

## Prayer Personalities

Three studies on how our personalities might shape how we meet with God in prayer.

(By Lyndall Bywater)

### Part 2: Digging in

(Psalm 77)

I am immensely looking forward to the invention of the eternal battery, that is to say, the one which never runs out of power. I travel a lot, and battery-powered devices are all but indispensable if I am to alay the boredom of long train journeys. I even go so far as to have several different listening options in my bag, so that, if one dies, the others will be on hand to fill the yawning gap.

It is a particularly bad day when all the batteries die at the same time: the IPOD splutters its last; the CD player proves incapable of spinning CDs; the mobile phone would gladly let me listen to the radio for a while, but it will be at the expense of being able to phone anyone at my destination, should the train get delayed. The abandonment is complete. It's just me and my thoughts (and perhaps the unnecessarily loud mobile phone conversation of a fellow passenger).

Yet, if I stay awake and alert, these journeys can be by far the most enjoyable and productive times in my week. Despite the surrounding passengers and the intermittent station announcements, these can be the times when I truly understand the meaning of solitude.

'I found thee not, O Lord, without, because I erred in seeking thee without that wert within.'

(St Augustine of Hippo)

St Augustine was born in the latter part of the fourth century AD, and was one of the foremost writers and theologians of his day. One of the concepts for which he is best known is that of 'interiority': the idea that we can only truly know God by shutting off outside stimulæ, and finding him in our inner world. As we still ourselves in solitude, our spirits have chance to interact with his Spirit, and our souls become aware of the Eternal.

'Interiority' certainly comes to the aid of the writer of Psalm 77. Here, we have a person who is in turmoil. Unlike last week's psalmist, he has not found God in the world around him; he has not stumbled across the reassuring fingerprints of the Divine in his everyday life. He has reached the end of a long day, and he is still crying out to God for an answer (verses 1,2). Unable to find peace, and unable to shut out the disquiet by falling asleep (verse 4), he begins a process of introspection.

Some claim that this religious practice of shutting oneself away from the world is tantamount to escapism, but anyone who has journeyed into the depths of their own soul will know that you don't get off that lightly. The first part of the psalmist's inward journey is truly dark. He is faced with the contrast between how his life used to be, and how it is now (verses 5,6a). It is logical to suggest that the first thing we encounter, when

we turn inwards to look at our own souls, is our own frailty and inconsistency, and that alone can put us off the idea of prayer for a very long time.

If possible, the second stage of the journey is even darker. Having faced his own spiritual bankruptcy, he begins on the perilous pathway of 'what ifs' (verses 6b-9). He picks through the rubble at the very bottom of his worst experiences, and unearths some frightening imponderables. What if God doesn't rescue? What if God isn't able to do the things people say he can do? What if, when he comes to the end of himself, God isn't actually there.

And that is where the miracle of interiority occurs. At the end of the last and worst thought, a hand reaches out from beyond, and begins to pull him back up to hope.

In the outside world, hope generally begins with noticing something. In the inside world, it begins with remembering something. The psalmist starts to remember things about his God (verses 10,11). Suddenly, he is no longer staring at the wallpaper of his own despair; instead, he is looking out of the windows. He has been taken beyond himself, and has begun to remember other places, other people, other times when God's goodness and faithfulness were proved utterly true.

The last part of the journey is altogether brighter. Amazed anew by the God he has connected with, even in the depths of his own troubled soul, he sets himself a formidable task:

'I will meditate on all your works, and consider all your mighty deeds' (verse 12).

The rest of the psalm is an exultant song of praise. Instead of being a dry, hopeless place, his inner world becomes a riot of life and colour, as he lets awe and wonder flood his soul.

We don't get to hear how life turned out the next morning, but I suspect we are safe in concluding that this worshipper made his way back into the outside world with an altogether lighter heart.

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