



Lesson Five: When you meet with God...remember he is holy.

Reflection/Discussion

How well did you get on with maintaining a background of silence in your conversation with God? At first I found keeping my mind quiet very difficult, but gradually it got easier. Now it happens pretty naturally, so don't give up! Of course, it's unlikely that you will hear God speaking back to you in an audible way (I never have), but I believe that God appreciates the fact that you are making space for him, and what you do in your prayer time will gradually change your openness to God during the rest of the day.

If you're continuing to feel drowsy when you do this exercise, don't worry about it, this is quite normal. Perhaps you need to rethink where and how you are praying. If you do the exercise lying down on your bed you may find yourself falling asleep! Perhaps you need to stand, or sit on an upright chair to do your prayers.

So, did you find it hard NOT asking God to do things for you when you were talking to him? Did you feel you were wasting time by not doing so?

Teaching

Matthew 6: 9b/Luke 11: 2b "...hallowed be your name,"

The power of weakness...

When I was thirteen I left home to study at a boarding school. One of my first memories of that school was the chapel services. All the boys had to attend and so the chapel was full. What struck me was the hymn singing. Having been brought up in a traditional church where people didn't sing too loudly in case others heard their voice rising above the rest, it was refreshing to be in a service where the songs were sung at full volume! This approach to singing reflected the general attitude of the school. We were taught to be strong and confident. We were meant to achieve great things, both in the class room and on the sports field. Subconsciously we learnt that there was no good to be found in weakness and failure. I have been un-learning this lesson ever since!

Some years ago I had the opportunity to do a course based on the writings of Henri Nouwen - a university lecturer who was invited to live in a L'Arche community with people who had learning disabilities. He writes on a number of themes to do with Christian spirituality, and one of them is 'downward mobility'; or the idea that whilst our natural tendency is to climb up the ladder of life, God is to be found at the bottom of the ladder! In his book *Letters to Marc about Jesus* Nouwen

writes this, *“So, here I am in my new surroundings. I may say that the contrast between my university life and my life here in L’Arche is greater than I realised at the outset. The contrast isn’t so much between intelligent students and mentally handicapped people, as in the ‘ascending’ style of the university and the ‘descending’ style of L’Arche. You might say that at Yale and Harvard they’re principally interested in upward mobility, whereas here they believe in the importance of downward mobility. That’s the radical difference; and I notice in myself how difficult it is to change direction on the ladder...It has become very clear to me now that the further you descend, the more your eyes are opened to the brokenness of our humanity.”*¹

So in Nouwen’s view, the calling for Christians seeking God was actually towards ‘downward mobility’ rather than ‘upward mobility’. Nouwen had been very deeply influenced by his experience of the L’Arche community he made his home. The founder of these communities was a man called Jean Vanier who has written a number of books including *Becoming Human* in which he talks about the power of weakness. *“Our lives are a mystery of growth from weakness to weakness, from the weakness of the little baby to the weakness of the aged. Throughout our life, we are prone to fatigue, sickness and accidents. Weakness is at the heart of each one of us....Some people are infuriated by weakness; they are disturbed by the cry of a child. Weakness awakens hardness and anger in them....However, weakness can also open up our hearts to compassion: the place where we are concerned for the growth and well-being of the weak....If we deny our weakness and the reality of death, if we want to be powerful and strong always, we deny a part of our being, we live an illusion. To be human is to accept who we are, this mixture of strength and weakness....To be human is to be bonded together, each with our weaknesses and strengths, because we need each other....Weakness carries within it a secret power. The cry and the trust that flow from weakness can open up hearts.”*²

Moving in the right direction...

At the beginning of the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus makes the first statement to the Father an act of worship...*“hallowed be your name”*. In biblical terms God’s ‘name’ means the person that God has revealed himself to be. So in our worship of God we acknowledge the truth about who he is, utterly holy and worthy of our worship in every respect. We cannot approach God on equal terms, or filled with pride. We can only come to him in humility; in our weakness. As Paul writes in Romans 12: 1 *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship.”* Someone who is a ‘living sacrifice’ cannot also be puffed up and full of themselves. As Jesus says in Matthew 6: 24, *“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”* Unfortunately, as ‘living sacrifices’, we have the tendency to crawl back off the altar! But if our desire is for money and the worldly power/pleasure it brings us, our focus will be on climbing up the ladder of life. If our desire is for God, then our calling is to discover our weakness, to become like a child as Jesus said, *“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 18: 3), or as Paul states it, *“when I am weak, then I am strong”* (2 Corinthians 12:10). These two possible roads for us to travel on do not run parallel. They run in

¹ “Letters to Marc About Jesus” by Henri J. M. Nouwen, page 41.

² “Becoming Human” by Jean Vanier, 2003, pages 39-40.

opposite directions; hence you cannot be climbing both up and down the ladder at the same time. Nor can we pursue both God and the things of this world!

Our approach to God can only begin by recognising our weakness, like the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18: 9–14. Jesus ends the parable with these words, *“For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”* We live in a world that strongly encourages self-aggrandisement, and we are all, to some extent or other, affected by this attitude. To say, *“hallowed be your name”* is to put the aspirations we have for ourselves to one side and set our hearts on lifting God up. It is stepping down from the throne of our own lives and offering the place to him. It is humbly acknowledging the truth of his holiness in comparison to our sinfulness. It is the cry of weakness from the human heart that opens up the heart of God in response.

Becoming like God...

