

THE THEOLOGY OF PRAYER AND INTERCESSION

We begin with two quotations on the subject of prayer. The first is by Heiler, in the abridged translation of his book on *Prayer* and the second from Karl Rahner, Vol. 3 of his *Theological Investigations*. Heiler writes (p. 119), 'In the exposition of prayer in personal religion it is almost exclusively Biblical and Christian personalities that have to be taken into account. Christianity, including the prophetic religion of the Old Testament, is "the peculiar home of personal prayer", as Soderblom remarks, or it is, as Bousset says, simply "the religion of prayer", that is, the religion in which prayer is the focus of personal piety. To be a Christian means to be one who prays.' Heiler goes on to quote Luther, as follows: 'As a shoemaker makes a shoe, and a tailor makes a coat, so ought a Christian to pray. Prayer is the daily business of a Christian.' He goes on to quote Luther again, 'To pray is a strange work which no one but the Christian performs and yet it has been very common in the world.'

The above quotation reminds us of what the historian looking to the past can tell us about the place of prayer in Christianity. By contrast, it is interesting to note the rather different judgement of a modern theologian, i.e. Karl Rahner. In his essay, *The Apostolate of Prayer*, he begins as follows: 'Do we Christians really believe in the power of prayer? Believe, that is, in its power on this earth and not merely in some distant heavenly dwelling-place of God? Is our thinking still sufficiently "anthropomorphic" to make us dare to believe that we can by our bawling and weeping move the heart of God to intervene in this world? Or has our thinking become so abstract, so spiritless, that we will allow to prayer no other value than that of a "tranquillizer", or recognize it as no more than an affirmation of our hope for a success beyond this life?

'Yes, the prayer of petition is quite a problem. Its practice is now almost exclusively confined to ordinary people. It is found only where a "primitive religiosity" holds sway, which – in the opinion of the more sophisticated – has not quite grasped the fact that we cannot ask anything of God, since He is in the ultimate analysis an inexorable Fate. These others, the clever ones, who do not form part of this folk . . . become "primitive" only when they have their backs to the wall. Then they will pray; or, if they cannot bring themselves to do it even then, they give way (quite rightly and quite logically) to despair. Should they unexpectedly get away with it (their life, their money, their health, and so on), then they will

again give up praying, or give themselves over to Existentialistic nihilism. It is therefore from a Christian point of view quite right and just that, in the judgements of history, the "sophisticated", the "intellectuals", should have more prospect of making better acquaintance with the (allegedly) inexorable march of events than the little people who do not think it entirely superfluous and unintellectual to pray for their daily bread and other such earthly needs.'

Rahner here is warning us that prayer is in danger of going out of fashion among the intellectuals and sophisticated. Perhaps at this early stage we should notice that his thinking here about prayer is of prayer as petition.

We shall allow ourselves one other flash-back into past teaching on prayer, and make a brief reference to Calvin. Calvin has no hesitation about the place of prayer and boldly advocates the claims of intercession. Also, he enumerates a number of quite important considerations on behalf of intercessory prayer. (1) It delivers us from selfish self-centredness. (2) It is a way of expressing love for others and leads us to identify ourselves with others. (3) Our intercession becomes part of the eternal intercession of Jesus Christ. Of course, as Calvin teaches, we must not commit the error of believing that we are strengthening the intercessory work of Jesus Christ! Rather, our intercession effects two things. (a) We share in the intercession of God's Spirit as the Spirit prays within us. (b) We identify ourselves spiritually with those for whom we pray. There is no magic in our intercessions; there is nothing so degraded as a form of 'prayer pressure' on God, or even on our fellow-man. Calvin, clearly, has what can be called a theology of prayer, as may be seen from what we have already said. Confirmation of this claim can be seen in his declaration that God answers prayer. He refers to the title given to God in Ps. 65:2, 'O Thou who hearest prayer', or as the NEB translates, 'thou hearest prayer'. Calvin believes that prayer makes a difference to God. He justifies this belief on the basis of the view that God subjects Himself to suit human conditions. Yet having gone so far Calvin realizes he must beware lest he be accused of teaching that God is changeable and not of steadfast purpose. His conclusion is that if our prayer be answered it does not mean that we have prevailed over God by our human power. According to Calvin the truth is that the answer has been in accordance with God's will. Calvin goes on to urge Christians to persevere in prayer and to resist the temptation to believe that God ignores our prayers. Where there is delay in answering, this may be due to a wise providence, indeed it may be a mode of God's dealing with man. Delay may become a necessary part of the experience of learning to wait on the Spirit and to learn what is really meant by waiting on God. Calvin believes that perseverance in prayer is necessary; the

