

AN APPROACH TO PRAYER

A PSYCHOLOGIST'S VIEW

VERA VON DER HEYDT

HUNDREDS and thousands of books on prayer exist. Many of them are handbooks from which one can learn of and be instructed in the science and art of prayer. I am not going to speak about those things, but about attitudes I have met with regard to prayer.

I know full well the difficulties connected with this attempt. The word 'prayer' touches us off in our emotions and it may make us feel embarrassed, apprehensive, or even hostile to hear about it, as it may come very close, too close, to the innermost secrets of our hearts. The idea of prayer may bring up deeply hidden wounds and despair when we think of times when we prayed in anguish for a chalice to be taken away, and it was not. Our distress may have started in childhood when we were taught to pray, and when we were told that prayer is always answered. We may have prayed and asked for a sunny day, or mother's understanding or father's safety, and it rained, and mother did not understand, and father was killed. And life went on. We grew up, and started to think, to doubt and to query the truths we had been taught, the validity of religious truths, and with it the importance of and the place of prayer in our lives.

Prayer, so it has been said, is the vital means of access to the seeker after God. But, if God is, would it not be an insult to his omnipotence and omniscience to pray and ask for anything? And would it not be an insult to his majesty to approach him without feeling like it? So we remain silent and stop speaking to God altogether, as all too often our prayer has not been answered. That is to say, our requests have not been granted. We feel that we have been rejected by God. Yet, in spite of these feelings and doubts, there are many who will cling on with fear to superimposed ideas and who will perform religious duties more and more from a *persona* level. Eventually they are caught up in the collective aspect of some Church, keeping the outer rules and regulations, paying mechanical lip-service. They will repress

their doubts, and they will be blind to their lack of understanding, and therefore remain fundamentally untouched and cut off from the implications of the faith to which they are subscribing.

But there are also those who, disillusioned, reject everything in a mechanical way. They too will repress their doubts and be blind to their lack of understanding.

And then there are those who have seen God and know him by experience, and those whose thinking has brought them to deny him.

Freud belonged to those latter ones. To him religion was an illusion, the religious man a neurotic; to him the 'Father in Heaven' was nothing but a projected image of the personal parental figures of a psyche which had remained infantile. The aim of his therapy is to release man from this bondage, and by analysing his fixation to his personal father, making him independent from him, thereby freeing him also from the delusion of there existing a transpersonal transcendent being.

It is difficult to see how in such a system there would be room for the idea of prayer. Nevertheless, it is true that individual psycho-analysts have set out to separate Freud's psychological theories from his metaphysical outlook, and one will find amongst them people of religion. Indeed, there are many religious people who prefer the Freudian attitude to the Jungian, as they believe it to be possible to keep the sufferings of neurotic man separate from his religious or spiritual life.

Jung's attitude is very different. He has never anywhere denied God, and he holds that the image of God as a psychological factor has influenced man everywhere since the beginning of time.

In order to show what prayer can be if approached from a Jungian point of view, I will have to give a short summary of Jung's concept of the psyche.

For Jung the psyche is a whole. Its totality consists of pairs of opposites. These opposites complement one another, and our life consists in trying to keep them in balance. Any too great one-sidedness inevitably leads to trouble; from within ourselves there is a constant attempt made to rectify any unbalance there may be. This attempt shows itself frequently in 'neurotic symptoms', the dis-ease pointing to the error in attitude, and from this point of view it can be said that the neurosis is purposeful and a drive towards wholeness. Body and soul, matter and spirit, the con-

scious and the unconscious, are some of the pairs of opposites; there will always be tension between these opposites as tension is the basis of life. But tension may become too great and turn into bitter conflict when one side has been or is violated too severely. In our Western civilization the neglected side is as a rule the unconscious, the inner reality. This means that too great an emphasis is put on the conscious side, on the outer reality, and on its centre the Ego. We are born in a state of unconscious unity from which, in the course of natural development, consciousness with the Ego as its centre emerges. Thereby a split between the realm of consciousness and the realm of the unconscious, our matrix, comes about.

Consciously and deliberately we have to pay attention to this vast other side of ourselves which does not only contain our repressions and reactions to our personal experiences during our life, but which is the source of our existence and creativity.

If we neglect the inner reality we cut ourselves off from the riches and the wisdom of all mankind; we will become barren and remain unaware of the hidden jewel within ourselves which is unique and exclusively ours. This jewel is hidden in the real centre of our whole being, and this Jung has called the Self. In the Self all opposites are united. It includes the deep realm common to all mankind in which the archetypes and symbols are contained, and it includes the realm of consciousness and the Ego with all the welter of wanted and unwanted happenings and experiences of our personal lives. To achieve a conscious deliberate union of these opposites has always been considered to be a great work to which end the Ego has to co-operate. This union is the Hierosgamos or the *Coniunctio oppositorum*. It is *religere*, the binding back to the real centre that which in the beginning had to be differentiated from it.

It is from this centre that we can apprehend that our lives have a meaning; it is from there that the desire stems to become whole so that we may discover that everything that comes into our lives as happenings, as 'fate' from the external world of reality, or else as 'symptoms' either physical or psychological from the internal world of reality, have a purpose. The purpose is to learn to include instead of to exclude, to know about the light and the dark. To know in the biblical sense, not as an intellectual cognition, but as a recognition in which our whole being is affected,

our minds, our hearts, our senses, and our 'always having known'. This is an experience which comes about when we are close to the archetype of the Self, are touched by it in consciousness through some symbol of wholeness in dream or vision. This is the experience of the transpersonal power, the image of God within, which is utterly convincing and overwhelming.