Of course, this act of worship is not intended as something we only do on a Sunday in church, or when we have our daily quiet time. It is meant to be something that affects every aspect of our lives; and it takes a lifetime to work out how we can do that. Fortunately, we are not left alone to work it out. The Holy Spirit has been given to guide us (John 14: 26) on our journey. But if there are times when our pride questions why we are doing this, or if we want to rebel against being humble before God (which would be quite natural to do given our fallen state), we can remind ourselves that we do this because we have chosen to be disciples and followers of Jesus. He is the one who has already demonstrated the extraordinary humility of God through his own act of self sacrifice on the cross. Do we really need any more proof of how worthy he is of our humble worship?

There is another aspect of the phrase *“hallowed be your name”* that we now need to consider. Behind the humility displayed by Jesus on the cross is an astonishing heart of love, and this heart of love is a part of what we mean when we say God is holy. Love is an aspect of God’s holiness. It is not that God loves, but that God IS love! Love is a fundamental part of who he is. *“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”* (1 John 4: 8) One of the meanings of the word ‘holy’ is ‘separate’. God is separate from us in that his love is a pure love. *“God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”* (1 John 1:5b) But our love is feeble in comparison, and our light is tainted with darkness. Yet God calls us all to, *“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy”* (Leviticus 19:2), and so a part of that calling is to love as God loves. We can see this when we consider the greatest commandments of God – those things that God most wants us to do. Jesus spells it out with the words, *“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”* (Matthew 22: 37-39) In both these commandments we are told to ‘love’, firstly God, and then ourselves and others equally.

Exercise

So far, in these prayer exercises, you have worked on the process of quietening yourself down as you come into God’s presence. Then in the last lesson you addressed God as ‘Father’, or saw him as a ‘caring counsellor’. The main point being that God is on your side. He loves you and cares about the life you face each day. So in this new exercise you are going to make the first and most

important request of God - that he might enable you to grow in love. God is the source of all love, and he desires that you grow in your capacity to love, and in the purity of your love. So for this exercise, each day that you do it, I want you to formulate a prayer that you will take to your heart and (I hope) repeat for years to come. The exact words of the prayer are for you to decide, but I would suggest that you include the following three elements of the prayer as follows:

- a) Thank God for the extraordinary love he has for you.
- b) Ask God to make you able to love him with all your heart, soul and mind.
- c) Ask God to expand your heart so that you might have a greater love, both for yourself, and equally for others. (Incidentally, it is not possible for us to truly love God or our neighbour unless we have first learned to love ourselves, so this prayer is really important!)

At first your prayer might be a long one in order to include these three elements, but as you do this exercise each day, I hope that you will find a formula of words that sets this prayer before God in a way that is right for you. Do not worry if this prayer does begin to feel like a formula. These are still your words, and the desire they express will be yours as well. At the end of the exercise remember to thank God for the time you've been able to spend with him.

Exercise in brief:

- 1) Pray – give God this time you have set aside for him.
- 2) Sit still and spend a moment becoming attentive to God.
- 3) Reflect on the way God has demonstrated his extraordinary love for you.
- 4) Ask God to help you become a person who loves him, yourself and others more.
- 5) Close the exercise with a prayer of thanks.

Encouragement

Carolyn writes...

My husband and I were on holiday in Malta with our baby. One day we drove our hired car to a beach in a quiet little cove where, we were told, the fast moving sea with its high waves would be a fun place to swim. We settled ourselves on the sand and took turns in looking after the baby or riding the waves. We made a day of it and, around 5pm, my husband went into the sea again, leaving me chatting to the couple next to us on the beach. About 5 minutes later, my husband returned with a look of immense consternation on his face. *"Carolyn,"* he said, *"I had the car keys in my trunks pocket. They're not there anymore!"*

After frantically searching our bags and stuff around us, we looked at each other in despair. Those keys could only be in the fast moving sea, ever turning over the sea bed. The situation seemed hopeless, but suddenly I was inspired to hope. *"God can do the impossible,"* I said, and I felt it! Propelled by my new found hope and confidence, I made my way down to the waters and went in. I began by looking as far as I could on the sea bed in the shallows. Then I went further out and dove down, feeling for the keys. I kept dredging up stone, sand, bits of glass and various odds and ends, but no keys. As the time went on I began to feel less confident. Glancing back at the shore, I saw my husband and the couple I'd been talking to staring at me. They had surely heard my declaration of confidence in God. There was no way I could go back empty handed!

I prayed with renewed hope, and not a little desperation. I was realising what a fine pickle we were in without the car, and we had no food or milk left for the baby. How would we get back to the hotel? "Please Lord, please, please let me find these keys and glorify your name at the same time. PLEASE!" A few seconds after that prayer I was wading in the shallows again, not far from the spot I went in, and my right hand grasped something. Would you believe it – IT WAS THE KEYS!!! I pulled them up and stared at them, unable to believe my eyes. Trembling with joy I shouted to my husband that I'd got them. I think the whole beach knew as I ran out of the water triumphantly! What a miracle that was!

Incidentally, the couple we were next to were Christians and we got chatting. The wife had a long term illness and I now had a new confidence to start praying for her supernatural healing. I don't know the outcome as we have not kept in touch, but I pray that the miraculous provision of God in that situation will stay with all of us and keep rippling out into the world to bring continued hope and healing to us all.

Sayings of the Desert Fathers/Mothers

Abba Poemen, "As long as the pot is on the fire, no fly nor any other animal can get near it, but as soon as it is cold, these creatures get inside. So it is for the monk; as long as he lives in spiritual activities, the enemy cannot find a means of overthrowing him."