

Tablet - September 2006



Prayer as Meeting

The Pope's lecture was a mixed blessing for our annual Way of Peace event last weekend. "Prayer as Meeting" brought together Christians and Muslims to pray together and taste the riches of our contemplative traditions. As the meeting opened I was receiving emails from friends of the World Community anxious that the wildfire of rage would spoil the peace of our gathering. Perhaps it was the young people present or perhaps the older ones, in fact I think it was the prayer itself, but certainly while the bad news got worse, we seemed to grow closer, friendlier and to share at deeper levels of the spirit.

Sitting on the floor of the local mosque on Saturday night after isha , the last of the five daily prayers, we sipped tea and chatted and asked the questions we had always wanted to ask each other about our faiths but which before had seemed embarrassing evidence of our ignorance. A Muslim professor came over to the group I was sitting to ask my opinion and to give me his about the lecture. He had lively feelings to express but the spirit of friendship and hospitality from the prayer was stronger; and I thought afterwards that perhaps there is a lesson to be learned from this affair which in time might change the relations between our sister religions.

When Cain was about to slay his brother he was consumed by 'sadness and anger' – the gut reaction to any feeling of rejection. God intervenes and asks him 'why are you sad and angry?'- the kind of rational response the Pope talks about. But God then says something that has been neglected in this controversy: the transcendent dimension of religion. God urges Cain to wait and to master the demon 'crouching at the door' or it will overwhelm him. Prayer is in the waiting. It is kin to the courage of non-violence, that Ghandi said demands the highest kind of strength. Transcendence is born of this profound patience. Patience is not only not interrupting someone or not getting irritated when the train is late or hitting the computer when it crashes. Controlling impatience is a practice of the deeper truth of the virtue of patience. (Its meaning is made clearer when we see it in the word 'passion' - as in the 'passion of Christ'.)

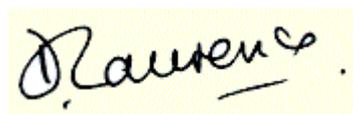
So, odd though it sounds there is passion in the waiting. Our monastic and academic speakers at the conference illustrated this from many mystical writers of our traditions- Catholicism and Sunni, Orthodox and Shia - whose diverse themes harmonised in the

essential experience of all prayer: love. Religious people easily neglect the obvious and this is the most obvious and the most necessary to remember. The unloving know nothing of God. This is not metaphysical reasoning but the reason of the heart. Our most universal human experience teaches it from the beginning of life and without it life is unbearable. Love is transcendence, the re-centering of consciousness by the act of patient attention to the other. Parents do it, lovers do it and religious people must do it too if they are to be genuine.

The way you pray is the way you live. We live in the power of transcendence by praying at depth. Not just salat and liturgy, but contemplation. The whole purpose of this life, said St Augustine, is to open the eye of the heart by which we see God. Transcendence makes us more human because it fulfils this human project. The means are what religion teaches if it does not mistake itself for the end: waiting, patience, stillness and, particularly important in an age of instant communication, silence.

St Benedict says that 'since the spirit of silence is so important permission to speak should rarely be granted even to good disciples even though it be for good, holy and edifying conversation' (because) 'in much speaking you will not escape sin'. Rationalism, the linguistic logos, is one half of the way of peace as Pope Benedict eloquently illustrates. St Benedict, however, emphasises the other half which is transcendence in the presence of the mystery whose language is silence.

We prayed the salat and said Christian prayers. But we also sat in silence for meditation – we call it prayer of the heart and they call it dhikr. It reduces many words to one word in a rich poverty of spirit. In this silence we touched a universality that words usually only point to. It is not an escape from reality but an embrace with the divine reality that we both know as love. Relationships are changed by this experience of silence in transcendence, in ways that words cannot achieve. We live together in a new way when we have been patient together in the silence of love.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, with a horizontal line under the name.

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Tablet Newsletter

Source URL: <http://www.wccm.org/content/tablet-september-2006>