

“Praying without Ceasing” – A New Angle

I have long been challenged by the seemingly impossible command in the Bible that we “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17 – just three words, but powerful enough, and arresting).

“Giants” in the Christian faith whom I have met over the years have hinted to me that continual prayer is natural to them, a lifestyle choice that can (read “*should*”) be cultivated by anyone with a modicum of genuine desire to know Jesus Christ better. An old pastor once told me that, “God and I, we talk”. As a younger Christian I found this both encouraging and intimidating.

Priests and gurus in other religions also seem to have a knack of praying to their “gods” for protracted periods, with apparent ease and lack of urgency to be elsewhere. And they don’t even know the true God.

I confess that praying without ceasing is not so easy for me. While encouraged by the likes of Brother Lawrence (1614-1691), about whom I have written elsewhere, who seemed to enjoy an ongoing conversation with God, whether in the church, kitchen or street, I find life to be so crammed with other “stuff” that I struggle to be a “prayer warrior”.

I know that prayer is part of the Christian’s DNA. I read the Bible every day (at least I have a system that works in this respect) and I pray as often as I can (nowhere near as structured as I would like), but there is a lot of surround sound that competes for my attention. I also have family and community responsibilities, so a cloistered life is not an option (nor is it something I desire – Christianity has to be eminently practicable in everyday life).

Here’s my dilemma: how can I have a meaningful ongoing conversation with God (after all, the Holy Spirit *does* speak to me) without being either mechanical or “religious” about it and when I am up to my eyeballs in everyday living?

Sometimes those daily Bible readings give me hints, “nudges” for the day, that sit on the edge of my thinking and provide clues about how and what to pray.

I recently came across a verse tucked away in Deuteronomy that gave me a further hint about how to approach this issue. Addressing the generation of Israelites who were about to leave the wilderness after forty years of wandering and enter the Promised Land, Moses encouraged them:

“you are to rejoice before the Lord your God in everything you put your hand to”

(Deuteronomy 12:18 – the next verse refers to their responsibilities in terms of looking after the professional clergy, the Levites, so it is clear Moses was talking to the non-clergy; see also verses 7 and 12).

As they crossed the Jordan River, took the land, settled down, farmed and built houses and communities, God was promising to be with them. And even though they would come together from time to time in what was to become centralised temple worship, each and every one could count on His presence and blessing as they went about their daily affairs during the rest of the year.

Reading this verse, in context, I asked myself: could this principle apply today? In the detail of my daily schedule? In the 21st century.

Think about it: “in everything we put our hands to”. That means, well, *everything* we do. There is no part of us that God is not interested in. We are to think about Him in our daily lives, and take Him there, not as an invited guest, but as a permanent resident. We are to do so in the context that He is with us. The Incarnation is evidence enough that God understands experientially the world in which we live and the pressures that we face.

Frankly, I find this concept a relief, because all too often we are told, when we gather in formal church services, that we are “entering the presence of the Lord”, which (while probably no more than a rhetorical button, but one that contains echoes of earlier times when the temple was everything) also seems to imply that we are not in God’s presence at other times. This does not make sense.

As Christians we are individually and corporately the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16); we are never *not* in His presence. Whatever you, do, wherever you go, you are in the presence of God. That much is exciting!

In everything we do..... That is far reaching. At home, in the car or bus, at university, in the office, in the 160 plus hours a week that we fill when we are not at church. Everything ... no exceptions. What are the implications?

For a start, if God is with us and we are to “rejoice” in his presence in our daily tasks, we have a unique opportunity to partner with the Lord in what we are doing during those long non-ecclesiastical days.

Whether we are making money or clothes, designing art, composing music or decorating cakes, helping the poor or preparing ourselves for (or retired from) the world or work, we can count on God’s presence. I believe this means we can, and should, pray about our work, see it as part of God’s plan for our lives and seek His wisdom (James 1:5) and favour (Proverbs 12:2) to enable us to do the best we can. We should expect fruit and to see tangible results that are satisfying and please Him, as well as contributing to our spiritual growth and well-being. Surely, that is not too much to expect.

What an antidote to boredom at work, to the sense of ennui that so many experience because their employment feels repetitive and meaningless. What a way to celebrate days when our efforts appear to be filled with trifles or unfinished business, when we are not able to satisfy everyone and colleagues are uncooperative, hostile or unappreciative.

This verse also reminds that, in the final analysis, we have an audience of One. The works of our hands are not futile in His sight. When no one else is watching, when they are caught up in their own busyness and priorities, we have One who wants us to live as though we are continually in His presence, that He sees our hearts, hears our thoughts, discerns our motives and wants to have a meaningful relationship with us. We are free to be ourselves; there is no need to impress Him, because he sees us just as we are.

