

God, Liturgy and Prayer in a New Story

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The two questions I am most frequently asked are, “What do you think happens in death?” and “How do we pray now when so much of the religious imagination in which we were grounded has been taken away from us?” I have a simple answer to the first question: “I don’t know.” However, I think we have solid ground on which to stand as we try to articulate a response to the second question.

Let us first of all summarise the ground that has shifted from under us and the reasons for this shift in which we find ourselves. Put simply, we have a new story, a new understanding about our place in the universe. It is a story not known one hundred years ago when people were yet to discover that our galaxy was not the only galaxy in the universe. It is a story not known even fifty years ago when no one had a photo of this planet taken from outer space. It is a story that has developed only in our lifetime, aided by photos from the Hubble telescope and evidence of billions and billions of galaxies, of an expanding universe, and of planet earth’s place in a universe beyond our comprehension.

Planet earth is not the centre of creation. Theologically, that fact alone is startling and upsetting and challenging to traditional Christian thought. Using a scale of planet earth being the size of a pin head, we inhabit a planet that is a pin head in an area of billions of planet earths. If this planet should disappear, the rest of this galaxy, yet alone the universe, would not even blink. We Christians point – and we can only point – to a Mystery beyond our human understanding and comprehension as the Source and Sustainer of everything that exists. We posit this Mystery as an all-pervasive Creative, Active Presence holding everything in relationship and connectedness. To use traditional Christian language, everything exists IN this mystery to which we point with the word “God”. Nothing can exist outside of God. God is everywhere. And rather than trying to tie down in human language and concepts what the nature of this “God” is, we should be paying far more attention to the most basic belief that this Mystery really is everywhere and pervades all that is.

If the age and size of our universe – all news to us! - boggle our minds, then it is hardly surprising that our minds should be equally and newly boggled as we try to come to terms with the mystery we call “God”. If Christians in our lifetime have not been jolted by this, then Christians have been protecting their own human constructs and idol rather than being open to the grandeur and the mystery of whatever “God” points to.

For the sake of this particular presentation, I want to highlight just three important factors, among many that could be highlighted, in the tension between two stories about our relationship with God.

One. Whatever “God” is, God is not an elsewhere reality. Any story that focuses on God as if God really lives somewhere else becomes non-sensical and unbelievable if by definition we understand God to be the source, sustainer and energizer of all that exists.

Two. The earth is not the prized jewel in the crown of God's creation. God is not an elsewhere deity hovering over this planet like a hen watching over the chickens, no matter how beautiful and re-assuring the image may be. The Mysterious Creative Presence we call "God" permeated this planet for billions of years before the human species emerged, just as that Presence permeated all the galaxies. The wonder of this planet is that conditions here allowed that Creative Presence to come to expression in ways that may be unique to planet earth. But this does not mean that what happens on this planet is the greatest and best expression of that Presence in the entire universe. And again there are highly significant theological implications from recognizing this fact – especially for religions preoccupied with a God who supposedly went into a massive reaction when the first human person did not act in accord with this God's plan for life on earth. Even more so when the same religions claim to have a monopoly on access to this God.

We also know that the human species did not emerge into a state of paradise. There were massive extinctions of life for millions and millions of years before the human species appeared. And the violence of those extinctions pale into insignificance when compared with supernovas exploding.

When we put One and Two together we realize we are in a massive shift from a traditional religious story that told us the first human beings caused a rupture in relationship with God and that God, as it were, withdrew to heaven where He lived, and in the language with which we are familiar, locked the gates. God then developed and set in motion a plan to remedy a bad situation: God sent His only Son from Heaven to be with us and to "save" us from the predicament in which our first parents put us by their sin.

This leads to the Third point, emerging from the other two: We have personified the Mystery we call "God" and have then consistently, and wrongly, literalised our personification into a Personal Deity. This was almost inevitable given the history of humanity dealing with gods. The Hebrew god simply became the greatest of all the gods and the Hebrew people became this greatest god's chosen people. As Cicero would probe in legal disputes, "Cui bono?" Who gains, who benefits?

Christianity followed its mother religion by locking interpretation about Jesus into belief that this God had closed the doors and only Jesus could gain access – and only believers in Jesus could have access. Who gains, who benefits? The religious institution, of course, in granting itself unique identity and power.