Christian may well have to keep on asking in his petitions and intercessions.

It is, however, in Karl Barth that we get the strong insistence on the need to ask God. We refer to Barth's treatment of prayer in *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III. 4. A short quotation may remind us of the central place he gives to petition, in the sense of asking God directly for what we need. 'We must now emphasize the tacit pre-supposition of our deliberations thus far, that prayer is decisively petition – petition addressed to God, but still petition.' That is definite enough, and it is the thesis Barth develops in this section of his work. He refers to Luther and Calvin in the following terms, 'A striking feature of Luther's basing of prayer on the commandment, as also of Calvin's exposition and that of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, is the restraint with which they understand prayer centrally as petition, developing its other aspects from this centre', and he goes on to remind us that the Lord's Prayer, apart from the address and the doxology, consists exclusively of pure petitions. Barth regards prayer as an activity commanded by God. To pray to God is a way of obeying Him. Prayer involves turning to God and moving towards Him. It is seeking, asking and accepting from God something man needs. Rather interestingly Barth extends this rather general phrase, 'something man needs' into the more vigorous one, 'everything' man needs. His own words are, 'Perhaps the very highest honour that God claims from man and man can pay Him is that man should seek and ask and accept at His hands, not just something, but everything that he needs' (p. 87).

This idea of prayer as a command from God should not be treated abstractly. The command to pray, and here we quote, 'points to the fact that He has created him for Himself and appeals to this determination of his reason'. Presumably this means that God has so made man that human reason can apprehend this command which God has issued. We have to acknowledge the Christian claim that God loves man and that even the command to pray is an example of God's love, or as Barth himself expresses it, 'God wills that even when he has already found Him, he shall seek Him and find Him again'. Barth says prayer is petition. In prayer man simply lays his need before God. He supplicates. He comes empty-handed. He cannot force a favour from God. In Barth's teaching on prayer, the centre is firmly fixed, viz. petition; our thinking about prayer has to revolve around this centre, petition. From this centre, Barth proffers a criticism of certain views and practices, which might well be noted, even if not discussed at this point. He is, for example, critical of the practice of cultivating the soul or the spirit. This may take the form of seeking to intensify, deepen, or purify our inward self. It may aim at attaining what might be called spiritual clarity or self-control, in

order that we may create harmony between God and our own souls. Barth thinks this is a form of secularism. He calls it 'psychical hygiene' and refuses it the name of prayer. Barth is surely right in offering us a criticism of this kind. But it may be advisable to keep our minds open to the fact that Barth has treated this more or less as a side-issue. He has issued the warning and it needs to be heeded. However, on the positive side, it is clear that the centrality of petition makes it possible for the real man to come to God. For in God's presence the man's need comes to the fore. In the divine presence, masks are discarded, the actor gives up performing, in order to gain the applause of the theatre-goers.

