the universe is raised and transfigured in the glory of God. What had been expected was the cosmic catastrophe, and what comes is the new creation. What had been expected was cosmic death, and what comes is eternal life. Is that not reason enough for laughter? With us prayer and laughter seem to be poles apart. But here they coincide. 'Then our mouth will be filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy' (Ps. 126.2), for 'blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh' (Luke 6.21).

3. *Wanting — willing — praying*

Prayer doesn't come easily to the lips of some people, let alone spontaneously. Of course in every life there are heartfelt sighs and cries from the depths. But prayer is more than that. It is talking to God and with God, and if in the fellowship of Christ God is 'our Father', then his children will like to talk to him, always and everywhere. A child grows slowly and learns to talk to its parents; and the same is true in our relationship to God, which is the relation of a child. We pray through the Holy Spirit, and we listen to God in the Spirit, and through prayer we grow into fellowship with God. Faith deepens prayer, and prayer strengthens faith, until we reach the point of 'praying always and without ceasing' (Luke 18.1), whether consciously or unconsciously. Of course we shouldn't just babble on at length 'as the Gentiles do' (Matt. 6.7); but we are struck to the heart when in the Gethsemane story we hear Jesus's reproach to the disciples: 'Could you not watch with me *one hour*?' It isn't easy to pray concentratedly for a longish time, let alone 'one hour' in the day, without letting one's thoughts stray. But prayer and meditation have this in common: they can only be learnt by hard, concentrated practice. So we must practise praying, like to pray, and feel the spiritual strengthening

and comfort we receive in prayer. Christians who have to get through a huge daily agenda are often the very ones who spend a very long time in sustained prayer.

The psalms in the Old Testament can be a good school of prayer, and so can the Lord's Prayer and the church's hymnbook, because they embody so much, and have so much to tell us, about the loss of God, the experience of God, and the wisdom of God. We need this tradition in order to find our own language in prayer, and not to be reduced to silence.

And if a man in torment is struck dumb,
yet did a god give words to tell my suffering (Goethe).

As specifically as possible

What must we bring with us when we pray? We are talking now about prayers of request. If we take our bearings from the stories about Jesus in the Gospels, we see that there are two necessary preconditions if the request is to be heard: 1. *firm faith*, in the sense that we trust God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength, since 'All things are possible with God'; 2. *a strong will* that what we have prayed for should really happen. 'Your faith has made you well', said Jesus to 'the woman with an issue of blood', who touches his garment, being sure that if she does so she will be healed (Mark 5.34). 'Be it done for you as you desire', he says to the Canaanite woman who begs him to heal her daughter (Matt. 15.28). We must bring faith to prayer, and we must know exactly what we want. What we want we must want under all circumstances.

Praying begins with *wishing*. We get an idea, we have a dream, we see a vision in front of us. Nothing lends more vitality than a creative idea. It gives us hope and points us towards a greater future. Our life takes on meaning, and what we do acquires an orientation. Why is there so much despair and apathy about? Because we have betrayed our dreams and lost our hopes. Because we are afraid of being disappointed we write off our hopes so quickly, and don't dare to do things. 'Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he will not be disappointed,' we say. This attitude often leads us to make a cunning deal with providence: I always expect the worst. If it doesn't happen, great! If it does — well, at least I was right. But hope wants whatever I am beginning to be successful, and have a happy end. The person who really expects and hopes for something is not in love with failure. If we really want something, we have to want it with all our hearts

and all our souls and all our strength. It is better to come to grief with our great wishes than not to have them, and to be successful as a result.

The same can be said about what we *will*. Praying begins with what we really *will*, with all our hearts and all our souls and all our strength. Here too we are often gnawed by doubts about the things our will is set on. 'It's impossible', we say, and don't trust ourselves to do it: 'I can't!' By saying this we are already anticipating in our innermost souls the possible setbacks, and are getting in the way of our own 'willing'. So as not to be completely disappointed, we only 'will' half-heartedly, our hearts are not in it, and we do not invest all our energies. But how should that 'be done for as we desire' (Matt. 15.28) if we are not clear ourselves about what we really do desire, and whether we actually desire it at all? Let us put ourselves for a moment in the position of the one who is supposed to be responding to our wanting, willing and praying. Does he hear a clear wish, a specific will and a real, solid request? Are we trusting him to hear our requests with complete trust? Faith means wanting and willing something with all our hearts.