Institutional Christianity is not likely to shift readily from belief in this elsewhere Personal deity who thinks, plans, intervenes, chooses, listens, reacts and has definite opinions on a huge range of what are predominantly cultural matters. Institutional Christian leadership, wanting to protect the Church's "true identity and purpose", will inevitably stay locked into doctrinal formulas fixated on who gains access to an elsewhere God. Such fixation blinds it to what is becoming increasingly obvious to open minds – this notion of God has outlived its use-by date. Yet it is this notion of a God who sent his Son from that elsewhere place to "save" us, who listens, observes, reacts, thinks about things, demands we pay attention to him and thank him that still dominates liturgy and prayer, both in mainstream and even in progressive Christian circles.

We can find a corrective in Jesus' own teaching:

The first and most significant factor with Jesus is that he did not preach about an elsewhere God who cut off access. He did not lock his preaching and his understanding about relationship with God into a creation story or a worldview that would become outdated. That mistake can be traced to leaders of the Christian religion. He did not see himself as the connector or the mediator between a “fallen race” and God. The Christian religion did that. He did not even see himself as “the Way” to God as if “No one can come to the Father without me”. That understanding developed after he died – and again it is what I would call “institutional theology”: theology for the sake of institutional identity. No, Jesus was much more simple:

- However you conceive of God, God is gracious and life-giving
- You are not to fear God. Live in a relationship of trust
- God is not far away. God can be experienced in everyday living through loving, care, compassion, forgiveness.

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- This is for everyone, not just Jews. A covenant of love surpasses a covenant grounded in cultural laws.

- We, then, must be gracious and life-giving in all we do. So the great commandment is: Love one another. Be neighbour in ways that stretch the limits we put on it.

If, then, we were to ask Jesus: “What is the point of prayer?” he would surely respond:

- to express gratitude. Always be thankful to “God”, however you think of “God”
- to reflect on life.

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- First, there is nothing more important than we grasp the insight that living in love and living in God and God living in us are all connected. Grasp this and it will change how we view ourselves and other people. Second, we need to deepen awareness and belief in this presence of God to sustain us in difficult times.

- to shape our response to the “spirit” in all of us; to ask where is love, integrity, growth leading me.

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- And what about “ritual” and worship, we might also ask?

Ah, Jesus surely would respond:

- * To remember; to tell the stories of God with us;
- * To be thankful for who we are as individuals and as a community

To commit ourselves by the way we live to being neighbour and creating a just society. (Note: it is not about winning or gaining access to God or God’s approval)

What is striking about Jesus’ message is that it can withstand any changes in worldview or cosmology or even our understanding of who or what the word “God” points to. There is a universality to it, grounded in human experience and in a Creative, Sustaining Presence everywhere.

What is more striking is that by the end of the first century this wonderful articulation of human connectedness with God and with one another was replaced with a theological mind-set that pushed prayer and worship into another direction. Very effectively, the story of Jesus was locked into an understanding of an elsewhere, lock-out God in heaven. He was locked into notions of God as a

Deity in heaven, the God who was offended, the God who reacted, the God who came up with a plan, the God who intervened, the God who manipulated, the God who listens, who watches, who broods, who gets angry, who lays down laws, who demands to be worshipped, who thinks about all sorts of cultural issues such as whether men should trim their beards or not.

And most of us grew up with this God because this God became the God of Christianity, rather than the Mystery Jesus tried to point people to in their everyday lives. This is the God who noticed whether we worshipped today or not – and even legislated that we should do so.

This is the God of our lives who “heard” or did not hear our prayers, who granted them, or declined to grant them, or for reasons unknown to us has decided to think about it a while longer before getting back to us.

This is the God we have spent a lifetime talking to, as if there is a deity out there listening in - ... or singing to, Sunday after Sunday ... or addressing our liturgical prayers to Sunday after Sunday.

Walk into most Christian bookstores and look through the Children’s Prayer section and we will find that 99 per cent of the books either address prayers to this elsewhere, listening God, or focus on relationship based on this notion of God.

We desperately need a counterbalance, both for ourselves and for future generations. The counterbalance will not come readily. It will require a mental discipline in order to break a lifetime of practice and habits.

