

REACHING UNITY BY PRAYER

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IT is not difficult to trace in the works of Walter Hilton a direct line of prayer from its inception until it reaches the union of marriage with God. And though for this reason many will be familiar with the plan, it may be convenient to extract the holy Englishman's teaching on the subject from both books of the *Scale of Perfection* and to combine them here into a single and brief account of an English way of prayer.

We may begin with a rather profound definition of prayer as 'naught else but a stying desire of the heart into God, by withdrawing of the heart from all earthly thoughts' (*Scale* i, 25, p. 44).¹ This desire rising direct to God himself is indeed the guarantee of true progress in prayer. Indeed it is impossible often to tell from any other sign whether or no one is praying at all. Distractions and dryness flood the spirit to such an extent that it would seem no corner had been left for prayer. But then the man finds that he still longs for God and that the reason for his misery is the need he feels so strongly for God himself and for divine help. He must have 'a whole and stable intention' (i, 22, p. 39) in order to have the object of prayer constantly before the hungry heart. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* gives something of the same definition: prayer, he says, 'is naught else but a devout intent directed unto God, for the getting of good and the removing of evil' (*Cloud* c. 39). It is clear that in one sense prayer is simply taking one's bearings and setting one's course as straight as possible towards God the supremely beloved. There must be an object of desire; we must look in God's direction and fill the mind and will with the sense of need, need to be fulfilled in him. It is not a matter simply of looking at a distant object. As soon as the man wants that object with a wholeness and integrity of desire he already possesses the object in part—Hilton says later that this desire is Jesus (ii, 24, p. 258). Our Lord is already present by grace in the mind and will of the man who puts first things first and

¹ All references are to the edition in the Orchard Series with an Introduction by Dom Noetinger (London, 1927).

sets his course for God; and such a man is already at prayer. Much evil may yet have to be uprooted and cast away, but already he is held by the goodness of God, already he prays. When St Thomas discusses the nature of *oratio*, the act of the virtue of religion called generically 'prayer', his article is concerned with the right ordering of means to the supreme end; and this surely is the reason why so much is written about the degrees in the scale of prayer. For the way to complete possession by God is a long way of ever increasing development—or of ever increasing subjection to the matters of divine love. And all that way is prayer, the development of prayer, the marching progress of union with God.

This desire which brings the assurance of true prayer demands expression, not in order to inform God but in order to prepare the soul to receive greater grace as its yearning increases (i, 24). Desire in this way frequently breaks forth into various forms of express demands: 'Teach me to love you', 'Thy will be done', 'Remove this pain or these unpleasant difficulties and temptations'. All such exclamations are the outward manifestation of a prayer which is more or less continually flowing towards God.

But this expressed yearning for God itself requires to be disciplined or 'matured in the wood' in the sense that it has to become more and more subjected to the will of God and so to the common good of all. It is not simply the individual who prays, for the individual is the image of Jesus and a member of his body. Therefore of the two forms of vocal prayer—the Divine Office and personal ejaculations—Hilton speaks first of the prayer of the Church, which is not to be undertaken simply as a bounden duty so that it becomes a burden, but as a joyful and gracious act. The passage is of such value to those who recite the Office that it must be quoted in full:

Therefore thou shalt not say them [the prayers of the Office] hastily or recklessly, as if thou wert evil apaid that thou art bound to them, but thou shalt gather thy affection and thy thought to say them more sadly and more devoutly than any other special prayer of devotion, trowing forsooth that, since it is the prayer of Holy Church, there is no vocal prayer so profitable to thee to use commonly as that is. And so shalt thou put away all heaviness, and by grace shalt thou turn thy need into a good will, and thy bond into a great freedom, that shall be to thee no hindrance to ghostly occupation. (i, 27, pp. 46-7.)

