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**Attention** (Mark 8: 31-38)

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Our theme this Lent is prayer. In particular, we're focusing on the dynamics of radical and transforming prayer – prayer that draws us into intimacy with God and so more and more conforms us to God's likeness, to a way of being that's unthreatened, hospitable, generous, loving and generative of life. Last week, I said this kind of radical prayer begins with desire – God's desire for us, and our desire for God. *The Cloud of Unknowing* speaks of cultivating a 'lively longing', 'a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being'.<sup>1</sup>

But what exactly does it mean to speak of 'desiring' or 'longing' for God? For some of us, perhaps, these notions connect with something in our experience. We might be conscious of a deep yearning, a hunger for – we know not quite what. One writer speaks of 'a kind of ecstatic pull',<sup>2</sup> where 'ecstatic' refers not to the intensity of feeling but to the sense of being drawn beyond or outside yourself (*ex-stasis*). Others of us, however, might struggle to recognize our experience in these ways of speaking; we might not resonate with this language. In fact, we don't feel we're particularly drawn by something we're inclined to call 'God'; our souls don't feel particularly 'thirsty' for 'more'. We're just living our lives, seeking to go on with as much integrity as we can. If this is where we find ourselves, what does it mean for our prospects in prayer?

The question of what it feels like subjectively to desire or long for God is certainly different for different people. And one thing the great teachers of our tradition insist on is that intensity of feeling or emotional state is not a necessary feature of prayer. In fact, intense feelings can end up being problematic in two ways. On the one hand, those who

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<sup>1</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. William Johnston (New York: Image Books, 1973), pp.39-40.

<sup>2</sup> David Foster, *Contemplative Prayer: A New Framework* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.11.

have them can end up preoccupied with them, mistaking their feelings for God and becoming focused on cultivating their feelings rather than focused on God; while on the other hand, those who don't have such feelings can think themselves spiritually second-class citizens, and begin to strain after them, becoming discouraged when they don't eventuate.

So – when I speak of prayer beginning with the desire for God, I don't want to imply the necessity of a certain 'felt' quality of experience. Desiring God is much more to do with the question of orientation, with what you want your life to be connected to and about. And I guess what I would say is, even if your experience of 'desiring God' doesn't feel particularly intense or 'desirous' – well, you're here aren't you? Jesus walked through the villages and towns of Palestine and many just let him pass by. They didn't particularly register him, and didn't want to know more of him. Others however, came closer. They weren't necessarily in the inner ring – maybe they didn't feel they fully 'got' what he was about. Nevertheless, something drew them ... something in them, however, unconsciously and inarticulately, began looking in his direction and the direction he pointed ... and that's where prayer begins. With coming closer, wanting to hear more, letting ourselves be drawn and finding we can't turn back (even though we might not really be able to explain to ourselves or anyone else what keeps us here).

And what I want to suggest now is that prayer *proceeds* by means of attention. When we give our attention to something, we become more fully, intentionally aware. We focus, we look more closely, we listen more intently, we're more deliberately present, mindful, receptive to what might unfold or to what we haven't noticed at first. Attention (as any teacher knows) is what makes it possible to learn – and it's why attention deficit is, well, a 'deficit'. Attention is the condition of truly encountering the independent reality of 'another', of being open to discovery and surprise, rather than simply assimilating what's before us into our pre-existing categories and our version of the world. And paying attention is much, much harder than it seems. How often do we

fail truly to ‘hear’ what a partner or child or work colleague is saying, because we’re sure we know already exactly what they’re saying? How often do we eat a meal and realise we’ve barely tasted it, or drive home and can’t remember how we got there? Attention is a task and a commitment.

Prayer is a practice for paying attention to God and letting God be God. We’re not talking to a God of our own imagining, but open to encountering God who is Other.

This means that anything that strengthens our capacity to give our attention is significant in the life of prayer. Simone Weil thinks that ‘the right use of school studies’ is part of learning to pray, since genuine attention to a problem in geometry or to learning a language forms in students ‘the habit of that attention which is (she says) the substance of prayer’.<sup>3</sup> The same applies to attending to our families, the people around us, and to what our tradition calls ‘natural contemplation’ – that is, loving and careful attention to the natural world. *Wherever* we practice giving our attention, we’re deepening our capacity for prayer.

At the same time, we must beware of trying too hard, of being tense and overly muscular in our zeroing-in. Attending implies not only focusing and concentrating, but also waiting – letting the object of our attention yield itself or give itself to us. Again, we know the significance of this in our ordinary experience. Sometimes our eagerness really to connect with someone or understand them, leads us to clutch at their words. We can jump in too quickly with a question or affirmation, and somehow we end up missing them altogether. Similarly, Weil says, almost all clumsy translations and all wrong solutions in mathematics arise from the fact that a student has grasped prematurely at an answer and closed down the space, rather than being patient, receptive to a deeper truth and unfolding.

So it is in prayer. On the one hand, we must give ourselves undistractedly and whole-heartedly to the work of attending to God. *The Cloud of Unknowing* advises, ‘you

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<sup>3</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Fontana Books, 1969), p.69.

are to concern yourself with no creature ... nor with their situation and doings', you are to entertain no thoughts nor images, nor checketh your Tablet nor mobile phone, but 'during this work you must abandon them all beneath the *cloud of forgetting*'.<sup>4</sup> Yet on the other hand, *The Cloud* warns against 'imprudently' straining yourself in this work of prayer and presuming to attain God by clutching or 'through sheer brute force'. Rather: 'Wait with gracious and modest courtesy for the Lord's initiative and do not impatiently snatch at grace like a greedy greyhound suffering from starvation'.<sup>5</sup>

Prayer, then, is other-centred, committed yet non-grasping attention. Waiting on God, Weil called it. And this is what meditation is about. It's a practice for strengthening our capacity to pay attention beyond ourselves, steadily, undistractedly, patiently, receptively. And because God is not a 'thing', not an 'object' in the world, this practice of silent contemplation is sometimes described as 'objectless attention'. To begin with (the first 20 or 30 years), most of us do use an object to focus our attention and recall us from distraction – the breath or the mantra. Over time, though, this focus is itself transcended, and we are simply aware, focused, present. Benedictine monk Dom John Chapman spoke of 'the mind ... concentrated on nothing in particular – which is God of course'.<sup>6</sup>

And the experience of this is something like being fully present and wholly yourself, but also in a certain sense emptied out, without agenda and utterly at God's disposal. The Buddhists speak of becoming the eye that sees but does not see itself. Jesus teaches about losing our life in such a way that our life is truly saved (Mark 8: 35). This is how we are transformed by prayer, how we become more and more transparent to the light and love that God is, true disciples of Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, pp.45, 52.

<sup>5</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, pp.95-96.

<sup>6</sup> Foster, *Contemplative Prayer*, p.10.