

Choice not feelings

You yourself have to choose God and search for Him. But you cannot choose God unless you have some understanding of what He is. If you have a false understanding, believing God to be a vicious tyrant, then woe betide you if you choose Him. That is not choosing God, but the nasty construct of debased human minds.

The real God is the one you see in the Gospels, and it is Jesus who gives that mysterious word, 'God', its meaning. In Jesus we can make this leap of faith believing that, despite all that happens, God is truly our Father.

It is you yourself who must choose God and search for Him. In other words, pray. This is what maturity means. You have no means of knowing how many other people have committed themselves to this lonely and rather frightening search. It seems to me that nobody can really help you with it or tell you how to do it. Only you as a responsible human being can make this turning of mind and heart away from self in the small sense and out to God. You have to accept that you may get no comeback from this, comforting you with a sense of rightness. Some people get a great deal of

emotional support from their prayer. Others get nothing. Either way, comforting prayer or stark prayer is equally real, equally blessed.

I cannot tell you how passionately I would like to help people realize that what we feel does not essentially matter. This is especially true of prayer. I write this with a sinking feeling that most of you will not believe me. It is so natural for us to accept that what we feel is an image of objective reality. But it is not. Feelings come and go. They have no solidity to them. You can build nothing lasting on feeling. Think of happiness: what is it? It is not a feeling. It is something lasting for me, that is based upon the love of God. Any relationship, whether with God or man that has only feeling to support it is in trouble. When the feeling goes (and it will), what have you left? Nothing. Whereas if you have made a rational choice and cling to it, what you have endures.

Art and prayer

What has art to do with prayer? Speaking absolutely, nothing. Prayer has to do with God, ever present, ever loving, and with you

yourself, as present and receptive of His love as you are able. Nothing else at all, the state of your health, your state of mind, even your state of goodness, is important. (What is missing God will make clear to you – and if you truly desire Him, you will listen.) But if we come to speaking less absolutely and more relatively, then what you offer God in prayer is dependent on many factors. He can only come to the real you, and that totally true person, who has become what God intends him or her to become, is not what we are born with. We are born with the potential. It takes a long time of resolute desire to bring all the elements of this potential into active existence. And it is here that art matters.

Jesus told us that He had come so that we might have life and live it to the full. That 'full' includes responding to the wonders of our world, experiencing them so as to be wholly alive. Friendship, the natural world, music, books, film: the list is very long. High on it, it seems to me, comes art. I have always been saddened to find how many people think that the enjoyment of art is an elite pursuit, one for which they are either not educated or not intelligent enough.

Of course this is nonsense. We are all born with the capacity to respond to art. Even our remote ancestors in their dark caves created works so beautiful that they have never been surpassed: equalled, yes; surpassed, never. I was lucky in coming early to an understanding of the spiritual depth that visual pleasure (and perturbation, too – art elicits many layered responses) could provide. Although I am as yet far from being the Sister Wendy I was born to be, I acknowledge with gratitude that I am much closer, more integrated, more alive because of my contemplation of art. So, in this sense, that of drawing one into a more profound awareness of one's own unique humanity, yes, art does matter to prayer. I have only to see a Cézanne, for example, perhaps one of his great landscapes, or a majestic still life, a landscape in its own right, and I am overwhelmed with joy. This is a profound and transforming joy, a call to enter into something beyond what is seen, something that Cézanne, (or Poussin, or whoever) also saw but expressed in terms of light and colour. There are no words for this, but I know that I have been lifted out of my smallness into something immeasurably great, something that, however vaguely, seems 'holy'.

It was to share the wonder of this experience that I have spent what would have been good silence time in writing and talking on the screen. Whatever people believed or did not believe, and I had no way of determining who would read or listen to me, this pure clarifying joy, with its implicit challenge, its awareness of what is beautiful, would be accessible. I carefully avoided any words that demanded faith, or faith in one religion rather than another. Since most world art is, in fact, religious, this has never been completely possible.

Yet, speaking now personally and without an agenda, I have come across works where I am moved, not only by the beauty of what I see, that beauty that is God, whether the theme be Botticelli's *Venus* or Degas' *Jockeys* or Fra Angelico's *Heaven*, but by something more particular. I have been touched by a religious insight, a 'message' if you like, that I would not elaborate on in public, and yet which for me held great significance. These works that deeply affect me – me as a praying woman – are rare, but I treasure them. In that they directly unite me to God, I could say that they have a relevance to my prayer. I would never want to use

them during prayer, but when I come to pray, what they have shown me may be a powerful incentive to surrender.

