

STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

Communion with God is the starting point for every journey of life or ministry. And sooner or later it means serious praying.

Although prayer is a common enough occurrence among church workers, there is nevertheless a mystery about it. Of all people, Winnie the Pooh's creator, A. A. Milne, underlined the universal awareness of this mystery with the line "Hush, hush, Christopher Robin is saying his prayers." Why the hush? What is so special about prayers? The mystery of prayer has little to do with our feelings about prayer or our methods of praying; it has everything to do with the essence of prayer—a grace extended to humans by God's decision. Prayer is agreeing with God in order to lay claim to the revealed character of God. We pray because he has invited us to speak to him and has promised that he'll listen when we speak.

Earnestness Doesn't Count Here

A mystery also is that we claim his revealed character. David did this in Psalm 100, when this writer of the ancient Psalms prayed to the Lord who is faithful and who is good. We make the same claim when we pray in Jesus' name—that is, when we acknowledge that our prayers are independent of our earnestness or desperation or religious eloquence and realize instead

that they have their meaning because of God's prior love for us that has been concretely revealed in the life and death and victory of Jesus Christ. Our prayers claim that good decision of God's grace and faithfulness.

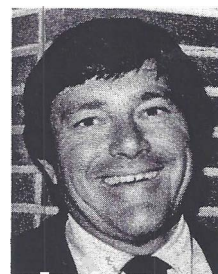
Our prayers, furthermore, invite us to shape the flow of history itself—to help manage it, so to speak, as reliable stewards. Jesus is very clear about this responsibility we have in his promises to the disciples in the Thursday evening discourse (John 13-16). Jesus calls his disciples friends (John 15:14) who ask for specific requests (John 14:13,14; 15:16) and who by their lives and their prayers act decisively in the events of history that would take place (John 12:14; 15:8). Jesus does not surrender his own authority to the prayers of his disciples, but invites them as friends to lay claim upon his authority.

Do My Prayers Shape History?

When I ponder Jesus' promise about prayer, I wonder about my own prayers at morning and meals and night. Do they shape history? Do I realize the mystery of the divine invitation, "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (John 16:24)?

What is your experience of praying? Is there that awareness of divine appointment so that those who watch our lives find themselves whispering to themselves, "Hush, hush, these Christians are saying their prayers"? For if

we cultivate this mystery of prayer, we have a relationship that does more than support us in our jobs and marriages. This relationship is itself another mystery—the grand mystery of our friendship with the Lord of heaven and earth. ♦



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