**Prayers that help me** Pentecost Sunday, 31 May 2020

The prayer I’d like to share with you is an unusual one, but one that I’ve always found helpful. It’s a prayer by an English academic, a don in Cambridge University, who later became a monk: a man called Harry Williams. I love the prayer because of its honesty! Here it is:

O God, I am so hellishly angry;
I think so-and-so is a swine;
I am tortured by worry about this or that;
I am pretty sure I have missed my chances in life;
this or that has left me feeling terribly depressed.
But nonetheless here I am like this,
feeling both bloody and bloody-minded,
and I am going to stay here for ten minutes.
You are most unlikely to give me anything.
I know that.
But I am going to stay for the ten minutes nonetheless.

Harry Williams’s writing and thinking about God has been described as ‘astonishingly honest’, and that’s what I like about the prayer. You can imagine the impossibly difficult people Harry Williams must have met in the claustrophobic life of a university college with its academic rivalries and its cruel gossip. And life in the confines of a monastery probably wasn’t much better!

I’m reminded of a nun I once met when I was visiting a convent: at the end of our chat about the world’s problems she said, ‘Well, it’s three o’clock and I’ve got to go and say my prayers. I don’t suppose it’ll do a bit of good, but I’m going anyway!’

Our prayers need to be honest. So often we think there are things we *ought* to say in our prayers, things we *ought* to feel. We need to keep a stiff upper lip, and stick to our polite religion. And our faith withers away!

The world we live in expects us to put our best selves forward. To appear happy, and successful. The photos we put up on Facebook or Instagram reflect this: they’re how we’d like to appear to the world.

There are bits of our lives, things in our characters that we’re ashamed of; perhaps we hope to hide them from God, like Adam and Eve tried to hide away from God in the Garden.

Honest prayer opens our real selves up to God. We have God’s Spirit in us, after all, and God knows what we’re like, and so we don’t need to pretend. There are days when we’re angry, days when we’re sad, days when we’re feeling abandoned; those days, we don’t *feel* like praising God. And the times we feel like that are not the times to trot off the prayers we *think* God wants to hear.

The Bible is full of honest prayers, and some of the best examples are in the Book of Psalms. You might think the Psalms are ultra-respectable, ultra-holy, all *The Lord is My Shepherd*, and *Praise the Lord!* After all, they sing the psalms in cathedrals and at Choral Evensong! But the psalms aren’t all *The Lord is My Shepherd* and *Praise the Lord!*, are they? The psalm on Jesus’s lips on the Cross wasn’t a psalm of praise: ‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*’ And there are many other psalms which are angry, or despairing, or resentful, or disbelieving. Psalm 74 is a rant about how it’s the ungodly people who always seem to be successful, to do well: ‘*I was envious of the arrogant, I saw the prosperity of the wicked’*. God, how do you let them get away with it! ‘*All in vain, I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning*.’

The psalms are full of people offloading their anger, their fears, their doubts, and their questions and complaints to God. Psalm 42 says: ‘*God, why have you forgotten me? You’ve crushed me. Why have you rejected me? Why must my enemy oppress me?*’ Have a look at Psalms 42 and 43, which go together; browse the psalms, and you might be surprised how often you find your own mood reflected there.

And the great thing about the psalms is that they don’t only give reassurance that our feelings, our anger or desperation or whatever are OK, and that God understands them; but the psalms help us to move on through those feelings. They put us in touch with our other emotions – our thirst for God, our amazement at the beauty of the world and God’s greatness, appreciation of the strength God gives us. The typical pattern of the psalms is to show someone getting their feelings off their chest and then finding words of trust in God, words of praise, words which take us forward into the future in trust and hope and a more open and honest relationship with God.

So whether your friends or family are driving you crazy, or whether the state of the world is getting you down, and even if you have no words to express all that, just think of Harry Williams or that nun, and open your inner self to God - and find that God knows already.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for ever. Amen!

William Allberry