It is important to realize that the whole scheme of Christian prayer is fixed in the liturgy. The personal approach to God never transcends liturgical prayer. The relation of the higher forms of the individual converse with God and that of the Church's official prayer is rather that of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit to the gift of Faith. Faith always remains, man never reaches beyond the darkness of belief; but the Gifts of Wisdom and Understanding perfect the faith, making the mind and will respond instantaneously and personally to the divine mysteries. Thus the vocal prayer of the Divine Office if taken up in the right spirit will convey the Christian to the Song of Angels of which Hilton writes so beautifully, i.e. the fruit of the perfect union of charity with the 'onehead of God'.² Those who feel that vocal prayer of this sort is mean and to be abandoned as soon as possible will find that their prayers turn out to be no more than an exercise of their own natural wit (i, 28, p. 47). So that if you leave vocal prayer of this sort for the 'higher regions' of quiet and passivity you are likely to be left to your own resources, inventing pleasant conceits—often of a poetic or mystical nature—to stir your thoughts and affections. But this is 'natural wit' rather than a divine action on the soul. There is, in fact, a real danger of making up your own prayers instead of allowing the Church and Almighty God to make up your prayers for you.

Another form of vocal prayer, however, develops instinctively from the formal and corporate prayer of worship. In modern times this prayer is usually referred to as 'ejaculatory' and Hilton describes it as a manner of prayer 'by speech . . . not of any certain special saying . . . when a man or woman feeleth grace of devotion by the gift of God' (i, 29, pp. 49-50). So he will call out for succour and for help and he will show his ailments to God as the sick man to the doctor. In this way the Christian speaks to God as devotion moves; and this of course will lead to the higher stages of prayer, to a very fervent devotion and to a complete turning from sin (i, 30, p. 51). But Hilton suggests that the words used even here are the words of the Bible, particularly the words of David so frequently placed on the lips of every Christian in the recitation of the Psalter in the Office.

Thus by active vocal prayer the Christian is led on to the 'third

² cf. 'The Song of Angels' by Hilton, published in *The Cell of Self-Knowledge*. Edited by Edmund Gardner (London, 1910).

manner of prayer which lies in the heart without speech by great rest and softness of the body and of the soul' (i, 32, p. 53). It is only after a great deal of active prayer and penance that this prayer of rest becomes habitual so that the Christian is enabled to pray continually in his heart and to love and praise God without hindrance. Distractions and outward preoccupations are apt to rob the spirit of this precious gift so that he has to be careful to avoid these in so far as he is able and above all to keep his intent and his will clean, that is free from the disturbance of desires for things other than God himself. This prayer of rest is in fact none other than the fire of love and is therefore of the same nature as all the highest experiences of union with God; but they grow out of the Office and this groundwork of desire for God:

Of this manner of prayer speaketh our Lord in holy writ by figure thus: 'The fire of love shall be ever lit' in the soul of the devout and clean man or woman, the which is the altar of our Lord, and 'the priest shall every day at morn lay two sticks' and nourish the fire. That is to say this man shall by holy psalms, clean thoughts, and fervent desire nourish the fire of love in his heart 'that it go not out at any time' [Levit. 6, 12] (i, 32, p. 54).

Distinct from these three manners of prayer Hilton discusses 'meditation' which should follow no rule but rest upon the movement of divine grace and upon the Christian's state of mind (i, 34-6, pp. 58-61). But such ways of organizing and using one's thoughts for the sake of drawing near God are rather the means to prayer than prayer itself. We do not wish to exclude from the different types that of discursive prayer. But the discursive activity presents us with ways of reaching unity wherein perfect prayer consists. It is therefore more convenient to turn here immediately to the second book of the *Scale* where Hilton is concerned in detail with the passive type of prayer called as we have seen 'the prayer of rest' but described later in terms of 'the reformation in faith and feeling'.

Having set about his prayer with desire for God the devout man must not expect to discover this permanent state of love overnight. He will not be re-formed in feeling as well as in faith all at once. Only after biding his time a long while and ruling himself with strenuous penance and practice of the virtues can he dispose himself for this 'feeling of grace' or fire of love (ii, 20, p. 237). Of

course, it is not the man's activity which is fundamental even in the work of preparation. This prayer of waiting already is the work of grace and already has a strong element of passivity within it. Jesus himself does the work of re-forming. This active prayer of preparation does not obtain love as its prize as a merchant by his own active trading can come by his profit. 'Nay, it is not so, spiritually, in the love of God.' But our Lord works by his grace which he freely gives where he will; and man co-operates with that free action.

