

**The Wound of Prayer (Mark 14: 1-9)***Passiontide*

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‘Prayer is the religious phenomenon par excellence’, says French philosopher, Jean-Louis Chrétien. It is ‘the human act that alone opens up the religious dimension and never ceases to sustain, to bear, to suffer that opening’.<sup>1</sup> Chrétien goes on to describe prayer as an ‘ordeal of transcendence’, an undergoing of God. Prayer wounds the one who prays, he says, and is itself ‘wounded speech’.<sup>2</sup> These are striking, perhaps unfamiliar images. They’re a long way (it seems) from our old bedtime prayers, ‘Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child’. But in this final week of our series on prayer, it’s this question of the ‘ordeal’, the ‘wound’ of prayer that I’d like to explore.

What leads Chrétien to characterize prayer like this? To begin, he says, it’s because prayer ‘always has its origin in the wound of a joy or a distress; it always opens its lips in response to some tearing asunder’.<sup>3</sup> For some of us, this quasi-violent imagery might jar a little. But what I take Chrétien to mean is that prayer arises from an opening, an opening effected in us by need, desire or love; by a summons, an invitation, a hurt. Prayer does not originate with our sufficiency, but issues forth when our self-containment has been broken or coaxed or surprised or called into opening up. In previous weeks, I’ve spoken of prayer beginning with desire. In Latin, the word for ‘wound’, *vulnus*, is the root of the English, ‘vulnerable’. So it’s in this kind of sense that we can conceive of prayer originating with a wounding, a vulnerability, an opening of self.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2004), p.17.

<sup>2</sup> Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, p.27.

<sup>3</sup> Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, p.37.

Yet as Chrétien points out, this wounding is not just to get us started and, as we pray, something paradoxical happens. Our prayer has the effect, not of closing up, but of enlarging – further opening – the wound in us.<sup>4</sup> One aspect of this, as we’ve already seen, is to do with the process of purification. As we come closer to God, as we suffer God’s nearer presence, prayer reveals our illusions and self-limiting ways of being. It confronts our ego-ic self-satisfaction, and this is painful. Rowan Williams says, ‘if we believe we can experience our healing without deepening our hurt, we have understood nothing of the roots of our faith’,<sup>5</sup> while the Augustinian friar Martin Laird speaks of being healed in the end by ‘the liturgy of our wounds’.<sup>6</sup>

But there’s another dimension to all this – another reason that prayer has the effect of increasing our vulnerability, enlarging (if you like) our wound. It’s to do with the fact that the more deeply we give ourselves to prayer, the more we experience the ‘beyondness’ of the one we address and long for. We are ‘called by a call that completely exceeds’ us, Chrétien says.<sup>7</sup> Every attempt to respond, let alone to encompass its fullness, falls short, and so our yearning, our sense of unfulfilment grows.

I think we know something of what this is like from other experiences in life. You might bring to mind times of being with a lover or a beloved child or friend, or times when you’ve been in the natural world or before a work of art, and found yourself overwhelmed, profoundly touched and moved by the beauty, the wonder, the sheer existence of the other. You feel drawn to respond with your whole being, to ‘answer’ to this reality in some way, and yet your response seems always insufficient, a falling short. Do you know that sense – that feeling, I can’t love enough, appreciate enough, yield enough, be present enough? An image of this for me is of a mother pretending to nibble her baby’s toes – this yearning to take in, this exuberant delighting in the other’s life which can never fully be expressed or sated.

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<sup>4</sup> Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, p.37.

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.20.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, p.37.

This is a kind of ‘wound’, a deep opening of the self to the other which is unfillable. But it’s an exquisite lack, and we wouldn’t want this wound to close because that would mean we’d stopped being moved by the fullness and joy of what touches us, opens us. Indeed it’s our very consciousness of ‘falling short’, the felt inadequacy of our love to its object, that constitutes our knowledge of the other’s wonder and plenitude. And if we’re lucky enough to know this experience, we willingly suffer what our tradition calls this ‘wound of love’, this ‘sweet sorrow’.

So it is with the wound of prayer. Last week, I said the heart of prayer is becoming open to all the fullness that God wishes to pour into our hearts. But this fullness utterly exceeds us. It overwhelms and defeats us (Chrétien draws on the story of Jacob wrestling with God); it overflows our capacity to take it in, it leaves us yearning for more and stammering to express ourselves – prayer wounds the one who prays, Chrétien says, and is itself ‘wounded speech’. One of the most profound and passionate expressions of this experience of prayer, and the woundedness of prayer’s speech, can be found in Book 10 of Augustine’s *Confessions* where he cries out to God, bewildered, reproachful and almost beside himself:

You called, you cried, you shattered my deafness. You sparkled, you blazed, you drove away my blindness. You shed your fragrance, and I drew in my breath, and I pant for you. I tasted and now I hunger and thirst. You touched me, and now I burn with longing for your peace’. (*Confessions*, X.27)

Augustine has been touched by God –Williams speaks of a ‘beauty whose compelling force’ has broken through ‘the defenses of [Augustine’s] soul’<sup>8</sup> – and now he aches for an un-encompassable ‘more’, his mystical prayer shot through with erotic imagery. And it’s like this also, it seems, for the unnamed woman at Bethany in tonight’s reading, who comes to Jesus ‘with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard’, breaks open the jar and pours the ointment on his head. It’s as if, like Augustine, her defenses too have been broken open, she’s found herself ‘called by a

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<sup>8</sup> Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, p.81.

call that completely exceeds her' – and her response partakes of the same excess. She has anointed his body for burial, Jesus says, and she's done it with utter self-abandon, called beyond all decorum and withholding. She's suffered the wound of love, and her action is itself a form of helpless, ecstatic, wounded speech – a prayer.

I imagine for most of us, most of time, these heights (or depths), this agony and ecstasy, seem remote from our experience – our prayer life decidedly more prosaic, fitful, even dry. John Main was fond of saying that, in the journey of prayer, it doesn't matter where we are or what we experience – it just matters that we're on the way. I used to think of this as a kind of consolation prize – his way of encouraging we spiritual laggards who were never going to attain the mystical dimension, or feel as if we knew directly the burning touch of God. But more and more, I realise that what he says is true.

Prayer opens us to God ... and all that matters for our growth and transformation is that we keep being willing (in Chrétien's words) 'to sustain, to bear, to suffer that opening'. I've spoken tonight of the wound of mystical prayer, not to make us feel inadequate, but so we know that our distracted 10 minutes once or twice a week is of a piece with the passionate prayer of the woman at Bethany and of St Augustine, of a piece also with the wounded prayer of the wounded Christ. When we pray, whenever we pray, we're embarked on the same pilgrimage into the heart of divine life where we are simultaneously wounded and healed, drawn beyond ourselves and restored fully to ourselves.

Poet George Herbert described prayer as feast and journey, as God in us and we in God, 'Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age, God's breath in man returning to his birth, the soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage'.

As we enter Holy Week, preparing to live again the liturgy of Christ's wounding for our healing, may we consent so to be wounded in prayer, that through us, God's love may pour out for a wounded world.