

PRAYER

There are few things as alluring as the smell of baking bread. It holds a warmth in its aroma, as well as a promise of something good to come. It whets the appetite and offers a hint of comfort. It is used by advertisers to create a sense of well-being and satisfaction for shoppers and house buyers, the theory being that everyone seeks the comfort of familiarity, and this particular aroma evokes the safety and comfort of home. In the hands of a good baker, freshly baked bread also has an attractive appearance, a nicely browned crust, a well formed shape and a goodly size.

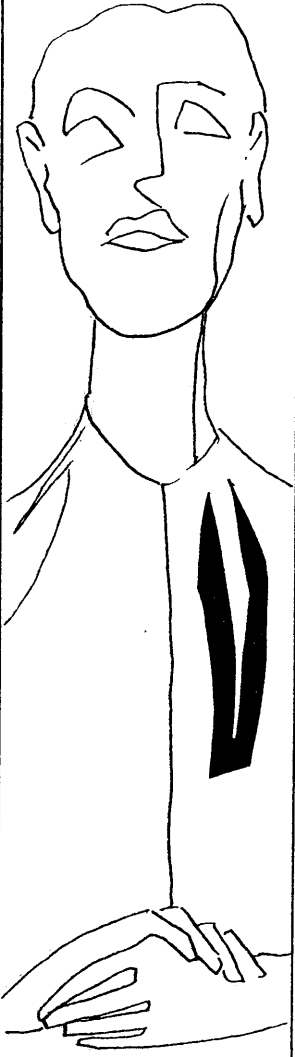
It started out as a lump of dough; an amorphous conglomerate of ingredients, which can look very unappetising, unpromising, unattractive. It appears after baking as an appetising and familiar loaf of bread; an attractive promise of wholesome satisfaction, a solution to a basic need. Its transformation from one state to the other is largely due to the presence of yeast which was added to the other ingredients, which was indistinguishable when the dough was kneaded.

Hidden deep inside the mass of dough the yeast works, unseen, unheard. When the loaf emerges from the oven there is no sign of the yeast; we do not find it when we cut through the bread. It has helped to create the smell, the shape, the texture of the bread, but has become an integral part of it. It has raised the dough and lightened its texture, helping to transform it into something desirable, something for which we have an appetite, something which we need for strength, energy and action. The action of the yeast transforms the dough and raises it to make it edible, digestible. Without the raising agent, the dough would become something different. Bread may be a lowly kind of commodity, but it is one which has been raised in order to achieve its full potential, thanks to the yeast, the raising agent which helped to bring about its true potential.

‘Raising up’ is a way of enhancing things. Like the yeast, we, too, have some raising up to do. We have to ‘raise our standards’, ‘raise the game’, ‘raise a smile’, ‘raise awareness’. More importantly, in response to the catechism question: ‘What is prayer?’, we learned that ‘prayer is the raising up of the mind and heart to God.’

Because we belong to a responsive and interactive faith community we also have many prayer formulas which enable us to pray together, and they are a very important part of our lives, but recitation of words must come from a heart and mind raised up to God. True prayer is a stirring of the heart, a desire to be at one with God, a desire to belong to God, a desire to be accepted by God. Being attuned to God is our real prayer; it is an attitude of union, of oneness; it is our ‘with-God-ness’ and it is more important than the words and formulas of our formal vocal prayers.

St. Augustine says in one of his letters, ‘He who created all things by his Word does not require the words of humans.’ He also wrote, ‘There is another way of praying without ceasing and that



is the way of desire... . This very desire of yours is your prayer'. St. Paul tells the Romans, that "when we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." (chapter 8)

This is very evident when we meet people who have no words, people who make no sound, but who desire to be part of the praying community, who desire to be friends of God, who pray to God with 'sighs too deep for words'. In a Spred group we are privileged to share time and space with such people, and we share in their prayer too.

We are often tempted to consider that we are allowing these men and women to share in our prayer, our faith, our participation, but after some years in a Spred group we begin to realise that we are receiving something which we cannot put into words. We gradually learn to recognise that an inclination of the head, the twitch of a mouth, a concentrated frown, can indicate a stirring of the heart, the raising of the mind and heart to God. We learn to realise that such simple indications are an expression of a desire to be at one with God; that desire to be attuned to God.