Barth says that thanksgiving is the root of prayer itself and that petition arises from gratitude. Whereas man may experience a sense of his own deep weaknesses, nevertheless this need not always happen. He draws attention to the fact that the awareness of our sinfulness and of the infinite gap between that sinfulness and God's gracious concern for our good, is the soil in which the prayer of penitence thrives. But the confession of sin is not the terminus of genuine prayer. The penitential psalms move from penitence to crying out to and for God Himself. This may show itself in a cry for forgiveness, a clean heart and a new spirit. If the prayer stops short at petition it has been abstract and fails truly to trust God to deal generously and creatively with the suppliant. Yet we must not too rigidly try to impose norms of our own manufacture on what constitutes prayer which is acceptable to God. It has to be remembered that even the ideal petition which a Christian may offer in some moment of spiritual exaltation may, in fact, require to be made acceptable by God Himself. In concrete penitence we are all dependent on God so dealing with our defective prayer, that it becomes acceptable to Him. In so far as this is the case then the prayer of petition must be offered with a Christian boldness, in the faith that God will answer us in accordance with His will for us. Barth takes his teaching a step further and claims that our human asking is carried into the very will of God Himself (p. 107). Possibly Barth is going as far as he can in his teaching, but he offers sound theological grounds in support. (a) He reminds us that as we pray, each one prays as the 'we' who belongs to the Body of Christ. (b) The man who prays is not separated from God nor God from that man. Or, otherwise expressed, in Jesus Christ the man who prays is bound up with God. (c) Man may pray with and after Jesus Christ. Barth quotes Calvin in support: 'We ask *comme par sa bouche*' (p. 108). Using very much his own idiom Barth asserts further that those who belong to Christ have 'God on our side from the very outset – and we on His side . . . so that . . . we must be certain that He hears our prayers'. (d) It is in this comprehensive way that we understand the prayer

of Christ, to quote Barth (p. 108): 'In His name means under His leadership and responsibility, in the unity of our asking with His, in obedience to the summons of this one, but also with the support of His power as that of the Son, of His unity with the Father.'

Probably enough has already been said to give a rough idea of some of the factors which need to be included within what might ambitiously, if not very accurately, be called a 'Theology of Intercessory Prayer'. It need hardly be said that here we are attempting hardly more than a few preliminary statements on the subject. It is no more than decent modesty that impels us to limit the range of what we are trying to do. One only needs a passing acquaintance with but a little of the vast literature on the subject of prayer, to realize that a theology of intercession is an ideal to be aimed at, rather than an achievement to present to Christians today.

However, there are several factors at work in intercession which seem to be worthy of further consideration. What we have in mind, in the first place, is what might be called the 'status of the Intercessor'. Following that we shall look at intercession as seen in our Lord, particularly in Gethsemane. Lastly, the general question of the Spirit and human action. With this particular and almost peculiar choice, it will be obvious that we are not presenting a theology of intercession. Our task is the humbler one of drawing attention to some of the signposts on the way to such a theology. Hence we turn now to look at what we have referred to as 'the status of the Intercessor'. There are several candidates in the Bible who could serve as a model for this part of our study, such as Moses, Jeremiah and Job. However, we have turned to Abraham, largely because he lends himself to fairly straightforward treatment, and obviously there is nothing to be gained by using all possible candidates. Abraham is our model. We shall examine his intercession with God, with a view to discovering something of the nature of intercession. Our study begins with Genesis 18: 23f. This depicts the anger of God against the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. 'Abraham drew near him, and said, "Wilt thou really sweep away good and bad together? Suppose there are fifty good men in the city; wilt thou really sweep it away, and not pardon the place because of the fifty good men? Far be it from thee to do this - to kill good and bad together; for then the good would suffer with the bad. Far be it from thee. Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?" The Lord said, "If I find in the city of Sodom fifty good men. I will pardon the whole place for their sake." Abraham replied, "May I presume to speak to the Lord, dust and ashes that I am: suppose there are five short of the fifty good men? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for a mere five men?" He said, "If I find forty-five there I will not destroy it." Abraham spoke again, "Suppose forty . . ."

