

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

R. H. J. STEUART, S.J.

DON'T let us make any mistake: we are *ordered* to make this prayer of petition. Go to God as to your absolute All—your father, brother, creator. I must turn to him as the lover of souls—as one who loves me beyond the dreams of imagination; who has only one care for me, that the best may be mine; who longs for me. 'As the hart panteth' (I am not afraid to put that the other way round) so does God long for me. People complain 'I can't meditate, I can't pray'. That is often another way of saying 'I'm not interested enough'. Is it possible that I have not got enough interest in it? Am I sure that I really want it enough?

I have always maintained that it is a mistake to divide prayer up too sharply into ordinary and extraordinary. Prayer is a continuous thing like a tree—branches, leaves, flowers, fruit; quite different in its different states but all one thing; from the *Hail Mary* to the tremendous heights of which the great saints have been able to show us just a glimpse. The prayer of the mystic is hidden because it belongs to God's plane of existence, and the words we use about it are like mathematics in ordinary words: it is like using double basic English.

God has planted in our hearts a desire for him as he really is and in this life we shall never attain to that. We ought to be content to know that heaven is at last attaining to that which we have been striving after all our lives through, and prayer is the utterance of that growth upwards. I don't know if I am going too far if I draw the resemblance to trees like this. Just as there are some trees of red wood, that grow to the height of 300 feet, higher than the tower of Westminster Cathedral, others attain their full growth at 20 feet, and they are perfect trees. The redwood tree is not more a tree, nor the others less. So, looking back, we find persons who have risen to perfect heights, and others who have attained nothing like that and yet who have used all the powers in them.

'Thus therefore shall ye pray.' The main thing in this clause is to ask; God wants us to ask him for everything. Daily bread means all the things I want, big and little, material and spiritual. Every time I make a prayer of petition, it is an act of adoration of God, it is an act of faith that he is answering it even though this does not appear to be so. 'Give us this day our daily bread.' The implication is that by saying that to God, I make an act of faith that all my daily bread, everything I need, all come from God; not as if God were a department handing things out, but because each of us is to him as if there were no other.

So the first meaning of that clause is that you are to look upon everything as coming from God. Life will go on according to fixed lines, but I must try to see that everything is handed to me by the very hand of God himself. So when I pray the prayer of petition, I am implicitly making an act of faith that everything, whatever it is, comes from God. And another act of faith, more difficult perhaps, that everything that comes from him is good. He could not give us anything that was not good. Many people find it difficult to believe that everything that comes from him is good—they even seem able to prove that it is not good!

Our Lord said in ordinary language, 'Ask and ye shall receive; knock and it shall be opened to you'. You often find you ask for things and don't receive them and say, 'I could be quite prepared for "No" if I asked for frivolous things, but many of the things I have asked for appeared to be very good, and still "No" was the answer. Perhaps I could bear up if it were only myself that was concerned, but so often I pray for others, make intercession, and they don't get it so far as one sees.' When I ask for a material object I am exercising faith in God, hope and trust, because I believe that he can and I believe that he will, which means that I believe there is a bond of love between us. Every time I pray for an object I exercise those three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. What more do you want? You may say, 'Yes, but I want a little on account! I have prayed for these things.' What things? 'This, that and the other.' But I ask you—life is too serious to be encumbered with these frivolities. I have prayed for more money, good weather,

and so on, but add them all together and what did they add up to? There is only one thing necessary. There was Martha in and out of the kitchen; all very good; Martha getting that dinner ready. Eventually she asked what Mary was doing beside our Lord, and Martha said, 'Look what I have to do, and there is Mary, my own sister who usually helps me, letting me get on with it'. But he said, 'Martha, you are busy about many things; Mary has chosen the better part'. The better part: adoration of Christ, love of Christ, love of God. So I think the greater part of our petitions we shall find were trivialities and we should perhaps have thought less of God had he granted them. Things that seemed so urgent to us at the time.

We are taken out of our depth when we are involved in something which demands knowledge of God. Our hesitation and doubt and unhappiness about unanswered prayer is due to our trying to express something in terms of everyday things which is really something known to God alone. 'My just man liveth by faith.' 'Without faith it is impossible to serve God.' You cannot live up to what he demands of you except purely upon faith.