As unreservedly as we can

Faith like this must be brought to prayer, or must be developed in prayer. People who don't love and trust God with their whole heart (Deut. 6.5) don't truly pray either. So we have to banish every germ of resignation from our minds. We have to conquer our apprehension that what we wish and pray for might perhaps not happen after all. It is not trusting God if we ask for something, but immediately leave it to him not to answer our request. That sounds as if we were saying: 'Yes, we are asking, but we don't much care whether what we ask is granted or not.' If we bring our wishing and willing to God in prayer, we are trusting ourselves to God completely, and expecting everything of him. According to the stories in the Bible, people who came to Jesus asking something had a clear picture in their minds of what they desired and willed, and they came to him with unreserved trust. So when we pray, let us make our wishes and requests as clear and specific as we possibly can. Let us banish everything that is hazy and equivocal; don't let us keep our options open! And let us trust ourselves to God with a whole and undivided heart, and without resignation: 'All things are possible with God!'

There is a build-up in prayer. This is the transition from *prayer* to meditation, and from *meditation* to the silent *submergence* in God. We begin with our wants and requests. We take up our thinking and thanking.

These are the gifts of grace for which we ask and give thanks. But then we perceive the gracious hand of God out of whose fullness we receive and take, and we grasp these open hands of the life-giving God, so to speak. From these open hands of God we will be led to the open heart or 'womb' of God, in which we are eternally in safe keeping. These images are a way of describing the road that leads from asking in God to life in God. Finally, we no longer love God just because of his gifts of grace, which make life enduring and good. Then we no longer love God either just because of his wonderful presence, which surrounds us from every side. Then we begin to love God for his own sake and are happy in a kind of selfless contemplation of his beauty. In this *adoration* we fall silent, because we forget ourselves. The silent submergence of the heart in God does not do away with the other stages in prayer. The mystic way which we have described here is not an outward journey with no return. On the contrary, it means turning into ourselves so that we can start on a new outward journey, and an immersion in the mystery of life so that it may be more vital. So it is good in prayer to fall silent between the remembering and the thanking and the wanting and the requesting, so that as we become still we may sense the presence of God in the eternal moment.

In the name of Jesus

Perhaps our prayers often remain so general and resigned because we only call on God without being clear in our own minds who God is. Then it is a help to name *the name of Jesus*, to call on God in his name, and to make our requests for his sake. With Jesus, we have in our mind's eye a specific human figure. This makes it clear to us what we can pray and how; for Jesus makes us aware of who God is. When we look at Jesus's person and message, we realize what we can ask for, and what we can't. He is the visible likeness of the invisible God. That is why he was rightly called the Son of God, and God's Word made flesh. To see Jesus is to see God. The way Jesus listens and acts is the way God listens and acts. The One Jesus called 'Abba, my beloved Father' is, for Jesus's sake and in fellowship with him, our Father too. 'Abba' is a primal word of undivided childlike trust. So we can also translate it as 'mother'. We must see what form of address in prayer best expresses our undivided primal trust. I feel Jesus's nearness most strongly in addressing God as Abba. That is why we pray the Lord's prayer in the fellowship of Jesus. Later prayer formularies in the church then addressed prayers 'through Christ to the Father'. Just as through Jesus God the Father became our Father too, so through Jesus

we talk to God our Father. In order to make that clear, it is useful to pray 'Our Father who art in Christ.' When we say 'our Father in heaven', it is because we are thinking of God in the kingdom of his boundless possibilities; but we also feel a distance which was not present in Jesus's Abba prayer. 'Our Father in Christ' brings God down to earth from heaven, so to speak. However we use it, it is only with the name of Jesus that our prayers become concrete, and that trust enters into our prayer.

4. Living with unheard prayers is called 'watching'

How can we go on living with unanswered prayers and still keep our trust in God? How can we exist when God is silent? Then suffering from God begins, with the unanswerable and inexorable question: My God, why? And suffering from our own unfulfilled lives begins also: 'Why me?' or 'Why not me?' Many people then give up and stop praying altogether, because it hasn't helped anyway. Many people give up believing in God, or rebel against this God who leaves us in the lurch when we need him. 'Curse God and die', Job's atheistic wife advised him, as he sat on the ashes of his life and contended with God. When Jesus's prayer in Gethsemane was not heard, his disciples fell into a deep sleep. That, too, is a natural reaction to absolute desolation.