Here is an interesting example of a man of faith interceding with God. Abraham's pleading with God aims at asking for a benefit on behalf of sinners. It should be noticed how the prayer is brought to its end. 'He said [i.e. God], "For the sake of the ten I will not destroy it." When the Lord had finished talking with Abraham, he left him, and Abraham returned home.' Apparently Abraham does not know if his prayer will be answered. Perhaps the conclusion is the almost obvious one, viz. as an intercessor Abraham can do no more than ask, yet even so, this asking is a necessary element in the process of God's Will being made known, or at least, made better known. In one sense, God's intention towards Sodom and Gomorrah does not seem to have been altered by the intercessory prayer. The situation remains the same as before, to the extent that Sodom and Gomorrah are still under threat of destruction. Yet, in another sense, a change has taken place. Abraham has learned that God is prepared to grant what might be called a concession to Sodom and Gomorrah, or, put less abstractly, God is still merciful and gracious towards Sodom and Gomorrah. He is no Shylock demanding his pound of flesh. It looks as if something has happened as a result of the prayer. Abraham returns to his home, presumably confident that the Judge of all the earth will do what is just. Closely related to this deepening of his confidence in the merciful God acting justly, it needs to be noted that Abraham leaves the decision as to what is the proper action in the circumstances to God. There is no attempt to infringe upon the fulfilment of God's will in the divine dealing with the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. There is no suggestion that Abraham possesses a talent somewhat akin to the powers of magic or the power to perform miracles. Abraham leaves the issue to God. The fact that God condescends to hear his prayer is itself a divine gift, over which Abraham has no personal control. Yet, although Abraham is not in charge of the situation, his relation to God is real, practical, and if the word be permitted, concrete and not merely abstract. Abraham is actually in communion with God. He engages with God. The words of his prayer express Abraham's own will. He sets his own will alongside God's. There is a real meeting of wills, conceivably too, there is a possibility of the clash of wills.

Let us pause and reflect a little on the view just expressed about the engagement between God's will and Abraham's will. Just what is the nature of the wills in this engagement? What do we know about them? First, we know Abraham's will as expressed in the prayer. Second, we know that God's will is to be merciful and just, as expressed in God's replies to Abraham, in the dialogue between them. Thirdly, we know that Abraham left off at the point, as it were, where he leaves the outcome to God. So far as Abraham is concerned he does not know what action God will take against

Sodom and Gomorrah. God's will towards Sodom has still to be manifested, and, of course, in God's own time and fashion.

It will be remembered, of course, that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God (19:27f.). This negative outcome of Abraham's prayer may be susceptible of a more positive interpretation than appears at first sight. We must not yield to the temptation to analyse the psychology of Abraham when 'he saw thick smoke rising high from the earth' above Sodom and Gomorrah. It might well be true that he regretted the destruction but there is nothing to suggest that he thought God had acted unmercifully or unjustly. More probably Abraham learned that although he knew something about God's will, in the first instance that is, when he embarked upon his prayer, yet the prayer itself was also a step forward, towards a fuller understanding of God's will, i.e. God's will for Sodom and Gomorrah. Whatever form the carrying out of God's will took, either to spare or destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham himself will have been granted a deeper and wider understanding of the mystery of man's communion with God.

It may well be that at this point we are exposing this view of God to the criticism of a thousand qualifications! God is regarded here as doing right, whether he spares or does not spare the sinners in Sodom and Gomorrah. But this criticism is not quite fair to the nature of intercession. For intercession, by its very nature, always leaves the final decision to God. God is free to spare or not to spare. Also, the very fact that an Abraham intercedes, starts off from the claim that the intercessor himself prays that God's will alone be done in the situation. The intercessor is sustained in his action by the faith that God will condescend to listen to the prayer, that God's action, whatever form it may take, will also take man's prayer into account, that the Holy God will not ignore the intercessor in His final decision. Indeed, the intercessor is one who is prepared fully to yield even his own life to God, and all he holds dear to God, in order that God's will be done. Abraham was ready to give up his son Isaac and we may recall that Moses was personally prepared to have his own life blotted out, in order to further God's will in the life of the nation Israel.

