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Naked Intent (Mark 1: 9-13)

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The passage we've just had is traditional for the first Sunday in Lent, and it can be read at many levels. Liturgically, at the beginning of this season, it locates us at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Over the next six weeks, our Lenten journey will follow the story of this ministry from here through to its very end, to Jesus' final entry to Jerusalem and his being given up to death.

Theologically, this narrative offers an interpretive key to the meaning of Jesus' life and work. The first readers of the gospel would have recognized how Jesus' baptism in the Jordan and his naming as Beloved reprises Israel's formation as God's chosen people as they're led through the waters of the Red Sea, while his being driven out into the wilderness for forty days re-enacts Israel's forty years testing in the desert. In the person of Jesus, this story signals, the history of Israel is being recapitulated to establish a new and renewed community of God.

And finally, spiritually, this passage has something vital to teach us, I think, about the beginning of the life of authentic prayer, the inaugurating dynamic of life radically and whole-heartedly responsive to God. Tonight, it's this element I want to focus on.

Why? Well - if this reading is traditional for the first Sunday in Lent, so too is the theme of prayer in Lenten reflection. Over the next six weeks, we'll be exploring this well-worn theme, though - I hope - in a way that's a little fresh. Rather than focus on methods of prayer or the range of prayer practices (such things as intercession or petition, silent or discursive prayer, praying the Scriptures or praying with icons), what I'm particularly interested in is to explore the deeper, underlying dynamics of serious

prayer. These dynamics are at issue, whatever form or practice of prayer we adopt. Attending to them encourages and helps deepen our journey with God.

Before we go any further, though, let me say a couple more introductory things. You might have noticed that I've already slipped in a few 'leading' adjectives. I've spoken of 'serious' and 'authentic prayer', of radical and whole-hearted responsiveness. This implies there might be such things as 'trivial', 'non-serious', or inauthentic prayer, and half-hearted or superficial responsiveness. This, in turn, might seem to imply that there are people who 'really' pray and then the rest of us, or that prayer is something we're being graded on and may find ourselves being evaluated as incompetent or insufficiently dedicated, failing some heavenly set of KPIs.

Depending on our temperament and history, such a train of thought could lead to self-condemnation and self-undermining (it's true – I'm no good at prayer; in fact, I'm no good at spiritual life; I'm a bit of a fraud; I shouldn't really be here; I'm not like that person over there who really is 'spiritual') OR it could lead to indignant egalitarianism – what do you mean by implying there are levels or degrees of prayer; isn't that just spiritual elitism?; if we're all equal in the eyes of God, how can you distinguish between the 'depth' or 'seriousness' of different prayer?; and so on). So let me respond briefly to both these concerns.

First, I take it for granted that we're all equal in the eyes of God and equally loved, however we live and however we pray. As Jesus said, the Father makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. (Matt. 5:45). Our acceptability to God is unconditioned – we can't earn it by good works nor by dedication in prayer. It's simply given – God is always coming out to meet us, all of us, and welcoming us home.

At the same time, we can be more or less responsive to God's seeking of us, God's longing to be in relationship with us. This is never something for us to judge or assess each other about. Who knows what's really going on in another's journey, how

the Spirit is at work in different lives, and the time that takes? And yet, I hold it to be true that God wants to know us and be known, that we're most fully ourselves and fully alive when we awaken to God's yearning for us, and that our response to God is capable of endless deepening. And *this* is what prayer is essentially about. Not particular ritual forms, not hours on our knees, but an orientation of response – a 'yes' to encounter and a willingness to let our 'yes' lead where it will.

And if that's so, you can see how certain practices of prayer can actually become ways of avoiding this encounter, of denying a real 'yes'. We can attend the rituals, come to church services or rattle off the 'right' words, all the while evading the 'one thing necessary' – a bit like the way we can turn up to a family dinner, and go through all the right motions, but not be truly available for connection. So when I speak of 'serious' or 'authentic' prayer – this is what I'm getting at. Not that we've perfected some technique, or dedicate a certain amount of time or feel ourselves to be 'spiritual' people – but that we're really available, we really want this. Which brings us back to the question of how we begin, how we dispose ourselves for serious, transforming prayer.

The heart of it, our tradition teaches, is desire. 'My soul has a desire and longing to enter the courts of the Lord' – psalm 84. The 14th century mystical treatise on prayer, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, advises: 'if you wish to keep growing you must nourish in your heart the lively longing for God'.¹ Although this desire for God is first of all God's gift – it's God who awakens it in us – nevertheless, says *The Cloud*, 'it is up to you to nurture it'.² How do we do that? 'This is what you are to do: lift your heart up to the Lord, with a gentle stirring of love desiring God for his own sake and not for his gifts. Center all your attention and desire on him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart'. This *The Cloud* describes as 'a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being'.³

¹ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. William Johnston (New York: Image Books, 1973), p.39.

² *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p.39.

³ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p.40.

It sounds straightforward, simple – and at one level it is. If you want to pray, then you have to want God. But almost immediately, when we embark on this way, we're confronted with the extent to which we actually don't want God – or at least not with our whole heart. We want God *and* we want to stay in control; we want to be self-sufficient; we want to know where we're going and to hedge our bets and attain our ambitions in life. If God can be fitted in around all those other wants, great – we'll have God too.

But that's not how it works. Says *The Cloud*: 'mark this, God is a jealous lover ... And all he asks of you is that you fix your love on him and him alone'. This is resonant of the words of Julian of Norwich, who speaks of coming to that simplicity that costs not less than everything. And this, I think, is what we see in tonight's gospel passage. At the very beginning of his public ministry, this is the whole-hearted turning to God that Jesus enacts. He's touched by the Spirit, his sense of call is enlivened – and yet immediately his 'yes' comes under fire. Mark's gospel doesn't give us details of the temptations, but from the other gospels we get the gist: temptations to power, security, fame. These are what Jesus must face up to and refuse. As *The Cloud* says: if you will fix your love on God alone, you must 'Close the doors and windows of your spirit against the onslaught of pests and foes and prayerfully seek his strength; ... Our Lord is always ready. He awaits only your co-operation'.⁴

Don't misunderstand what this implies. Serious prayer, wholeheartedly desiring God, doesn't mean we all have to shut ourselves up in hermitages, or give up our day jobs and families. But it does mean facing up to the deepest orientation and sourcing of our lives – will we let that be God, or do we seek our lives elsewhere? Until we've faced that question, we haven't really begun to pray.

One more thing. It seems to me that one of the main obstacles to our embarking on this deeper journey of prayer is that we don't believe it really applies to us. I don't

⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p.39.

believe that God wants *me* in this way. I can't hear the words: 'You are Beloved, with you I am well-pleased' as addressed to me. But they are.

So this week, I invite you to dare to let yourself be present to your desire for God – which is the echo of God's desire for you. Let it grow. Let it lead you. And let us pray.