As well as reaching out to God, this unspoken communication reaches out to us and draws us in, draws us to this other, deeper, realm of prayer. Like yeast hidden in a lump of dough, it transfers to us in silence, unseen, seemingly inactive. It transforms us, both as a group and as individuals, opening up for us an opportunity to recognise that prayer does develop in our inmost being and then permeates what we do, say, think, offer. As we offer time and companionship to them, we find our attitudes to life more open, expanded, more satisfying.

Spending time with men and women, children and teenagers, who dwell in a wordless reality raises us to a new awareness of our own communication with God. They are the yeast for us, transforming our attitudes in ways unseen, unheard, unmeasured. St. Ambrose says that 'the things that are unseen are eternal'.

It is a great temptation for us as catechists to think that words will help. We want to know the words of hymns, we want to interpret the words of the readings, we are very tied to our ability to say or sing the intellectual meaning of our intent. It is necessary to remind ourselves from time to time that vocal expression is not the more important part of communication, either with God or with other people. It is the intent of heart, the verity of our attention which conveys our real meaning.

Trying to do without words is difficult for us, but in order to understand the power of silent communication it is something that we ought to try. In preparing gestures for the hymn or for the readings we could try to start by using only our facial expressions, no words, no hands. It would give us an insight into the real meaning and intention behind the words. It could also give us a better affinity with those who are wordless and help us to understand what it is which makes sense to them. It could enrich our understanding of God's power to know the inmost thoughts of our minds and the desires of our hearts.

True prayer is the raising up of the mind and heart to God, and we are privileged to know people who can show us the truth of that reality, even though to others they may seem to be doing nothing at all.

When we are present in a Spred session, we, in fact, spend time 'doing something', and we

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encourage others to 'do something', to engage in a calming activity. It isn't the 'doing' which is important. The doing, the result, the outcome is totally irrelevant. It is unnecessary. It is the stilling which matters.

The early saints who lived in the desert and contemplated the mysteries of God used to weave mats to occupy their physical attention. When they had finished they spent time undoing their handiwork, so that their muscles, nerves, joints were occupied, leaving the heart and mind free to be turned to God.

That is why we sit together in silence in our Spred groups, doing some gentle, unpurposeful activity, drawing strength from each other in ways unseen, unheard. Our wordless friends become yeast for us, sharing that deeper inner reality, which, in ourselves, we so often mask with words and deeds.

This presence transforms us, helping us to be satisfied in our spirits, to be at rest with God, to become more aware of our own desire to be at one with God.

The preparation area in which we meet becomes then a place of sanctuary, becomes a place of peace, a place where the way is prepared for true prayer. Jesus said, 'When you pray, go to your room and pray in secret'. St. Ambrose said of this quotation; 'You must not think that he means by this a room with four walls separating you from the others, but a room that is within you, where your thoughts are, the place that contains your feelings'.

The silence and peace of the preparation room are there to make it easier for us to withdraw into our own inner room. The presence of those who live without words acts like the yeast, helping to raise the dough that we bring and transform it into something more satisfying than it was before, while we transform them by the openness of our presence, by our treatment of them as people of worth and equals, and by our unspoken desire to learn from them. There is a mutual sharing of spirits. It may seem passive, it may not be measurable by the standards of society, it may not sound like familiar recitation of prayer, but it is a true form of real prayer, for it is the raising up of minds and hearts to God. It is our shared desire for God-with-us.

The transformation which occurs readies all of us for that deeper and more specific sacred experience into which we enter when we move to the Celebration room. There our experience is more like that of the Upper Room in which Jesus gave himself to his apostles, his friends. If we have entered into the true purpose and meaning of the quiet preparation time, we will be more ready to receive the Word of God, to attune to the evocations of God's actions in our daily lives, to respond with sound and gesture and so to expand the inner spirit, to be more ready to enter 'the room that is within you, where your thoughts are,' to be more aware that God can read our inmost thoughts and desires without the aid of human words. 'For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight, the mystery of his will.'

So it is not the recitation of prayer that is most important, it is the attitude of mind and heart from which it springs. It is not the attendance at the Spred group which matters, but the attitude of mind and heart from which it springs. The attentive, silent, 'with-God-ness' which we receive from the wordless people we befriend will nourish our minds and hearts and enhance our response to God's grace.

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