It is possible that we need to say a bit more about the intercessor than simply to assert such claims as (*a*) that the intercessor always leaves the final decision to God, and (*b*) that God, in making the final decision will condescend to take account of the suppliant's intercession, and (*c*) that the intercessor is so far from personal self-seeking that he will be ready to go so far as yield up his own life, in order that God's will be done. These elements which we have just catalogued as (*a*), (*b*) and (*c*) have their place, we believe, in a proper understanding of intercession, but they tend to understate

what we want to regard as a dynamic element in intercession. By this we mean an activity which we reckon to be going on, within the suppliant, in the very process of intercession. This is a point we shall try to illustrate more concretely later on, in this paper. For the moment, we want to enter a claim for the view that the very act of praying, the action in which the suppliant engages, is a necessary element in his own coming to know the will of God. It is in presenting the human plea, the intercession or the petition, that the speaker comes to learn either that what he asks is contrary to the will of God, or is something less and other than the will of God, or is even contrary to the will of God. We may even go so far as to claim that unless the prayer is actually prayed, then the will of God most probably will remain unknown, and may then set up troublesome fears in the mind of the suppliant.

It is at this point we propose to consider another example of intercession, or perhaps more accurately in this case, an example of petition. This example is less simple than obtained in our discussion of Abraham. Petition and intercession are closely linked in this case. We refer to the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane. For our purposes we shall discuss His prayer on the basis of Mark 14:35f. The differences between Mark on the one hand and Matthew and Luke on the other are minor. Mark's version reads as follows: 'Then he went forward a little, threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by. "Abba, Father," he said, "all things are possible to thee; take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what thou wilt."' It is conjectured that some of the wording has been influenced by the Lord's Prayer, but that hardly affects our immediate purpose. What is presented in these verses may be described as a view of our Lord's last lesson in obedience. There is set before us here, not only a genuine fear, a shrinking from terrible physical pain but an agonizing mental struggle and turmoil. Terrible as must have been the apprehension of so cruel a death, there is, so we suggest, the agonizing struggle to clear the mind as to what truly was the Father's will for him, at this time. Part of the agony, if not the very heart of the agony, was to win through to an assurance that the way of the Cross was truly God's will for him, at this time. We deem it important to avoid sentimentality here, and bearing that in mind, nevertheless the situation seems to be one characterized by an overwhelming mental distress, marked by a sense of loneliness. Some of the older writers speak of an 'awe before God'; possibly they meant an awe arising from the growing perception that the Father's way called for this fearful, terrifying act of obedience. At some point in his act of praying, our Lord dared to say to the Father, 'All things are possible to thee; take this cup from me.' The plea was, in fact, made, whether in these

words precisely or in some other form, even if a process of reconstruction of the words is involved. But, as we have just hinted, the plea was 'at some point in the act of praying'. We regard this time element in the process of praying as worth underlining, because it does not express the whole content of the prayer. It is an important part, indeed a very necessary and initial element in the prayer. It does not include within itself the final end of the prayer. Our claim is that this petition was uttered in solemn sincerity, and in the utterance of it, a further step was taken, viz. a step towards a fuller awareness of God's will for him. This awareness was of the ineluctable choice, and that it broke in upon the mind of our Lord seems to be indicated by the remainder of the prayer: 'Yet not what I will but what thou wilt.' The petition, it will be remembered, was based on a sure faith in the omnipotence of God, 'All things are possible to thee; take this cup away from me.' Clear, undiluted petition! Yet this petition issues in an affirmation of faith in a trustful acceptance of the Divine will. It may well be the case that, in this instance, much of what that will contained was hidden from our Lord's eyes, 'Yet not what I will, but what thou wilt.'

It is tempting to offer conjectures here. But one cannot avoid the awareness that we are touching a frontier we cannot cross over. But it may be permissible to retrace our steps a little, and pay some attention to the preceding words, in v. 33, in the hope that we may become a little clearer as to the situation we are trying to understand. Verse 33 says: 'And he took Peter and James and John with him . . .' and goes on to say ' . . . stop here and stay awake'. Perhaps the warning against conjecture should be repeated at this point, especially if we try to claim that we know why Jesus desired to have the three disciples with him. But dare we risk suggesting a probability, viz. that Jesus expected Peter and James and John to engage in prayer? If so, and notice we are obviously venturing a guess here (but we hope it can find some support), then the prayer would involve prayer either for Jesus or praying with Jesus, or prayer for themselves. Some support for this comes from a consideration of a few of the words used in this passage, such as 'Stay awake' in v. 34, and the references to the prayers offered by Jesus himself in vv. 35, 36 and 39. Add to these the rather strange command Jesus gave to Peter, 'Pray that you may be spared the test', presumably 'test' in the sense of severe trial. It looks as if our Lord is urging upon Peter, James and John the necessity of 'spiritual wakefulness', the need for full and complete dependence on divine help, in the time of trial, and this to take place by means of prayer. It might be claimed that even in these closing hours of his earthly life, Jesus was preparing, through his prayer, for his own intense trial and temptation. But his prayer required vigilance; this was no time for sleep. It was