Much confusion has arisen from this idea, as many believe that Jung equates the experience of the divine image within the Self with God. I will quote from a letter of his in which he says the following:

'God himself has created the soul and its archetypes. We are dealing with what is the image of God and is numinous in God's own name. Trouble arises because my critics have not themselves experienced the numinous character of the archetype of the Self. By this experience we feel, in fact, as though touched by some divine power. Of course, our symbols are not God. When I as a psychologist speak of God, I am speaking of a psychological image. Similarly, the Self is a psychological image of human wholeness, and it also is of something transcendental, because it is indescribable and incomprehensible. We observe that both are expressed by identical symbols, or by symbols so alike as to be indistinguishable.' Jung ends his letter: 'The best I can do is to have a divine image, and I am not the idiot to say that the image I behold in the mirror is my real self.' This image, however, is coloured by and contaminated with the individual's experiences with his personal parents.

If the individual remains fixed at this childish level, the mirror image of God, in whose likeness we were created, can neither develop nor be transformed into that unique image latent in every single one of us.

It is of vital necessity, therefore, to get in touch with this image within, to confront it, look at it, even wrestle with it; as I quoted in the beginning: 'the vital means of access to the seeker after God is prayer'.

In so far then as we realize Grace, or the spark which is hidden in us, prayer is the deliberate attempt of the Ego to get into touch with the indwelling transpersonal image in the deep centre of ourselves. It is a turning inward and consciously directing libido towards the divine image. It is an attempt to make a bridge from the temporal conscious side which is limited by space and time,

to the unlimited eternal source and fountainhead. This directed stream may then gather up and carry along the needs and clamourings of our personal longings, cravings, wants, coming to rest, entering from the deep within into the peace that passeth all understanding, in God.

As long as our image of God is too contaminated with childish feelings, our attitude to prayer may remain infantile. It seems to me that one of our great difficulties in being simple and childlike in our approach to God is that most of us were unable to approach our parents spontaneously and without fear. 'Asking' then is an insult; or are we afraid of the answer? And our 'feelings' may be those we felt in the presence of our parents, and therefore we do not wish to be reminded of them.

Very rarely does it dawn on us that we can speak to God like St Teresa did when she and her companions were thrown into an ice-cold river: 'Oh God, I am not surprised that you have so few friends.'

But is it only I who speak? Is there only this one way, only half a circle?

In his book *Symbols of Transformation* Jung comments on the following dream of Miss Miller's: 'I had the impression as if I were going to receive a message. It seemed to me as if the words were repeated in me: Speak, Oh Lord, thy handmaid is listening, open thou thyself mine ears.' Jung says: the biblical words contain a call, or a prayer, a concentration of the libido on to the divine image of God. The prayer refers to 1 Samuel, chapter 3, in which God calls Samuel three times; but Samuel believes that it is Eli who is calling him, until Eli tells him that it is God, and that he should answer if God called him again: 'Speak, Thy servant heareth'.

Miss Miller's situation is different from Samuel's, as she in the dream directs her desires, her libido into the depth of the unconscious, and is anxiously awaiting God's call; Samuel, on the contrary, believes man to be calling him by his name when really God was speaking to him.

Like Samuel we may be called by our name; and for a long time we may not hear. We may mistake the call from the depths for being nothing but an external occurrence which troubles our sleep. The call may be contained in our loneliness, our restlessness, our feelings of frustration and boredom, our grief and pain,

in success or failure, in our joy, gladness, ecstasy and peace. Something is always calling us to hearken, something is always pursuing us to stay and stand still. 'Those strong feet that follow, follow after, but with unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy.'

In this way the whole circle is formed, the circle which goes out and comes in.

Prayer is not only speaking and asking, but contemplating, waiting in silence, and listening. From our side and from the other. What will the answer be? a Yes or a No? From either side.

God, the Self, the Logos in the unconscious, Gerhard Adler's term, are constantly working towards the goal of wholeness; from the greater than I, the Yes and the No will be a *mysterium*; so ultimately is also our Yes or No. Why?, to what purpose are our hearts hardened? Why do we not listen? I do not know. It is a *mysterium* which the human mind can not understand.

We can but recognize the Ego's limitations, and say as the Alchemists used to say: *Deo concedente*. God willing. God permitting.

In this way, the Ego places itself in the right relationship to the greater than I; no longer will the Ego attempt to force issues by magic, no longer will the Ego have the illusion of being master, but on the contrary will be searching and watching, and as far as possible willingly co-operate with the Greater to complete the pattern of life.

Binding back, *religando*, through this attitude our split will be healed, and by virtue of this, something towards the healing in the world around us may be done. *Deo concedente*: by work on ourselves, by prayer, by our attitude towards life, which can be prayer.

WHAT ABOUT BECOMING A BROTHER?

With God's help you could do much for souls and bodies by joining the Hospitaller Brothers of St John of God

For full particulars write to:

**Very Rev. Bro. Provincial, St John of God's Hospital,
Scorton, Richmond, Yorks**