

Forty Days (Matthew 6. 1-14)

Sarah Bachelard

On Wednesday this week – Ash Wednesday – we began the season of Lent and the forty days’ preparation for Easter. Why forty? In biblical symbolism as well as in other traditions, the number forty signifies the experience of a certain kind of process, a time of ‘trial or preparation during which people are made ready for the next stage in their development’. The Hebrews spent forty years in the wilderness before entering the promised land; Jesus – recapitulating that wilderness journey – spent forty days fasting in the desert before beginning his public ministry. Interestingly, as I recently learnt, ‘Muhammed spent forty days fasting in a cave, and the Buddha spent the same length of time meditating under the bodhi tree’. According to the Kabbalah, the tradition of Jewish mystical thought, ‘it takes forty years to complete a cycle of transformation from intention to integration’.¹ Most of us have a way to go, it seems!

So the number ‘forty’ is about the time it takes – the time necessary to live from one state of being into another. Every year, in Lent, we symbolically enter again into this process ... making ourselves available for the renewed working of God’s Spirit within and among us, offering ourselves ever more fully to be transformed and led on. And that’s why traditionally in Lent we commit or renew our commitment to disciplines and practices that intensify our awareness of the continuous and continuing journey of transformation – practices of prayer, fasting, study and service.

¹ Laurence Freeman, *Sensing God: Learning to meditate during Lent* (London: SPCK, 2015), p.xiii.

What's critical, of course, is that these practices don't become merely formulaic – as if they're ends in themselves. It's Lent, so I'm giving up alcohol or chocolate; or I'm going to Mass every day or reading vast slabs of the bible, and feeling pretty good about my piety, my Lenten discipline. That's why the reading we've just had is traditional for Ash Wednesday. We're reminded by Jesus how to be available for the real process of transformation – as opposed merely to *looking* like we're available while polishing our religious ego.

The key is letting go self-consciousness and any sense of our prayer and religious practice as performance. 'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them'. The examples Jesus gives of this are hyperbolic – almost laughably exaggerated. Whenever you give alms 'do not sound a trumpet before you' like the hypocrites, who also love to pray at street corners so they'll be seen by others. These are vivid images, but almost too removed from anything we'd be tempted to do. I imagine that most of us would rather curl up and die than pray at a street corner so as to be seen by others. Even so the possibility of prayer as performance, contaminated by self-consciousness, is ever present, in subtle and pervasive ways.

It *can* involve wanting to look good before others. Maybe not going so far as to sound a trumpet before us, but certainly hoping to be approved of as a 'good' church citizen, a regular attender, someone who says the approved words, and 'helps' in the approved way so that just the right people are aware of what we've given – though in such a self-effacing way. It can also involve wanting to look good to ourselves – staving off neurotic guilt, being pleased with ourselves for our righteousness, taking pride in our self-discipline. Jesus' point is that however subtly, even subconsciously it happens, when our prayer is in service of our appearance to others or ourselves, then that's the reward we get – we look good ... And that's it.

True prayer, on the other hand, prayer receptive to the gift of transformation, must lead us beyond the limits of our self-consciousness and self-absorption. It's vulnerable – pushed off from the shore. It doesn't keep one eye on what it looks like, the left hand knowing what the right is doing. Its attention is one-pointed – its horizon is God alone. This is the prayer of the undivided heart. 'Whenever you pray, go into your inner room and shut the door (don't look behind you, don't look in the mirror) and pray to your Father who is in secret', hidden, beyond anything we can imagine or manipulate. And the Father, who sees in secret, who knows your heart, will reward you. The nature of this reward? Well, what God gives always connects us more fully to reality, to truth – always liberates us for larger life.

But if that's what true prayer is, it seems almost an impossibility. I know for myself that I am interminably self-conscious, self-absorbed, self-justifying, even as I try to leave myself behind. Which means St Paul is right. What we discover when we try to pray, is that we do not know how to pray as we ought. The difficulty is, we *can't* let go self-consciousness by an act will, or *decide* to be undivided. We might sincerely want to get out of our own way, to hand ourselves over in utter simplicity in the presence of God. But there remains a 'me' trying to hand myself over, whom I cannot get behind.

So somehow we must be displaced from the centre of our selves, the cords of our self-consciousness loosed from the inside by the grace of God. And this is how Jesus teaches us to pray. We are to begin, he says, by acknowledging the source of our life and inviting that source to work within and among us – 'hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done'. We are to acknowledge our need and dependence, to relinquish what keeps us locked in our small selves. 'Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors'. We are to express our trust and hope in the goodness of God.

Meditation is a practice which embodies, enacts this prayer Jesus taught us. By coming into the presence of God, letting go our thoughts, we make space for God to be God. We consent to be displaced, inviting God's Spirit to pray within us. Over time, very gradually, our self-consciousness is loosened and we find ourselves more able to be oriented simply, undividedly towards God and so to release ourselves and others from the small reciprocities of blame and bitterness. We are increasingly content to be handed over without self-protection to the goodness of God.

This Lent, as every Lent, we are invited to offer ourselves anew, to begin again. Maybe over this time you'd like to commit to the twice-daily practice of meditation or to another discipline that calls you to be more whole-hearted and so receptive to the gift of prayer, the reward of truer life. However it looks for you this Lent, may you experience this time as a process of deepening transformation. And blessed be each of one of you, these forty days and nights.