vigilance of a kind associated with a vigil. He had, even at that late hour, to discover for himself, through prayer, what was the Father's will. Basic and central in the prayer he offered to the Father, was his petition. Even he exercised his spiritual freedom to lay his own personal desire before the Father. Apparently no clash of wills took place. Also, there was an acceptance of a new understanding of God's will; its content was different from that envisaged in the petition. Yet, the more one looks at this prayer, the more remarkable it appears. Unlike the intercession offered by Abraham, Jesus does not, apparently, wait for an answer. His prayer, in form at least, looks less like a dialogue than that of Abraham, where we have a series of questions and answers between Abraham and God. The other point of difference is that Jesus, personally, was at what might be called 'the receiving end' of the answer to the prayer, whereas Abraham was not. This, of course, would point to the fact that Jesus was engaged in petition for himself, whereas Abraham was offering intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. But both prayers, that of Abraham and that of Jesus, have this in common, that the requests, in both cases, open up the possibility of a clash of wills. Yet we have to confess to a marked hesitation in asserting there was a clash of wills here. Jesus does, in fact, bring his own personal desire to God. He is sure that God is well able to find a way of avoiding the evil that sinful men were plotting against him. It is a not too bold conjecture to suggest that such a hope found a place in his mind; otherwise why did he pray in such terms? But along with that hope there was another thought, a thought which, as it were, encapsulated all his thinking about the Father's will. We suggest that it was all but inevitable that One Whose whole life was marked by a unique, loving obedience to the Father, would ask at this time, of all times in his life, if his wish were truly congruent with the Father's will. For him, the one way to learn God's will in that hour was simply to pray, and to pray 'Not my will but thine be done'. The prayer begins, we may remember, that the cup may pass from him, but it does not end there, nor does the cup pass from him.

Perhaps a brief digression may be allowed at this point, in order to see better, if we can, what Jesus had in mind in his prayer. First, Jesus asks to be spared from the death on the cross. Second, he asks, by implication at least, that his cause (or God's cause) triumph over the powers of evil. Thirdly, that he be given power to continue faithful in the work the Father has given him to do. All these seemed obviously to be in accordance with God's will for our Lord. It is no less obvious that Jesus hoped, at least to begin with, that these wishes should be realized. But we must not overlook the importance of the opening words of the prayer, i.e. 'Abba, Father, all things are

possible to thee'. This whole phrase, with its trustful 'Abba', with its affirmation 'possible to thee', sets all that follows thereafter within the supremacy and priority of the Father's will. There is no 'haggling' here, if such a cynical word be permitted; there is no hint of 'bargaining' similar to Abraham seeking to reduce, bit by bit, the required number of good men needed in order to save Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction. We are not belittling Abraham's intercession. Abraham sets his own will alongside that of God. He alters and changes his requests, step by step, humbly insinuating his own wish, in the reverent faith that his desire may, as it were, be given preference to what might have been God's original intention with regard to Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham, of course, stops short of what might be thought to be the logical conclusion of the dialogue he began with God, and leaves the last step in the process, to God. The several pleas, one after the other in his intercession, represented stages in his process of learning what was God's will. In contrast with that, Jesus begins first by affirming God's will. He does not seek to change that will. He does not proffer his own will as a possible alternative to the Father's. The prayer begins, as we have suggested, by affirming God's will, and it ends with the acceptance of that will, 'Yet not what I will but what thou wilt.' What is central here is his readiness to obey the Father, in the way the Father decides. He prays as a suppliant seeking the Father's will. His praying and asking is not a disguised form of His own self-will. He is not seeking for an alternative to God's will. The faith underlying his petition is that whatever the Father decides is the right decision in these circumstances. It would be a misreading of the situation to imagine that this decision was forced on Jesus. To use popular jargon, our Lord's petition was open-ended, i.e. open to learn from God, in prayer, what was God's will; open to that which, in a sense, must happen if God's will is to be done. There is, indeed, no alternative. In this awful experience which loomed up before him, in all its dreadful cruelty and shame, Jesus saw in some measure that act which would crown and complete his life's work and that the victory of the Father would show itself in the Son's obedience unto death.