Icon of Mother and Child

The image that is most significant to me I have in card form, always here on my narrow – too narrow – all-purpose table. It is an icon of the Virgin and Child, probably painted about 550 say the scholars, and it is a very recent discovery. The Iconoclasts, who thought all images led to idolatry, ravaged their way through the Eastern Empire in the late seventh and eighth centuries. Only seven icons before this period have survived, five in Rome, which was never violated by the Iconoclasts, and two in the far-away monastery of St Catherine in Sinai. Now the Temple Gallery in London has found an eighth, and I can never tire of gazing at it.

This icon may have come from some small church in Egypt, and miraculously survived, dirty and creased, from that age of faith into the age of disbelief. The Virgin does not engage us with her attention, nor does she look at her small Son. She removes herself from the scene, abstracting herself so that we might look only at

Jesus. She is remarkably beautiful, with her pale, oval face and columnar neck, noble head held high as she turns away to the right and holds out to us the transparent mandala in which her Son sits. At first I thought this was her womb, but we can see her hand holding firmly to an edge. (Scholars, who of course are fascinated by this survival, think there may be a reference to the shield on which the face of Caesar was displayed to the army.)

Mary does right to diminish her presence: all she has ever wanted was for us to see Jesus. But this Jesus is unlike any representation of Christ that I have ever seen. He is neither baby nor adult: small, intensely dignified, a majestic little figure with unruly auburn curls and large dark eyes. What makes Him so unique is His expression. All images of Christ, excepting those that show Him as a little baby, see Him as in control. Even Christ in His passion is at peace, one who knows the answer. But here the small face is not at peace. This is an anxious child, and He fixes those questioning eyes on us, not to tell us what His Father wants, but to invite us to search with Him. It has never bothered me to imagine what Jesus looked like. The Gospel writers were wholly unconcerned



*Icon of mother and child.
Courtesy of the Temple Gallery, London*

with how He appeared. Their only concern was what He meant, who He was. But if we had lived in first-century Palestine and met Jesus there, I cannot but feel this deep probing look, drawing us into a spiritual journey that we are to take with Him, might have been more true to what we would have seen. I look at this face with a shock of wonder: it draws us away – but to where? Into mystery, into faith, into that Truth that Jesus has said He actually was, in His person: ‘I am the way the truth and the life.’ The weight of that awareness rests almost visibly upon this small face. Does Jesus Himself understand it? We are taken into the Mystery.

When this icon was in the Temple Gallery, Dick Temple kept a lamp burning before it, and with the electric lights dimmed the effect was indescribable. Several who saw it there were impelled to their knees: it imposes that quiet in which prayer is at home. Remember that this is specifically an icon, which means it was not painted as ‘art’ but as a means to union with God. The unknown painter, all those centuries ago, would have fasted and kept vigil, would have prayed in silence and with words of supplication, begging to be made a vehicle in which God could come closer to

us. The art world is rather baffled by icons, which fit into no histories of the development of painting and have only one purpose: to take us through what is seen to the Holy that is unseen. To ask an icon painter what art and prayer have to do with each other would be meaningless: here art is prayer. But only here.

Doubts

A priest once wrote to me referring to St Thomas, who doubted (as the Gospels tell us) and said that unless he put his finger into the wound in the side of Jesus, he would not believe in the resurrection. My friend said he thought doubt was fruitful. It seems to me, rather, that doubt is irrelevant. Common enough, but not crucial to our relationship with God. It is what we do with the doubt that matters.

The holiest person I know has never had the slightest interior intimation that God exists. All she gets back from her prayer is doubt and darkness. She experiences a terrible fear that her life with God is all imagination; that there is no God; that living as a nun is a mockery. With this agonizing sense of her own personal

weakness and her own absolute absence of felt certainty, she chooses. She chooses to believe. She chooses to act in accordance with that belief, which means in practice a life of heroic charity. This woman – and others like her, because she is not alone in this heroism – is giving to God the real sacrifice of faith. This woman chooses to love God and to serve Him and to believe in Him, even if she gets nothing back. It is a glory to know that she exists and that there are others like her.