For this reason it is necessary for the Christian to enter the dark night where his own motives are purified from any selfishness in thinking that he can achieve the higher prayer for himself and by himself. His basic desire has to be plunged in the darkness of faith; and, with all the great mystical writers, drawing very clearly from *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the Dionysian tradition, Hilton includes his treatise on the Dark Night in his account of the ascent of prayer. Indeed, St John of the Cross later echoes the same phrases and descriptions.³

The man at his prayer goes forth into the 'good night' when he realizes his own nothingness and incapacity even to pray without that Jesus prays with him. 'Thou art naught else but a reasonable instrument wherein that He worketh' (ii, 24, p. 258). The mystical dark night has been described as 'purgative contemplation which causes passively in the soul the negation of itself and of all things'. In this sense it may be regarded as that aspect of prayer that is almost expressionless and lies in a deep-seated and constant yearning for God which grows more painful as the subject realizes his incapacity to do anything of himself.

'This night is naught else but a forbearing and a withdrawing of the thought of the soul from earthly things by great desire and yearning to love and see and feel Jesus and ghostly things' (p. 261). Without distinguishing the different types of night (active purification of the senses or passive purification of the spirit) Hilton places this one night of purification between two days—the first day is lightened by the false light of the love of this world, the second by the light of the love of Jesus. The night falls after the first day so that all 'bodily creatures' are hid and all 'bodily deeds' cease, that is to say that the false love of this world has to be overcome before the love of Jesus fully dawns, the affections and

³ Compare *Scale* ii, 24 with *Dark Night* I, 1.

thoughts have to be freed before they can awake to the full liberty of being enthralled by Christ.

But the initial stages of this process of detachment are bound to be extremely painful, and it here seems to be suggested that the first stages of the night are those of the more active purification of the senses. The picture that Hilton leaves us is that of a continuous process like that of the passage of night. Other writers often give the impression of a state of darkness in which the Christian remains, a sort of ante-chamber to the secret inner room where he will find his Beloved. But here we might see night falling slowly with a long English twilight in which the Christian at prayer for long can descry the objects around him which give him such delight and from which it is so hard to drag himself. The twilight would be too painful if the man were to strain to enter his own 'blankness', to create a sort of cell in which he might pretend these fast disappearing objects did not exist. He must not strain: 'Abide grace, suffer easily, and break not thyself too much'.

The fact is that the night grows darker the nearer it approaches the dawn. And the darkness is intensified by the awareness of the coming glory of the true source of light. This purification is fundamentally positive; it looks forward to the presence of Jesus. A man is not simply to strain to cut away, but to increase in this desire, the very stuff of prayer, the desire for Jesus. As the twilight finally gives place to the complete darkness of night the senses cease to cling to the old life of yesterday; the heart, which at the first hint of dusk had turned towards a restful waiting for the coming of tomorrow, may now lie wakeful but undisturbed by the outward din of a dying day. As night progresses all the powers of the sleeping earth seem to gather themselves more closely together into the quiet, warm unity of the dark womb in which new life is hid, holding within it the pent-up vigour of the Creator himself. So the Christian lies awake—no dreams, no stirring of a limb, but surely and hiddenly the rise and fall of the rhythm of breath. Breathing unknowingly the love of God:

Then thinketh the soul right naught, for then thinketh it of none earthly thing cleavingly. This is a rich naught. And this naught, this night is a great ease for the soul that desireth the love of Jesus. . . . What thing maketh this darkness? Soothly naught else but a gracious desire to have the love of Jesus (ii, 24, p. 263).

Jesus, then, who is close to the Christian throughout the night, draws nearer and nearer as the painful disturbances of yesterday recede and obscurity descends more restfully.

Now the short vivid flashes of contemplation begin to rouse the Christian to rise up to welcome the new day—'a little touching of contemplation' (ii, 25, p. 268). The second day begins to dawn with the new light which is the love of Jesus. The true sun begins to shine into the soul, a metaphor which is repeated by St John of the Cross in memorable terms: 'As the sun when it rises in the morning and shines into your house will enter if you open the shutter, even so will God, who keeps Israel and slumbers not, still less sleeps, enter the soul that is empty and fill it with blessings' (*Living Flame* iii, 40. *Peers* iii, p. 83).

But now, as the dawn of Christ's love breaks over the Christian at prayer, the loveliness of the new light of the unseeable Presence becomes so indescribable that Hilton, like many another of his kind, searches about for useful analogies. Many come to mind but all are inadequate; yet to summarize them may give an impression of what the prayer of love is to those who receive it.