Let us see if we can get back to the straight and narrow path, after this digression. We had reached the point where we had claimed that what Jesus envisaged when he began his prayer, was different from what he envisaged when he ended the prayer with, 'Yet not what I will, but what thou wilt.' The significance of the opening part of the prayer is that it does not lay down beforehand what the answer might be. The prayer is not a neat parallel with Abraham's slightly subtle style of trying to get God to do what Abraham personally would have preferred. The initial words of Jesus, in particular, the 'all things are possible to thee', suggest that Jesus is,

as it were, on the way to learning what is comprised in the 'all things that are possible'. Jesus is not asking for the impossible. Jesus is seeking the true, possible answer. Most probably, part of the answer was a renewal of power to continue in that line of obedience, which throughout his life had characterized his behaviour. He accepts at the end of the prayer what he now knows to be God's will. It is, to put it mildly and almost incongruously, a 'costly' obedience, involving what the New Testament calls *ἀγωνία*. The demand now laid upon him, a demand to some extent hidden from him prior to his prayer, formed the content of the answer he sought. The answer was a new and stern and, to some extent, a final revelation of the kind of obedience needed for the fulfilment of the divine will. The quiet words '*but what thou wilt*' need not be dramatized in terms of great heroism, nor should they be sentimentalized in terms of an ineluctable resignation. Rather they represent what in modern jargon is called 'a break-through', or to take a parallel from the experience of driving a motor car, the opening words, i.e. 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee', might be likened to the gear lever being in neutral, with the engine ticking over. At that point, the car may move into forward or reverse, depending on the direction the lever is moved. The lever moves in the 'forward' direction, as is indicated by the words, '*but what thou wilt*', Jesus moves forward in order to fulfil God's will. That life of obedience was put to its supreme test. In the light of the events which followed swiftly after the prayers in Gethsemane, we are forced to conclude that, in and through his prayer, Jesus received the assurance that the way to the Cross was the way the Father willed for him.

We have laboured long enough on this passage and a story that is already too long must be brought to some kind of a conclusion, even if it is only a provisional one. It can be put quite briefly: Intercessory and petitionary prayer begin with the suppliant bringing his own personal desires to God. He will usually do so, humbly and even naively. Nevertheless, the very act of addressing God, in petition or intercession, will find its end in a deeper understanding of God's will, rather than in a specific answer to the man's request. The answer is God's own answer, and not necessarily something of a mixture or compromise between God and man. It is God who is responsible for the answer, not man. Man cannot prejudge God's answer. The answer to prayer is given to faith rather than to sight. Such power as may be given to man to know God's will through prayer cannot be treated mainly as a heuristic device to obtain information from God. In so far as it may provide knowledge about God's will, it does so, as power both to do and to bear God's will. This we believe, is demonstrated by the prayer of our Lord in Gethsemane. Of course, this is in no sense a new or novel conclusion;

