

THE LONGEST JOURNEY OF ALL

The Swedish Church

Easter VI

Prayer Sunday

Sunday May 1st 2016

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Pundits tell me that the tragic conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the longest lasting war anywhere in the world. It has passed through different phases reaching all the way back to June 1960 when Belgium finally gave independence to its only African colony. In my youth, however, perhaps the most vivid memory in all this was of the air crash on September 18th 1961, which tragically brought Dag Hammarskjöld to his premature death. As Secretary General of the United Nations, he was on his way to broker a ceasefire to save non-combatant UN troops from almost certain death, when his aeroplane crashed in the jungle.

After he had died there was discovered the remarkable diary jottings of this most private of men, jottings which were later published under the simple title *Markings*. They became a celebrated source of spiritual nourishment for that coming generation, and are still read widely now. So, on Prayer Sunday, in a Swedish church where else to begin, but with Hammarskjöld? Let me set the scene with just a couple of his short gnomic aphorisms. So, at one point he reflects:

‘The longest journey
Is the journey inwards
Of him who has chosen his destiny
Who has started upon his quest
For the source of his being.’

Following on with a similar thread, Hammarskjöld reflects elsewhere:

‘Pray that your loneliness may spur you into finding something to live for, great enough to die for.’

In a way, the manner of his own death seems to have confirmed that his vocation to seek peace and serve humanity was a cause ‘great enough to die for.’

Now I’ve already said that Hammarskjöld was the most private of men, and these two brief reflections fairly clearly indicate that he was a loner. But, another of his most famous aphorisms comments: ‘In our age, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.’ So, he was a loner but a loner more implicated and more integrated with the wider fate of humankind than almost any of the statesmen of the twentieth century. So prayer for him was also a corporate exercise and not simply solitary.

The Scriptural readings we heard but a few moments ago all touch on the nature and practice of prayer, but each in rather different ways. So it was Jeremiah who set us off:

‘You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart.’

Therefore, the prophet is clear that commitment to the life of prayer includes every ounce of our being – ‘when you seek me your whole heart, he says.’

Our second reading, from the first letter of John, echoes much of that same feeling, but it reminds us also that we ask *anything according to his will*. That phrase is a key to understanding the nature of prayer, and we shall return there ‘ere long. Finally, the passage from Luke’s Gospel, including the *Our Father*, the *Lord’s Prayer*, introduces the corporate or community element which is essential to prayer. Prayer always looks out from me to God and to

others – Jesus is the pattern there as we see him in Gethsemane – ‘yet not my will but thine be done.’ Again prayer seeks that which is according to God’s will.

Of course, one of the complexities of prayer is the sheer number of headings under which it’s often divided. It may be prayer of confession and repentance; it may be prayer of adoration, reaching out to the heart of God in Christ; it may be the prayer of contemplation – emptying oneself – and opening oneself wider ever wider, and so on.

Does this mean that prayer is something of a hydra-like practice – with many heads and everyone quite different? Well, of course, the moods of prayer are undoubtedly manifold. I may come to God, craven and lost, on account of my sin, or my depression or my desolation; I may come to God consumed with concern for the woes and troubles of friends and relatives, or of the world’s wider wounds in conflict and injustice; I may come utterly consumed by the sheer power and majesty of God – rather like the disciples at the Transfiguration of Jesus, or Moses on the holy mountain – and so in adoration; or I may come – for retreat, for silence, for pure contemplation. Aren’t these all quite different, perhaps even in conflict with each other?

Well, already there are very clear hints, in what we’ve seen already, that the answer to that question lies in the negative. For we have touched on one key phrase. We pray, *according to God’s will*. As we confess or repent, we say sorry for falling away from God and *his will*; as we intercede we offer our prayers that God may accomplish things according to *his will*; in adoration, just glimpses of God’s majesty can offer hints of what *he wills*; in contemplation, we open our hearts to *God’s will*.

But in all this, what becomes ever more clear is that prayer stands as an essential to the Christian life. It’s not an add-on, an instrument only for use in time of despair, something that we retire to when we’re in that sort of mood. It is instead the umbilical cord which roots us in God and offers us a way to what the Orthodox call *theosis* or in the western tradition, *divinisation*. We are being taken ever closer to the heart of God. Jesus is, of course, the perfect exemplar, but more than that, Jesus is God incarnate. Hammarskjöld wrote, still more gnomically:

‘I am the vessel. The draft is God’s. And God is the thirsty one.’

We can only assume that it was through such an appreciation and such a life that he was sustained in his extraordinarily challenging vocation. He hints at just that when he writes:

‘God does not die on the day that we may cease to believe in a *personal* deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.’

This was the life that Jesus lived and died, albeit that he was closer than any to that personal God and Father. At his crucifixion it was clear beyond doubt that Jesus had responded to words not dissimilar to those of Dag Hammarskjöld:

‘Pray that your loneliness may spur you into finding something to live for, something *great enough to die for*.’

Amen.

Readings

Jeremiah. 29. 11-14.

I.John.5. 13-15.

Luke. 11. 1-13.