

Psalms As Prayer

by Fr. Dominic Borg, OCD

Nowadays, if a man told you that he has spoken to God, your first reaction would most likely be that this man requires psychiatric help. Yet, isn't this desire of communication with your Creator what you yourself are striving for in the medium of prayer?

Prayer is an intimate and private matter which the Rabbis called "Avada She' ba Lev" - the service of the heart. No-one else but God can hear - to Him alone are revealed our innermost secret thoughts. In this private meeting between you and God, assuming you have made the proper preparations, great things are capable of taking place.

The Hebrew word for "to pray", lehitpallel gives us an insight into its own deep meaning. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch traces it to the root "pollol" which indicates that to pray means to judge oneself. As we stand before God in prayer each one of us passes judgement on himself. The awareness of the presence and nearness of God moves us to introspection, to think deeply and seriously about ourselves. This creates the possibility of addressing ourselves to God.

Prayer, then, is more than speaking to God, it also involves the inner transformation we must each go through before coming into God's presence. Before long, we discover that prayer has become a way of life, and life a path guided by prayer. The ability to pray is a great potential power which we possess. Not to put this power to work is more wasteful than neglecting the use of any other talent. Genuine prayer is a skill to be developed and a goal to be pursued. It is a task that requires a lifetime of practice and striving. Empty, thoughtless words will never pierce the "curtain" between earth and heaven, but sincerely motivated prayer can. When we speak of prayer as "service of the heart", it is important to remember that the expression: "service of the heart" involves the heart, which is the seat of emotion, as well as the mind, which is the source of the intellect. The Hebrew verb for praying always comes in the reflexive form "hitpallel". This indicates clearly that prayer is a process of searching one's inner self, probing with one's intellect into the essence of his being in order that he may stand before God, where "seal is truth."

Mad people hear voices: Jews hear the Voice. I know that there are some who describe those who come together for prayer as mad, as men and women trying to hear voices that are not there; but I also know that there is much more madness in the world due to absence of prayer than our account of it.

To hear - listen - is crucial for us Christians; the ear is our vital organ. We cannot see God's face, the Book of Exodus tells us, but we are bidden to listen to His voice: Shema Yisrael, Listen, O Israel that God is;

that He is one;
that He is unique.

Idolatry is sites. Judaism is sounds - so is Christianity.

The voice that says Shema, "Listen!" also tells us what to do: V'ahavta, "You shall love the Lord your God." How do I love? By responding to the call of the Beloved.

The rabbis saw in the Song of Songs not only a superb love poem but also an allegoric description of the relationship between God and His people: Kol Dodi, "A voice: my beloved,

here he comes.": To turn to the Beloved is to respond; to walk in the direction of the Voice is to express our love and yearning for God - and prayer is the most obvious vehicle for it. What to outsiders seems like madness is for lovers full of meaning and beauty.