Firstly it may be considered as the entry into a beautiful city, the new Jerusalem. There is a strange paradox here; for as the Church sprang up in Roman times it was always found in its more perfect form in the cities where culture prospered. The unsophisticated peasants tilling the soil were the *pagani* full of superstition and directed by crude myths. To become an intelligent and practical Christian it became almost necessary to come into the city. The outer country regions were territories of dark superstition. So, by analogy the Christian approaches God's city where the light of Christian civilization resides, the atmosphere of perfect prayer, and he leaves darkness and superstition behind.

On the other hand, the Christian especially today needs to get out into the surrounding country to replant his roots in the nature around him, to regain the peace of the river passing towards the sea and the rise and fall of summer and winter. So in the analogy the full day of the love of Jesus dawns when the Christian has found his way into the desert away from the sophisticated preoccupations of city life. Nevertheless, city life represents the perfect Christian setting for a man to develop all his capacities both natural and supernatural, a city, that is, which gathers the spirit of the country within its walls, drawing the men of earth into its

civilized streets: 'This city betokeneth the perfect love of God set in the hill of contemplation' (ii, 25, p. 268). The man who goes out into the desert, spurned thereto by his burning thirst for the love of Jesus, may well perceive this new Jerusalem set on a hill in the midst of his desert.

Another way of speaking of this entry into union with God is to use the negative simile of death. A man for whom this new day begins to dawn must become as one dead. 'The world' has utterly disregarded him and forgotten him as a dead man; for 'he may not live to God fully unless he die first to the world' (ii, 27, pp. 279-80). This death to the world, so familiar a figure of speech in the writings of St Peter and St Paul, has many characteristics of the 'good night'; for it is not merely a question of ridding oneself of attachment to outward objects. This 'twilight' applies equally to the interior senses of a man, and to his whole way of prayer. Thus even the precious gift of his imagination, wherein the thoughts of his mind are received in human soil so that they may grow up as works of poetry, even the imagination, in one sense, has to die and darkness descends in these lightsome places of a man's spirit. Imagination gives place to strict reasoning; reasoning in its turn has to give place to the direct touches of faith. All that is precious precisely as human has to be abandoned so that it has the character of a death of a human being.

This is the common teaching of St Thomas (II-II, 180, 6 ad 2), and of St John of the Cross (cf. *Ascent* II, 13 and *Dark Night* I, 9). Picturing and reasoning in prayer have to be abandoned not by any kind of human suicide. A man does not refuse to use his imagination or his discursive reasoning. But twilight gives place to night, and his human spirit dies within him as the things of beauty in the words of the psalms, or the cunning descriptions of the human activities of Christ in the Gospels cease to stir a spark of prayer. In fact, the twilight itself is caused, according to Hilton, by the shadowing of our Lord Jesus Christ over a chosen soul, in the which shadowing the soul is kept from the burning of worldly love' (ii, 30, p. 299). For our Lord's manhood shines in the light of his divinity, and as man comes to love Jesus in his manhood, so does he approach the divine light but still in a human way. This is good indeed; but not yet the new day. The human form of Jesus is an object of love and under that shadow do we begin to enter into the night. His human form leads us on to die with him, and

it is only in the darkness of the Crucifixion that we are really brought to the brightness of the new day of divine love. St Mary Magdalen's experiences make all this clear:

Mary Magdalen loved well our Lord Jesus before the time of his passion, but her love was much bodily and little ghostly. She knew well that he was God, but she loved him little as God, for she could not then; and therefore she suffered all her affection and all her thought to fall on him as he was in form of a man. And our Lord blamed her not then, but praised it much. But after when he was risen from death and appeared to her, she would have worshipped him with such manner love as she did before; and then our Lord forbade her and said thus: "Touch me not" . . . Touch me not so, but set thy thought and thy love in that form in which I am equal to the Father—that is the form of the Godhead—and love me, know me, worship me as God and man godly, not as man manly. . . . (ii, 30, pp. 300-1).

Here indeed we find that death has lost its sting, that the twilight is the gentlest time of the old day as it leads on to the night and the expectancy of new light. So another metaphor of a like nature is brought forward, that of 'opening the inner eye of the soul' in the midst of this darkness, as one begins to detect the touchings or shinings of Jesus's brightness.