Therefore ... stop frantically trying to please Him, working hard to be “good enough”; take it as a given that you have access to his presence, grace and favour and that He loves you.

There must have been many who listened to Moses and felt, “I am just a humble slave girl, how can I celebrate before God in what I do”, or “My life is filled with the same activities every day of the year, minding the goats, tilling the soil, making pottery. Is Jehovah really interested in that level of detail?”. What Moses is doing is asking his people to consider whatever they do as committed to God, who knows what they are engaged in and wants the best for their lives.

I am not suggesting for a minute that you put a giant Bible on your desk at work, turn up the volume on the Christian radio station and pose for God on the Boss’s time (that would be odd; yes, there *are* people who do it), but to keep front and centre in your thinking that where you are is where the Holy Spirit is, and that He loves being there with you. There is no need for pretence or show.

Second, knowing that the “works of our hands” are noticed by the Lord helps us live in a way that reflects Him. So much of the church’s teaching about sin consists of warnings such as “Don’t do this, don’t do that”, which ends up as pious legalism or contrived guilt trips. In the end, this helps nobody. Nothing really changes when we try to conform to external regulations and commandments for their own sake. Moses does not say that the Israelites are to behave in “such and such a way”, but to rejoice in God’s presence. I strongly believe that the best antidote to temptation is not a prescribed set of rules and sanctions but the practice of loving God. Jesus affirmed that the entire law hangs off the dual principles of loving God and loving people (Matthew 22:37-40).

Third, as men and women struggle to find out what life is all about (“Who am I? Why am I here?”), knowing that God is with us when we put our hands to the levers each day makes us open to His direction. We learn by practicing how to hear His voice. We learn that we are not alone, struggling, lost, trying to make sense of it all, but real people involved in His great plan and purpose. We realise that we do not need to stress or obsess about guidance or making the right decisions. We come to realise that, while our lives are not scripted, God nevertheless has His watchful eye on us (Psalm 32:8) and is able to guide what we do and help steer us in the right direction. We can start each new day with a prayerful attitude and have confidence in Him as we make plans and decisions. Better to be yielded to Him than to wear ourselves out trying!

Fourth, the encouragement to “rejoice” before God in our daily lives promises new levels of strength. Negativity and pessimism inevitably sap our strength. It is easier to be pulled down by others than to lift them up. The Bible says that the “joy of the Lord is our strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). “Let the weak say ‘I am strong’ “ (Joel 3:10b). When I feel overwhelmed by work issues and anxieties, the best thing I can do is to imagine them in my hands and hand them over to the One who cares for me (1 Peter 5:7) and invites me to roll my daily burdens onto Him (Psalm 55:22). He is our peace, our assurance, our rest and comfort, even in times of pressure or loss. The man or woman who pursues a life of worship of the living God is not afraid of spiritual

attack or future uncertainties. Stop stressing about the future, about things you do not know and cannot control; focus instead on what you are doing today and trust Him for strength to do it well.

Fifth, I am convinced that living as though we are in God's presence adds meaning and purpose to worship. "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy" (Psalm 30:11). For many Christians, prayer, Bible reading, praise and worship are reduced to (sometimes mindless) formula and cant. God wants to set us free from cant, so that we can worship Him freely, "in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:23, 24), in reality, for who He is, not what religion has made him. Celebrating is not always expressed in words; it is an attitude, an expression of thanksgiving (even for the little things) and is a learned way of life.

Finally, if we take seriously the notion that our everyday work world can become a place where God lives, we can be the most optimistic, confident, hardest working in the office or factory because what we do is for Him. Our work should not be sloppy, slapdash or indifferent; we should be committed and creative. I admit that circumstances are not always positive and that it can be hard to feel buoyant all the time. The strong sometimes feel weak; we all have occasional fainting fits. However, on balance, and without wanting to over-spiritualise the quotidian, Christians who believe that their lives are God's and that their work is performed for Him (eg Ephesians 6:5) often develop a sense of resilience that others lack.

If all of the above is true, "praying without ceasing" has a very wide meaning and practical application. It is less ecclesiocentric, less subjective, less functional, and more about relationship: who God is, in each of us. . Whatever your background, or your role, God loves you, the Holy Spirit lives inside you; He wants to be the focus of your daily life.

"May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you" (Psalm 70:4). God's presence and favour are not mystical or esoteric concepts that only theologians can unpack. They relate to our lives in a very direct way.

Ask the Holy Spirit to awaken in your consciousness a new sense of His presence and leading. Practice it. If you do this, "praying without ceasing" will be less about obligations and words, less about circumstances and time, less about competing with more "spiritual" Christians and more about your own relationship with God.

My goal is not to build a great theology or religious tradition but to experience and live a joyful practical relationship with God and His people.