If our prayers are not heard, and we feel only soundless silence round about us, it is good to think of Gethsemane, and to enter in spirit into Jesus's passionate prayer to his heavenly Father, and into his God-forsakenness. He was not spared the cup of forsakenness for whose passing he had so implored. Not his will was done but God's, the will he did not want. Any of us who find again our own god-forsakenness in the forsakenness of the Jesus who prayed without an answer, enter into an experience of God which the Christian mystics later called 'the dark night of the soul'. We would give up, or become inwardly numbed, or as if turned to stone, were we not together with Jesus to acquire the power to 'watch' in this 'night of God'. Watching means being aware, open-eyed and with fully stretched senses, of the reality of this eclipse of God. The New Testament does not simply say 'pray!' We are told again and again to 'watch and pray'. We learn this watching in fellowship with Jesus, when God is far away from us. It is a watching and waiting in the Holy Spirit, who is beside us and intercedes for us when we lose sight of God and when the last spark of faith in us dies out. The watching Christ in Gethsemane shows us this way of being open for God's reality in God's absence.

Watching in tense expectation is the strongest form of prayer, because it is a great human answer to God's hiddenness. We watch for God.

'Be sober, be vigilant': this is what the New Testament expects of Christians. They are supposed to keep watch in a sleeping, drunken and dreaming world. What do we perceive, when we live with senses that are open to receive and at full stretch? We perceive the dangers threatening the world, and the tribulations hanging over its self-assured and despairing people. But we watch, too, because we are watching for God's coming. 'Blessed are those whom the Lord shall find watching when he comes' (Luke 12.37). Waiting puts great expectancy into our praying, and by so doing makes it messianic. Watching goes beyond the praying and beyond the falling silent, because it makes our whole life an animated and awakened life in tense expectation of God's coming into this world.

5. The sustaining network of intercession

It is actually astonishing that I can pray not just for myself but for other people, too, and that other people can pray not only for themselves but for me as well. These intercessions bring us into a great, often world-wide fellowship of the Spirit. To know that this fellowship is there, and intercedes for me when I fall silent, gives me a powerful feeling of safe keeping. In this intercessory dimension, praying doesn't make us solitary; it overcomes our lonelinesses. People who have a hard time ahead of them and know that others are praying for them know that they are sustained, and they don't give up. Human life becomes living when people are there for each other; and in the same way, life in the Spirit becomes a living life because people pray for each other, and bring one another reciprocally to God.

Intercession cannot remain general. It has to be specific. But it can only be specific if we have as much background knowledge as possible, and inform ourselves. 'Informed prayer' is therefore a convincing point in the programme for the *Women's World Day of Prayer*, which has existed ever since 1887 and which has become a world-wide ecumenical movement. Each year, on the first Friday in March,

women all over the world support each other in their hopes and fears, their joys and anxieties, the possibilities open to them and their needs. Through the World Day of Prayer women all over the world are encouraged to raise their sights to include the whole world, and no longer to live in isolation; to take upon themselves the burden of other people and to pray with them and for them; to become conscious of their gifts and to put them to use in the service of the community. Through the

World Day of Prayer, women confirm that prayer and action cannot be separated, and that both have an influence in the world which cannot be estimated (*Ein Freitag im März*, ed. A. Schmidt-Biesalski, *Weltgebetshandbuch*, 1982).

Informed prayer for other people leads us to share in the fortunes of other people, suffer with them and rejoice with them. Because people's lives are never merely inward or spiritual, informed intercession leads inescapably to social, political and economic prayer for others who are humiliated, hungry and oppressed. After all, the Lord's Prayer already puts 'our daily bread' first when it turns to human affairs. Today, all over the world, the Women's World Day of Prayer has become an eminently political matter, no less than the *Political Night Prayers* which began in Cologne in Germany, and the world-wide *prayers for peace*.

Depending on the possibilities and powers available, informed prayer is followed essentially by 'praying action'. In many countries the Women's World Day of Prayer has triggered off unexpected initiatives and activities. The prayers for peace held on Monday evenings in the Protestant churches in Leipzig are another good example of informed prayer and its results. These prayers were a leftover from the massive peace movement at the beginning of the 1980s, when people in West and East Germany demonstrated against the introduction of Cruise missiles. For ten long years, some very small, politically quite insignificant groups met in Leipzig to pray for peace. Then came the unforgettable peace demonstrations of 1989, which took 300,000 people on to the streets. It was the Monday evening prayers for peace which first sparked off the demonstrations and the commitment to non-violence. Against 'prayers and candles' the full martial force of the state power of East Germany was helpless. These Leipzig prayers for peace and peace demonstrations brought down the Berlin wall, and because they were non-violent they may be considered the first successful revolution in Germany.