

THE CASTLEMILK QUESTION

... a matter for prayer and contemplation

The Revd John L Bell

*[Mr Bell's talk at the Conference was un-scripted.
Thereafter he sent the Editor this script]*

In discussion about a devolved Scottish parliament, objectors frequently raise the spectre of the "West Lothian Question." I wonder whether, as regards personal devotions, a comparable thorn in the flesh might be identified called, perhaps, the "Castlemilk Question." Such nomenclature, I suggest, should simply allow the query, "Will it work in Castlemilk?" (or comparable neighbourhoods) to be raised.

This might seem like liturgical suicide to people of a Scoto-catholic disposition, covert anglicans who stealthily attend evensong whenever in a cathedral town, but would never admit their passion for Elizabethan liturgy in public, let alone encourage their congregations to drink from such suspect wells.

However, the issue under debate is not that of public worship, but personal devotions. Both are, admittedly, different sides of the same coin; but they are **different** sides. In public worship, we encounter God as the Source of all life, the Lord of creation, the Bridegroom of the Church. In private devotions, we pay respect to God's decision to meet us on his knees in the person of Jesus, and so to frequent kitchens, living rooms, gardens and market-places, that his conversation never sets himself at a distance from the confidence of unschooled people.

One of the great strains on public worship at the present time is simply the over loading of expectation.

On both sides of the border subsequent to the reformation, it was presumed that an individual encountered his or her creator in private prayer, in daily family, house or community worship, and in weekly public worship. This is no longer the case. For many, if not most people, Sunday is the principal or the only time when they deliberately express their devotion to God. And the ravages of a market-led, consumer society predispose many to expect that they should be able to get what they want for their own private personal satisfaction in the course of corporate liturgy.

How very different from the days of Cranmer and Knox, who shared a belief in the public nature of prayer when the parish gathered, and some of whose utterances would today be regarded as politically charged by dint of their direct imprecations for God to intervene positively or negatively in matters of national or local political import.

It is my belief that public worship cannot be renewed unless it is unshackled from the illegitimate expectation that its primary purpose is to recharge highly independent batteries as and when the owners see fit to offer them for renewal.

But, in order to redress the imbalance, we have to offer to our congregations patterns of personal prayer which will be imaginative, intelligible and fulfilling. Here, most of us are at a loss. Private devotions have never been part of the academic curriculum in Scottish divinity halls, and few candidates or ordinands will have engaged in conversation on such matters with their supervisors. It is very much like Victorian sex: the presumption is that people do it, but we don't have the vocabulary or courage to discuss how or when.

One of the most warmly acclaimed features of *Common Order* is its inclusion of a Daily Office. It has been well received by ministers keen to have some patterns of personal prayer. But here, with no disrespect that justifiably lauded publication, I have to ask the Castlemilk Question.

And I fear that the honest response must be in the negative. For while clergy, verging on the frantic about their non-existent or irregular prayer life, may find such an office rewarding, it will not be nearly as accessible to the majority church population who are lay people.

Indeed, the office prayers and hymns, based on the 5th century pattern of canonical hours, were never intended for predominantly lay usage. Such forms of devotion presupposed a monastic settlement, a cathedral or abbey cloister, or an academic foundation. Any lay people who participated in them were not artisans or dairy maids, but lay religious living a chosen life of disciplined devotion, and accommodated in a building or working in fields within easy walking distance of the cloister bell.

There is, admittedly, within the anglican tradition, the provision of matins and evensong, the origins of which are rooted in the canonical hours offices, and the practice of which are open to the public. But there must be very few English villages or anglican cathedrals which can boast of a regular congregation of working people attending such services as part of their daily routine. We must avoid identifying the exception and calling it the rule.

Even so, this is still, essentially corporate worship, using a vocabulary, a sequence of scriptural readings, and a pattern of prayer which may be quite consonant with the reverberations of a neo-gothic chancel. The liturgy does not sit quite so easily in the bedroom of a council flat.

So, what are we going to do for the Castlemilk Christian who wants to regularise or develop his or her prayer life? Indeed, what are we going to do for the burghers of Bearsden and Broughton who are similarly disposed?

I want to suggest some markers, nothing more. These come from a host of conversations with lay people as well as priests and ministers. They may offer some approaches for discussion and practice.

1. TIME

The recurrent motif in the Psalms about "waiting on the Lord" has frequently been regarded as indicative of patience. I suggest it is equally a sign of love. We wait for, and spend time with, that or those whom we love. People have to be encouraged to make a simple decision as to when prayer shall be made. It is not a matter of how long, so much as a matter of deciding when all else will be set aside. Then two minutes may grow to twenty. But nothing will happen as long as there is no decision about when... morning, afternoon, night... in bed, out of bed, walking the dog etc etc.

2. SCRIPTURE

Those who protest that they can't hear what God is saying to them, frequently never go to where God is speaking. No one could make a value judgement on the level of communication in Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony if he or she had done nothing more than admire the CD jacket in a record-store window.

The Word has to be opened, not as an oracle read in an ecclesiastical echo chamber, but as a basis for conversation between the reader and the writer who - form analysis aside - is God. While clergy may be aware of the folly of reading from Genesis to Revelation as a source of spiritual edification, we cannot presume that lay people are adept at knowing what to read and when. How have they to learn ... by osmosis?

3. PSALMS

The implication is not that the Psalms stand outside the canon of scripture, but rather that the Psalms have a peculiar role to play in personal, devotional life, not least because half of them are personal laments or hymns of trust.

The psalms have suffered at the hands of chorus writers from being portrayed as brief songs of praise and acclamation. The truth is that they are vehicles which convey both the fullness of God to the people of God, and the whole panoply of human experience to our Maker.

People will not find Psalm 13 or Psalm 22 a stumbling-block to devotion when they are released from the bondage of believing that they should be able to feel the emotion expressed in such laments. If they are encouraged to see such poems as indicative of the range of sentiment which is acceptable to God; and if they are enabled to find in these words an echo of how others in society may be feeling, such psalms will become tools for devotion on a desperate day, as well as windows on intercession.

There is, therefore, a need for a planned reading of the psalms but not after the fashion of evensong, or of the blessed Columba who is reputed to have repeated the psalter aloud while his nether regions were stimulated by such remnants of the Gulf Stream as reach the Sound of Mull.

4. PATTERNED PRAYER

By this I simply point to the great advantage which comes from deciding what will be the focus of prayer on different days of the week. This may have respect to personal life as well as causes for concern.

For some lay people, a "quiet time" consists of neurotically trying to remember before God all the important things that need to be prayed for. Thus even die-hard protestants develop a litany as predictable as the Rosary, albeit with a less Marian vocabulary.

For many, it is a liberation to be told that we can pray to God about different things on different days, using - if it is helpful - a disposable notebook to aid the memory.

5. THE TRADITIONS

Despite the prefatory remarks, I would lay great store by ensuring that part of a disciplined prayer life is using meditations, runes, prayers and collects that come from a wide spectrum of people and religious traditions.

God does not give to any of us a monopoly of understanding the divine will or the human spirit. But from what other people have gleaned may come insights which challenge, deepen and develop our practice of prayer and spirituality. It is for this express reason that *Pray Now* has, in its daily prayers, an item from the historical or global traditions.

This much is, perhaps, the theory. What we need to work on is the practice, and that by faltering steps at first. Let us hope that we resolve the Castlemilk Question before the politicians resolve the West Lothian one.