So often the things we think are good are not good, or not good at that particular time, or someone else has stronger claims to them. Our Lord said, 'Give us this day our daily bread', *after* he had said, 'Thy will be done'. Therefore in all prayer, certainly in the prayer of petition, that is the keystone of it, that ultimately my prayer in essence should be, 'Thy will be done'. Very often I don't think of that at all. I want it, or someone else wants it. I should try to accustom myself to ask myself whether my petition, whatever form it takes, really is 'Thy will be done as it is in heaven'. Whatever else there may be to make my prayer an exceptionally good one, it may be that it does not square with that fundamental 'Thy will be done'.

Then again, perhaps we have not enough faith. If you had as much as a pinhead of real faith, God would be in your hands, so to speak: you could move mountains.

One of our Lord's statements was: 'Whatever you ask for in my name shall be granted'. The Church takes up this word of our Lord and ends all her liturgical prayers with *per*

Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum. When our Lord says 'in my name', he means us to understand 'in my context', i.e. 'live your lives as I lived mine'. Just in the proportion that you are Christ-like, so shall you receive, for then your prayer is real, and you have a claim on God. Is your life like Christ's?—in other words, does your life run on Christ's principles? Take Christ's example in the agony in the garden. Remember, he made a petition, he asked for a thing. Now, he could not ask for anything except what was best: there was nothing selfish or narrow in his request. 'Father, let this chalice pass from me; nevertheless, not my will, but yours.' Well, his request was not granted, so I am in good company. 'Thy will be done.' It does not make it easy. Sometimes it makes it more difficult. All that matters is that in my heart of hearts I want God's will, and God's will only, to be done.

I know a lot of people will say, 'I am still worried'. I know you are, because you are trying to explain in terms of earthly experience something that belongs to the divine region. Every time I make a petition to God, every time I turn to God, on that very account, whether my prayer has been granted or not, what has really been granted is that on account of that prayer I am nearer to God, dearer to God, and holier, because I have done that thing that was laid down.

Christianity is a heroic religion. It is not a religion of the world; it is purely supernatural, and therefore we shall be called on as routine to do things that involve heroism to a certain extent. We ought to be much happier on the subject of granted or not granted prayer of petition, as that is not the real gist of the matter. Petition that I want God's will to be done more and more is the real gist of the matter. Our asking is a token that that is what we feel.

'Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?' . . . 'Bid me come to thee upon the waters.' Our Lord says, 'Come!' We must learn the tremendous degree of faith he wants of us, for we have not yet that complete faith which sticks at nothing at all.

God binds himself, he pledges himself to us by his own divine word, that he won't let us starve for grace. He will give us all that is necessary; for the spiritual life is, like the natural life, a growth. We don't get fruit from the root, but

from the grown branches. Saints are not ready-made. Turn to God, our Lord tells us; turn to him for everything that is necessary for your spiritual life, for your natural life. You cannot ask too much. Recall M. Dupont's query to a petitioner who was making long phrases to God in her prayer. 'Do you want to be cured? Then say, "Cure me!".' God is your father, so be more child-like in your approach to him. If you don't ask, you won't receive. If what you ask is good for you, if it is right for you to have it, then God will give it when you ask him; you will get it. He is a loving father. But if I ask for things that seem best to me and I do not get them, then I have just to say, 'I am mistaken; God sees it is not good for me'. God sees and knows: trust him.

So it is not very long, I think, before anybody to whom God is a reality uses prayer of petition; we are told to. Even the highest contemplatives and mystics used it, though their form might be different from other people's.

True, my prayer will tend to become less and less self-regarding and more and more something for God. 'My delight is to be with the children of men.' God made us for himself. I am only truly fulfilling the object of my creation when I am trying to achieve, even in this life, some degree of that complete surrender to God of which the next life will consist.



SEAT OF WISDOM¹

MGR H. FRANCIS DAVIS

THE Lord is my Light.' These words from the psalm form the device of our senior University. Come back with me a moment to the early years of the twelfth century. Come to Oxford, to the vicinity of St Mary the Virgin's Church in the High Street. A certain

¹ A sermon broadcast on October 25th, 1953. This sermon is as delivered from Newbold Revel for Education Sunday, but for a few words omitted in the broadcast to save time.