

## **THE PRESENT MOMENT AS PRAYER**

We take each moment for granted. It is here and gone, often without us noticing it or being aware of its importance and richness. Yet, in some sense, it is all we have. Someone once said that it is all we do have: the past is gone, the future is not yet here; this moment is everything. Our Christian tradition has always seen the moment as important. So important is it, that God gives it to us only one at a time, and takes back the previous one before the next is given us. Within that moment, we can reach out in contemplation to God, receive the divine love that it contains and deepen our relationship with God in a profound way. Yet for many this most precious opportunity is lost. We need to work to make it a prayer, to open up to us the riches it contains.

Throughout our traditions different images have been used to capture the importance of the moment as encounter with God. They illustrate that we live always in the divine presence, but often are not aware of it. One image is that of a sun of darkness. Just as the sun emits its light rays which enable our eyes to see the things around it, God is like a sun of darkness whose rays are all around us, yet our eyes are not attuned to this darkness. Only the eyes of faith can reveal that God is there, and when faith has liberated our vision then we see God acting as clearly and as surely as we see the material things around us. We need to develop the eyes of faith to see God in the moment we are experiencing now.

Another image presents God as writing the Scriptures anew in the lives of people today. Just as the Holy Spirit wrote the Scriptures in a conventional way in the past, today the Spirit writes the divine word, not on paper, but in the lives of people. The divine proclamation and action is available to us through the commonplace events that we experience on a daily basis. What our senses pick up in these events is really a veil which conceals what God is doing. It is only through faith that this action is revealed, understood and responded to. Again it is faith that is needed to read these new Scriptures. We need to read them to know what it means to respond to God in our contemporary situation. Seeing the present moment in this way reveals it as a communion with God. Our very experience becomes the place of prayer.

The image of a fish in the sea captures other aspects of this mystery. The fish draws so much from the environment in which it lives. It draws from its surroundings a power to do things it couldn't do otherwise. Its beauty and vitality reflect its environment. Like

the fish, we live in an environment that can enable and support us in our life. The divine presence floods the universe. Each moment is so much the richer when we recognize that presence and cooperate with it. The importance of the present moment as prayer is that it enables us to act differently. We are not alone. When we are in the presence of someone we love we are influenced by their presence; not only influenced, but empowered. The recognition that God is acting in the present moment enables us to respond to it in an appropriate way.

Perhaps the most telling image is that of the present moment as a sacrament. In a sacrament, God comes to us and we respond. A sacrament is an event, an encounter in which God comes to us and we respond to God. To see the present moment as a sacrament clearly presents it as an encounter with God. If we believe this, what respect and awe we will have for each moment. How deliberately we will seek out God's action, and how consciously we will try to respond to God within it. The whole of Christian life is sacramental and we are able to commune with God in every aspect of it.

The context, or the background against which we view something can change it considerably. A small unpretentious chalet in the Alps takes much of its charm from the mountainous snow filled surroundings within which it is viewed. Its beauty is principally a reflection of the environment in which it is situated. So with the present moment. Its real beauty and meaning needs to be seen in the context of the God within it. It is enhanced and ennobled by the divine presence in which it exists. Seen within this context, the humblest experience can become the most profound.

We talk often of religious experience. What is it? Is it a type of event that happens intermittently, or when we come to Church, or have a special time of prayer? Or is it the potential of every experience. Whatever we experience, in any situation, can become a religious experience if we can recognize within it the divine dimension which makes it religious. The awareness of God in every experience, enables us to see life itself as a continuing religious experience, within which we constantly live out the interaction between God and ourselves that lies at the heart of all religion. The present moment as prayer transforms life so that it becomes prayer.

We have been talking about presence. Sometimes we understand presence as being physically there; just as absence is being physically not there. However, there is another way of approaching presence: the way a human person is present. A person can be present

to others in a variety of ways according to the degree to which that person reveals his or her self. One relates differently to ones' parents, spouse, children, friends etc. Each of these is a close relationship, but their natures are different. To say that God is present is not just to say that God is there as an object is, but rather as a person is, reaching out to us and calling us to respond. The moment is a personal encounter, a real sacrament, in which God embraces us and draws us to respond. God is there in every moment, but the nature of his presence may be different. What can make it different is that it focuses on each one of us. It is personally directed, not just the same for all.

How do we develop this awareness of the present moment as a communion with God? We can do it by living the moment consciously. Rather than just letting the moment slip by, be conscious of it. Live actively in the present, positively engaging with the Lord present within it. Don't let its potential be lost, don't let it pass by without engaging it. Grasp it consciously, make it meaningful, express yourself fully within it. By doing this regularly in a conscious and deliberate way, we can develop the practice of recognizing the present moment in all its riches.

We can begin by educating ourselves to associate certain activities with God's presence. Traditionally, the ringing of the angelus was a way of turning people's hearts to God during their work. Turning the heart to God when one is doing certain regular actions in one's life eg walking, driving, during breaks at work, on the hour, etc. also helps to educate the heart. Doing this consciously and deliberately on a regular basis can educate the heart to become aware of the presence of God in every situation. When the person quite consciously and deliberately makes operative the divine element within the situation, then the experience of that situation is transformed.

Whatever human value we put on an experience, its ultimate value stems from the divine presence and how we respond to it. To live in the present moment is to be conscious of the divine dimension of it, to draw on the divine power it reveals and be empowered by it. In the present moment, time and eternity meet, the human and the divine come together, the secular and the sacred are merged. The moment becomes a window which lets the eternal shine on the present, and allows us to understand the moment, and, through it, to respond to God. The divine illumines the human, the sacred transforms the secular, the eternal gives meaning to what is happening in time. The present moment becomes a place of convergence in which we are caught up in all the important dynamics of life. This is the place to live. This is the life of prayer.