

Beggars At God's Gate

Yes, we are all beggars before God, beggars for ourselves and for one another. Prayer is not delusion or a selfish preoccupation with our narrowly perceived needs. We rarely know what our true needs might be but unless we are honest with ourselves and humble enough to stand day in day out, and cost what it may, before God with open hands, ready to receive – and then to share – we can receive nothing. Angels, Richard Trench tells us, are scattering gold. Only our cussedness refuses the gift, whether we know it or not.

Beggars At God's Gate ~

Prayer in the Light

& shade.

This is an age of instant everything, convenience foods, the easy fix. We cannot bide our time. If God himself does not deliver the goods we dismiss him as redundant.

But in the things of the spirit it is actually the other way round. Truth, Beauty, Love, Holiness, Eternal Bliss, are to be discovered in painful slowness, coming and going over the horizon of our vision with an almost petulant elusiveness. They are things to be partially savoured step by halting step, with all their contraries being shown up for what they are in lived experience. It is not always very comfortable.

We cannot have a lifetime in the first moment, though we may catch a glimpse of the wonders to come, flashed briefly on the screen but only to pass swiftly away. Yet, once seen, the vision is never totally erased as we hobble through the ups and downs, the darkness and the light of life, earnestly yearning for the fulfilment. Our task is never to give up. All of this is what prayer and Christian living is about.

O, but we still want the good moments to last forever, like the disciples on the Mount of the Transfiguration. Archbishop Richard Chevenix Trench of Dublin, writing in the 19th century, felt just the same as the rest of us. He put it across quite simply and vividly in his verses,



Holy Cross Series FE19a

Holy Cross Convent, Rempstone Hall, Nr Loughborough LE12 6RG

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especially in LINES (written after hearing some beautiful singing in a convent church in Rome). The ecstasy itself is hard to describe, though the archbishop attempts it. No doubt the sisters themselves would have been surprised since they would know only too well the shortcomings of their musical rendering! Yet God chose their corporate worship to be the means of revealing just a little of himself to one who was present, and participating in prayer, though of necessity as it were on the fringes:

*My soul that listened seemed quite gone,
Dissolved in sweetness, and anon
I was borne upward, till I trod
Among the hierarchy of God . . .*

Yes, in those moments Archbishop Trench had his glimpse of the wonders to come, a taste of the End descending into time and space. Coming down to earth again when the singing stopped seemed almost unbearable:

*And when they ceased, as time must bring
An end to every sweetest thing,
With what reluctancy came back
My spirits to their wonted track.*

By comparison everything here below seemed pallid and futile, daily living an inexplicable and useless enigma:

*And how I loathed the common life,
The daily and recurring strife
With petty sins, the lowly road,
And being's ordinary load.*

The mystics and people of profound prayer tell us it is so, though, if the experience of the divine is genuine, in the end everything down below also becomes tinged with glory and is seen to be of deep significance in the purposes of God. Even the hum-drum monotony, and the insignificancies which we make to loom so large, become vehicles of communion with God. But that comes later. In first experience, along with the Archbishop, we question why:

*O come, warm sun and ripen my late fruits;
Pierce, genial showers, down to my parchèd roots,*

We feel ourselves dry and unfruitful, late in the day in showing any real signs of anything akin to holiness. Like the Israelites in the wilderness we need pure water to drink for all that we have is polluted through our sinfulness. The wood of Christ's cross alone can make it pure (Cf. Exodus 15: 23-5):

*My well is bitter; cast therein the tree,
That sweet henceforth its brackish waves may be.*

Such a prayer is obviously no idle plea but is a cry from the heart. Our own sinfulness, divorced from the mercy of God, is impossible to contemplate. Despair would set in, anger, rebellion . . . Richard Trench cries out, as for ourselves too:

*Say, what is prayer, when it is prayer indeed?
The mighty utterance of a mighty need.*

*The man is praying, who doth press with might
Out of his darkness into God's own light.*

We need perseverance in prayer, it is essential to us. Archbishop Trench goes on to use various images from nature and the world around us to indicate that outside prayer we shall, in a real sense, cease to be. However painful it might be, we *must* wrestle with God and *against* ourselves and our excuses and reluctance, our slothfulness and our dread. Outside the fire iron remains cold and hard, flowers and leaves plucked from their stalks, will plainly simply die. A river cut off from its source dries up. And so do we, if we turn from God and seek only our self-sufficiency. The difficulty of picking ourselves up, turning round and journeying back to God is only compounded by our dilly dallying. Every created thing comes from God and returns to him. Are we so proud that we think ourselves exempted?

*All things that live from God their sustenance wait,
And sun and moon are beggars at his gate.*

*Why, after such a solemn mood,
Should any meaner thought intrude?
Why will not heaven hereafter give
That we for evermore may live
Thus at our spirit's topmost bent?
So asked I in my discontent.*

Why **do** we always have to come down again to the plain seeming never to get any higher up the mount? In his more sober moments Richard Trench knew something of the answer and passes it on to us. If we were always on some minor peak or other of apparent bliss or holiness, we would stop half-way, or less, in our journey, content with mediocrity and thinking we had all. God is infinite and there is always far more beyond what we think we know of him. Brief tasters must be granted us of the joys that lie in store, else we could never guess at them, but we cannot sustain them in our present, earthly state. Neither could we bear our exile here **without** these brief tasters:

*These seasons come, and they depart;
~
They come, or we could never guess
of heaven's sublimer blessedness;
They come, to be our strength and cheer
In other times, in doubt or fear,
Or should our solitary way
Lie through the desert many a day.*

But their departure as well as their coming is a blessing, for we are reminded then of our creatureliness, our dependency on God, so that our all too prevalent human pride and self-sufficiency is checked when we are faced with our self-emptiness in the seeming absence of God:

*They go, they leave us blank and dead,
That we may learn, when they are fled,
We are but vapours which have won
A moment's brightness from the sun*
~

*Well for us they do not abide
Or we should lose ourselves in pride,
And be as angels ~*

But not like the real angels, ministering round the throne of God to do his bidding – No, like the fallen angels, the devil and his minions . . .

So, Archbishop Trench tells us, we **can** rejoice in our rare moments of blissful fellowship with the divine. *Thrice welcome may such seasons be*, he says, while adding straightaway, *But welcome too the common way, the lowly duties of the day*. Everything is grist for the mill of prayer and of union with God, the rough with the smooth, the ordinary with the out-of-this-world. We must take both in our stride and not be thrown off course.

And to emphasise the point we can turn to another poem by the Archbishop, entitled simply: PRAYER. This time the perspective is the other way round. It is not that God seems very near and everything is blissful, until we are plunged back again into the everyday. No, on the contrary, God seems nowhere and prayer is so excruciatingly difficult that we shy away. It is then, of course that we need to grit our teeth and stay at the task, somehow, come what may:

*When prayer delights thee least, then learn to say,
Soul, now is greatest need that thou shouldst pray.*

It is not that God has deserted **us** but instead it is we who are out of true and only God can put things right. Therefore we must persevere in knocking at his door:

*Crooked and warped I am, and I would fain
Straighten myself by thy right line again.*

There is in fact nothing quite like dryness in prayer for showing us something of ourselves, our weakness and our utter dependability on God. That is why we are not allowed to bask permanently on the heights as we saw earlier. Recognising our state we begin to cry out to God, wherever he might be: