

PRAYER: WISDOM AND LOVE

By G.H.

PRAYER in all its fullness is nothing else than making oneself open to God. This sounds very simple, but it is hardly an answer to the question 'What is prayer?' It is merely the start of the answer. What then is being open to God, and how does one make oneself open to God? Perhaps the best way for us to begin is by our considering the two most fundamental acts that man performs. Because he is man, and not animal, his most fundamental, most characteristic acts spring from his rational nature. Using a form of expression which is not fundamental, but which is nevertheless deep rooted, we say that these two most characteristic activities of man are those of his mind and his heart. With his mind he understands, and with his heart he loves. Being open to God, then, is having one's mind open to God and having one's heart open to God. This is prayer. In a steady and lasting state of communion with God the mind is always open and turned to God, and so is the heart. The opening of the mind to God is Wisdom, and the opening of the heart to God is Love. Prayer, then, is Wisdom and Love. But what does this mean to us? for it is easier to answer the question 'How are we to grow in wisdom and love?' by saying 'Through prayer', than it is to answer the question 'How do I pray?' by saying 'Be wise and loving'.

We do not really know what is meant by Love or Wisdom. To a certain extent however we do know what is meant by love; it is wisdom that is more difficult to grasp. It is no good our being able to love if we are not also wise; for our love will be misdirected. We know what love is, however, and this is where we can start. We know what love is, because we do love. We can see ourselves loving, we can recognize it as love, whether it be self-love or love of God. Sometimes we love God and we are aware of it. Sometimes we do not, and we can be painfully aware of this too. The very nature of our love is that sometimes we do and sometimes we do not. With wisdom it is not quite the same. Wise is a word that denotes a habit of mind, something steady and continuous, but love can either mean for us a similar habit or,

more usually, simply an act of loving. It is the acts of love that we see and recognize for what they are, and thus it is that we can say that we know what it is like to love. But the habit of loving God we do not know; we cannot be so sure whether we possess it. We do not know what Love in that sense means. With wisdom it is the same; we do not know what wisdom is, because our minds are not open and turned to God habitually. We do know what it is to love, and if we can make this habitual, it will become Love; but what are the individual acts, which, if we make them continuous and all ordered towards God, will make us wise? Such acts, surely, are understanding. This is the very function of our minds, and as we have said, it is having the mind open to God that is Wisdom.

So Wisdom comes through understanding, and this understanding is, of course, of God—our understanding of him. Prayer is founded in loving and understanding God. It is essentially an activity of the whole man; we cannot just love God without understanding him, nor can we understand him without loving him. But although we can recognize our loving, can we recognize our understanding? If we cannot, then our *recipe* for prayer will not convey any meaning to us as a whole. What exactly should the mind be doing? This is by no means clear, and it is really not very surprising. We are trying to understand ourselves understanding. It is easy, by comparison, for the mind to look at the heart and understand its loving. It is easy for the heart to feel for the mind and love its understanding. But although we can and must, it is neither easy to love our loving, nor understand our understanding. It is as if the face were to try and see itself, not simply as a reflection in a mirror, but face to face just as it is! For the face it is impossible, but for the mind it is not. Let us try.

To try to see what understanding is, let us compare it with loving. The two essentially go together; they are however quite different. If we can see how they differ, then we will come to know more about what they actually are. We know a little about loving, and we know that probably the most characteristic thing about it is that it is accompanied by giving—so much so in fact that in the perfection of love loving actually becomes giving, giving one's own self. We see this quite clearly in God's love for us. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. We can also see this clearly in ourselves. We can simply smile at

someone and we are giving them our sympathy or support; we are in fact manifesting our love for them, making it real and active in an act which might seem so very slight, but yet is so very powerful. We are, in a very simple way, uniting ourselves to them by giving to them a part of ourselves. What, however, is the reaction of someone to whom we give in this way, or to whom we give ourselves in a big way? It will most probably be a return of love; but this will not be the most immediate simultaneous reaction. The immediate reaction will be that they understand us. In the case of a superficial level of our giving—perhaps a smile to a stranger—they will understand us as being friendly. The more we give ourselves to another, the more we will be understood (if other things do not intervene). And in understanding us the other person will return our love because of his understanding. As we have already suggested, the two must go together. The point at the moment, however, is that our giving ourselves to someone has caused them to have understanding. If we are giving, what are they doing? They are receiving; and this receiving is their understanding. They take us into themselves and make that part of us, which we have given to them, into a part of themselves. They have received us, they now know or understand us. Thus understanding is receiving; or better still it is receiving and making one's own, in the same way as loving is not giving what is another's, but what is one's own. Thus both in loving and in understanding there is a real change involved. In both you share, and in sharing you are united together, the lover to the loved.

We are talking about prayer, and prayer is loving and understanding God. Through understanding and loving we can come to understand and to love all the more. We, however, by ourselves cannot start this. It is only through God's love for us that we can return that love. He so loves us that he has given to us his only Son—the Word incarnate. It is by receiving what he gives that we can start; and it is through our act of faith that we receive what he gives; we receive the Word of God. Faith, then, is the seed of wisdom; this is where our understanding starts and grows from. A life of prayer is a life of understanding, a life searching to understand God; but it must not be thought that we can ever fully understand God. The fulness of understanding belongs to him alone. Nor in this life can we reach the degree of fulness

which belongs to us as creatures made in his image. That can only be reached in the beatific vision; and then the strength of that vision will depend upon the degree of wisdom that we have attained in this world, that is, our understanding, our holiness. A life of prayer is a life to understand God, but just finding things out about God is not necessarily understanding God. If we are concerned in finding out about God in such a way that we receive him into us and let him grow in us, we ourselves changing so as to conform with him, then we are understanding, and wisdom is beginning. If we are busy taking into ourselves things and thoughts and knowledge from around us which are not directed towards God, then these things, by being received into us and our becoming like them, will fence out our understanding of God and our life will not be in him, but only in ourselves, and that life will be dead. Through our really receiving God and giving ourselves to God, we come to understand what he is to us and what we are to him. We recognize what he is; we recognize what we are. We then can pay to him the reverence and love that is due to him alone. If we are doing this we can be said to honour and fear him; and 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'.



THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE AND TRADITION

EDMUND HILL, O.P.

ORIGEN, the great Alexandrian theologian who died in A.D. 253, is a key figure in the Christian tradition of scriptural interpretation. Earlier this year a monumental book appeared on 'the sources and significance of Origen's interpretation of scripture'.¹ The author, Dr R. C. P. Hanson, D.D., is a senior lecturer in theology at Nottingham University. *Allegory and Event* is a sequel to *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition*, which appeared five years ago.

It is a book full of excellent qualities; great erudition, vigorous

¹ *Allegory and Event*, by R. C. P. Hanson. (S.C.M., 35s.)