it is recalled in the words of a prayer used by Christians in Public Worship: 'Consecrate your lives to the Christian obedience and service and pray for strength to do and to bear the holy and blessed will of God.' It seems to us that this aspect of prayer has receded into the background. But possibly our observation has been confined to a rather narrow area. However, it is probable that what we have been saying may act as a reminder of the inadequacy that marks so much of our prayer. Paul's well-known words seem to be worth repeating, 'We do not even know how we ought to pray.' The further we penetrate into intercession, the more we realize we are in an area, in which we hardly know our way about. Clearly, it is an area which demands humility and simple trust in God, rather than any know-how or spiritual expertise we may try to cultivate. Intercession is inseparable from the faith that God is already present and that He is present to hear our petitions, even when we cannot put into words what there is within our souls. This is more or less part of what Paul was writing about to the Christians at Rome. In this connection it is interesting to observe what some of the commentators say about the two verses Romans 8:26-27: Dodd writes, 'Not even in prayer is the human intelligence or will the determining factor . . . an inarticulate aspiration is itself the work of the divine in us, and though we ourselves may not be conscious of its meaning, God knows what it means and answers the prayer.' Thus Dodd. Barth says a lot, but we simply note, 'In human fashion no man and no thing can make intercession for us. We stand alone, and are lost. But according to the will of God, the Spirit intercedeth for us, and we are saved.' Barrett says that Paul thinks 'of an indwelling God described as Spirit, and so introduces the notion of prayer as the Spirit's activity. The Spirit actually makes intercession for us.' He goes on to say that the 'communion between Spirit (-filled worshipper) and God is immediate and needs no spoken word'.

These quotations may be taken as a starting-point for what is no more than a brief closing note on an aspect of intercessory prayer. We have to remind ourselves that the Spirit who works within the man engaged in prayer, does not act impersonally. The Spirit does not behave as if the man were not really there or was not attempting to pray himself. The Spirit does not operate like a gramophone record being played in an empty room. It is necessary that the man pray; his intercession may be no more than a groan. Yet even so, the inarticulate sound may well be on the way to become an acceptable prayer so far as God is concerned. His groan may, as it were, be reinterpreted or transposed to a higher key, by the Spirit. Paul seems to take very seriously our human shortcomings in prayer. Although we are still *in via* and not *in patria*, yet the saving power of God is at work through the Spirit. And, not least, that power is demonstrated

in the experience of prayer. Just at the place where human weakness is manifested, the Spirit is 'compresent' with us and intercedes to help us. The value of this intercession is that the Spirit intercedes in the true and proper way, which is in accordance with God's will in that specific situation where prayer is needed. He intercedes for God's people, for those who love God, to use Paul's language. Notice, however, that it is in the exercising of the freedom to pray that the Spirit is 'compresent' with us and works to help. What the Spirit conceivably does, it not to substitute his prayer for ours. The Spirit does not infuse or insert a prayer in place of our own. Rather the Spirit comes in, as it were, at the point where man is unable to pray as he ought or in the way that is acceptable to God. Yet, such aspiration as there is in man to pray aright, is taken up into the Spirit's activity, and presented to God, 'in God's own way'. Such weakness in praying, which so often manifests itself in intercession, is not just a passing phase, which is automatically put right by practice. It is, we believe, a permanent feature of our humanity. It is a characteristic of being a human being. We cannot transcend ourselves in this area of our experience of God's dealings with us. Further, we doubt if it can be said that the Spirit removes this defect in the way possibly a dentist may remove a tooth (although, we hasten to add, not by using the dentist's tools!) The function of the Spirit, in this work, is to help us despite our defects. It might be possible to say that His intercession is added to ours, and with this addition, the two together make possible that prayer which is well-pleasing to God. If our prayers are to be our prayers we have to start off with the fact that we have our defects. These are inescapable accompaniments of our intercessions. As already indicated, we pray as in spiritual poverty, not out of the richness of our faith. But still, we can pray in confidence, with a confidence which grows from faith in an intercessor who is within, who is the Holy Spirit, and whose intercessions, make our prayer acceptable to God. In prayer we cry 'Abba, Father'. This is more than a mere liturgical formula. It is an invocation made possible by the Spirit, and not just the Spirit as it were in a general sense, but the Spirit who comes, and works within the soul. It is the Holy Spirit which leads us into the presence of Him who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

JAMES WOOD, Edinburgh