Metaphors and analogies, however, must now give place in the darkness of imagination and reasoning to the direct approach of Reality itself. Just as the author of *The Cloud* had insisted on the false use of metaphorical words, so Hilton tackles the spatial metaphors 'Above', 'Within', or physical ones such as 'Light'. At first these necessary analogies keep the Christian in the twilight of prayer, but as his inner eye is opened he begins to enter into the spiritual meaning and so to reach a 'naked understanding' or 'naked trowing' which is the beginning of contemplation (ii, 33, pp. 316-6).

Now indeed the new day begins to dawn, the new life to stir amid the bones of death. 'Formed' love which is the virtue both acquired and infused of loving God is transformed by 'unformed' love which is the Holy Ghost himself. So the man at prayer becomes the true lover, not simply because he exercises his will in the occupation of loving God, but because God who is love gives himself in return. What need now of discourse and involved

imagery! It is at the time of betrothal that lovers must forever express their love in delightful words, in pictures that captivate the imagination and so cause the heart to move quicker towards the Beloved. Betrothal is the time of sweet poetry, of many words. But when the love of each is not simply being offered but received, then words cease. When union is perfected in wedlock, when love is taken rather than given, when the wedded union leads to the death of a self-forgetting gift of self, then two loves become one love. When unformed love comes himself, the Spirit of God, to occupy the heart of man, when the Spirit penetrates the outer defences of human poetry and the manful struggles of reasoning, then the quietness of night becomes the same as the brilliant flash of the Sun; here the lightsome darkness of two in one Love descends upon the heart of man, and 'we do right naught but suffer him and assent to him' (ii, 34, pp. 321-2). And when the voice of Jesus speaks softly without an uttered word, then the heart of man is stilled and he lays aside all that he is doing or saying or praying, and listens, lying motionless in the depths of that night (ii, 44).

This is the language of the true mystic of all centuries, the language of St John of the Cross as much as of Hilton, the language of divine union in terms of marriage [Compare *Scale* ii, 41 with *Living Flame* iii, 35, etc.]. The presence of the bridegroom brings a great stillness and silence, a new type which is of divine origin and akin to the Spirit of God, the *Silentium Divinum* in which Christ himself was conceived; he brings rest and unity, a gathering of all powers so that the Christian goes forward with boldness and without fear of error or deceit to a solitude which is filled with Love personified.

All this is the perfection of prayer, and with St Thomas, Hilton explains it in terms of the gifts of the Holy Ghost. It does not mean that the many words of David's poetry are to be forsaken in fact, nor the pictures and parables of the Gospels left behind. But once the Holy Ghost has come to fulfil the Christian's desire—that foundation of true prayers—then all these things are seen and used in unity. The new light of wisdom and understanding breaks upon the *Pater* and the psalter. The prayer of the liturgy continues but in a new way. The whole psalm, the whole Mass is gathered into one in Jesus; these words are tasted savourly and softly. They may not form the fullness of contemplation, but they are all a part of contemplation (ii, 42). So the prayers continue to hold up the

Christian, to support him in this dark meeting place of love.

Again, all the doctrines of faith which at first seemed to be so multiple and diverse in their variety as the Christian chose first one and then another in his efforts to discover a suitable subject for meditation. But now in wisdom he begins to see the whole hierarchy of the universe in one glance, to see all things in the divine presence. For every message of truth felt with 'inly savour and ghostly delight is a privy whisper of Jesus to the ear of a clean soul'.

And all these gracious knowings felt in a soul, of the universe of all creatures in manner before said, and of our Lord Jesus maker and keeper of all this fair universe, I call them fair words and sweet speakings of our Lord Jesus to a soul which he would make his true spouse. (ii, 46, p. 398: cf. c. 43-46.)

In this way does Hilton show us how by prayer the Christian may enter the fullness of the love of Jesus; how death to the world leads to regaining all in Christ; how the heights are scaled in the life of a simple English priest and of those who would be taught by him to listen to 'the voice of our Lord Jesus assaying the harts' (Ps. 28. ii, 46, p. 397). So he describes the single path of prayer as seen in the vision of an Englishman at prayer.

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