The starting point I would suggest is this:

Determine in your mind to stop composing or saying prayers addressed to God. Stop praying, “O God, Dear God,” or any formula that addresses God, whatever name you use. This requires some discipline. Take, for example, if someone invites you to pray at the start of a meal or a meeting. How instinctive it is for us to start with, “O God ...” or “Sophia” or whatever. Stop doing it. That is the discipline needed.

I am not suggesting that we never pray prayers addressed to God. Take, for example, the song, “Red Sails in the Sunset”. The lover is on the shore; the beloved is out sailing; The lover sings: “Red sails in the sunset, way out of the sea, Oh, carry my love one home safely to me... We’ll marry tomorrow and you’ll go sailing no more.” Are the sails listening? No! The important point is the lover vocalizing the deep longing in his heart. Prayer is like that – and needs to be like that – at times. It expresses, vocalizes our deepest longings and desires. It can be addressed to God or whoever, but the important issue is not whether God hears or takes note; the issue is the release of heartfelt longing, hurt, joy or whatever.

So if we seek our counterbalance in not addressing a listening deity, what format could our prayer take? The answer to that lies in an appreciation of what the goals of prayer are. At the top of the list, in accord with all the spiritual masters, we would put: to be in touch with our selves, to know ourselves. If we do not know ourselves, then our spiritual life is built on sand. So there is meditative, contemplative prayer that seeks to quieten us so that in the stillness we might be sensitive to the movements of heart, mind and body.

It would be remiss if, in any treatment of Christian prayer, reference to prayer that helps a Christian to meet “heart to heart” with Jesus were omitted. St Teresa of Avila commented that this prayer was vital for Christians.

Knowing ourselves and knowing Jesus will always be essential to Christian prayer. However, in the light of the “new story” we have about ourselves and our universe, and the ways that story impinges on our relationship with the mystery we call “God”, three other considerations about or goals of prayer can help us formulate prayers more suitable for these times.

- 1 Prayer is not for God’s sake. God, whatever God is, has no need of our prayer. Prayer is for our sake: to deepen awareness and appreciation of who we are and our connectedness with other people and with our world.
- 2 Affirmation is coupled with awareness, especially in liturgical prayer. Liturgical and community prayer should affirm again and again the Divine Presence in which we live and move and have our being. We should constantly affirm also the universality of this Presence.
- 3 Challenge. Prayer should challenge us to give expression to that Divine Presence.

Take, for example, this prayer from *Praying a New Story*: a prayer to begin a meeting:

We gather
conscious that the Spirit of Wisdom
moves in each of us
as it has moved in all people
since the beginning of human life,
working in and through
whom and what it has to work with.

May we be wise in our sharing,
ready to listen,
open to learning where new insights and knowledge may take us,
drawing on wisdom that stands the test of time,
and courageous enough to discard whatever can no longer sustain our faith.

We pray that our gathering
may allow the Spirit of Wisdom to be expressed here
as graciously
and as clearly
as is humanly possible.
Amen.

What have we done in this prayer? We have not addressed God. We have affirmed the Divine Presence with us. We have acknowledged the universality of that Presence. And we have declared our readiness to communicate open to the movement of that Presence within us.

Liturgical prayer, I believe, could follow the same model of awareness, affirmation, acknowledgment of universality and the challenge to give our Amen to the Divine Presence working in our lives. In a Christian setting, it will also include thanksgiving and appreciation: thanksgiving for Jesus and all religious leaders who lead us into a wholesome and freeing relationship with the mystery we call “God”, and thanksgiving and appreciation for the wonder of being human. In a Eucharistic setting, our ritual and our prayer should express commitment to being the best possible expressions we can

be of the Divine Presence (our liturgical language is saying Amen to being the “Body of Christ”) rather than on reception of a sacred object or even on “Jesus coming to us”.

Cf Prayers in *Praying a New Story*:

I am often asked, “Where does prayer of petition fit into this way of praying?”

We pray in the belief that everything and everyone is connected. We want to be clear in our minds that our prayer of petition is not being addressed to an elsewhere God, so once again let us studiously avoid a prayer format that indicates a deity listening in and then giving consideration to what is being asked. The format of prayer of petition should simply state an intention, such as: “Let us pray for people in our community suffering from depression” and have people pray silently for a few moments. After the intentions, the presider could pray, “We offer these prayers in the firm conviction that everything and everyone is bonded in the Divine Presence. We believe that this Presence can do far more than we can ask or imagine when people are bonded in love. Amen.”