No reward for prayer

Biblical themes have impressed themselves so deeply into Albert Herbert's imagination that he comes back to them again and again, always with new insights. Moses making his lonely journey up the mountain where the mystery of God awaits him is one such theme. In this painting the mountain surges almost off the top of the canvas, pointing away into infinity, while Moses stands exposed, arms wide open to receive the divine message.

Perhaps he also opens his arms as a means of balance. He is terrifyingly high, planted as solidly as he can manage, with feet set



*The Mountain, 1991. Private Collection, England & Co. Gallery, London,
The Bridgeman Art Library*

apart and body tense with desire. He has reached this height by ways we cannot fathom: the mountain is precipitous, right-angled in its rejection of the easy ascent, and we realize that Moses has clambered to the meeting place with immense difficulty. No wonder he is stripped to his shirt and his face is dark with fatigue. Not only does he present his own plea, but he represents the whole of creation: those who stand at the mountain foot, holding hands, afraid of the lonely responsibility of ascent, afraid too, perhaps, of having to risk life and limb on a climb into apparent nothingness.

But Moses also takes within his spirit the animal and vegetable world, the little living beasts that creep on the lower slopes and the great lovely tree that adorns them.

It is a beautiful mountain, alive with so much colour and fascination, yet Moses has to labour on through it all, leaving everything behind, if he is to be present before his God.

He has not, we feel sure, turned away in any sense of belittlement. Herbert takes such loving artistic pains to show us the sweetness of the innocent and material world that we cannot but

feel that Moses, too, related tenderly to it. But nothing can go up with him except his bare self. Humbly, he does not press on to the uppermost peak, but stops on a convenient plateau, where God can address him and he can listen. It is easy to see why this scene exerts such force over Herbert; it is the quintessential image of prayer. Mystic after mystic has written of this solitary ascent and the need to labour along the way, the need to strip the heart of all that is a distraction, the need to hold on in faith to the certainty that God is there, even if – especially if – we see nothing.

‘Nothing, nothing, nothing on the way,’ said St John of the Cross, ‘and on the mountain, nothing.’ Nothing but God alone.

THREE

PRAYER AND PERSONALITY

The fullness of life

Writing to a fellow poet, Robert Duncan (1927–89) says the Chinese philosopher Confucius asserts that there are three supreme virtues in living. All of them, it seems to me, have an immediate relevance to prayer.

The first is what Duncan calls 'the effort', which must be his translation of *Qi*, the divine energy that infuses all that is. In Eastern art, landscape has a significance far beyond anything in the art of the West. For the Chinese a mountain is a spiritual statement, not a material fact, and so is a stream or a cloud or a tree. Scholars kept rocks on their desks or in their courtyards, because in their very materiality they reminded them of, and united them to, this sacred *Qi*: a radiant power greater than our own, holding in active tension the whole of nature, which includes human nature, in its great orbit. But whereas landscape and nature are inherently

imbued with *Qi*, it is a grace that human beings must actively and seriously pursue. They have to enter into *Qi* consciously; it is not a given.

With a slight twist of emphasis, we might call *Qi* the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God made actual to us, God working within us, God lifting us to Himself in prayer. Whenever we speak about prayer, we are really speaking about the power of the Holy Spirit ('for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words' Rom. 8:26). We are not conscious of this all-powerful Spirit, nor can we be. He eludes all our perceptions. But we should acknowledge the truth of His presence. If we say prayer is God's business, this is essentially what we mean: that all that is alive and real in our prayer comes from His presence. Turn to God, and it is the Holy Spirit who has drawn you. Rest in Him, and it is the Holy Spirit who sustains you. Go forth in His Spirit to work for the truth, and all that is pure and good in what you do is not yours, but His.

Humility

The second of Confucius's 'supreme virtues in living' is not to be great, to be an unknown. There can never be any true prayer when, at some level, we regard this as an expression of our moral importance. Forget what others think or may think of us, humility, which is surely what is exercising the mind of Confucius, demands that we ourselves are uninterested in what we are. Humility is nothing to do with having a low opinion of our qualities; it is all to do with not being interested in them, not gazing long and devotedly at yourself.

What does it matter how clever, how skilful, how powerful you might be, and what does it matter that others recognize this or not? When Jesus spoke about being like little children, I am sure that He meant the willingness to accept the unimportance of a child in first-century Palestine. Whatever a child's insights, its very childishness would militate against anybody paying attention to them. Be content to be a nobody, says Jesus. Accept that you get no feedback from others as to how good you are, how pure your prayer. Live in the shadows and let God have all the glory.