

PRAYING

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1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking about praying

Speaking about praying is on the one hand speaking about things concerning religious people personally and on the other hand it is speaking about the public prayer of the Church. The import of these lectures; the things I have to say to you are not focused on the world of the deaf. In my opinion what I have to say has as much to do with the world of the hearing as it has to do with the world of the deaf.

The structure of this lecture

First I intend to say something about praying as an attitude to life. After that I want to look with you to the language of praying. Next to the differences between private prayer and liturgical prayer. I will conclude with a short exposition about the difficulties we meet in the Dutch situation and the ways we should go.

2. PRAYING IS AN ATTITUDE TO LIFE

Praying is an attitude to life. You pray because you cannot help it. You have to. Israel didn't have a special word for praying. Praying was so to say, life itself. In old Israel praying was mixed up with life in a way that it was similar to breathing: praying was a condition of life, if not you were to die, you were losing contact with reality.

For us it is about the same. We have to pray, not in a manner of duty, but because we cannot help it: life is at stake. Praying is getting in touch with the ground of one's existence.

2.1 The attitude of praying

Praying presupposes an attitude. I distinguish between an inner attitude and a physical attitude.

2.1.1 The inner attitude

The inner attitude is one of openness and wonder. In the first place openness and wonder for all that was created. Openness and wonder for the world we live in, with its good sides and bad sides. Openness and wonder for people with their good sides and bad sides. Openness and wonder lastly, for the mystery we call "God". A mystery that announces itself in places where and at times when we don't expect it, in people from whom we don't expect it.

This inner attitude is also an attitude of concern and solidarity with all that was created. It is an attitude of concern for the weal and woe of people and of our earth. This attitude of openness and wonder makes a person vulnerable. Vulnerability, however, is not a desirable quality in our modern society. It is associated with weakness and it sometimes evokes aggression.

In our times it is essential to develop an attitude of openness, both for ourselves and with the people we are caring for.

2.1.2 The physical attitude

The physical attitude expresses our inner condition. Therefore, when I conduct a service, my attitude when praying will differ from my attitude reading the Scriptures or making an announcement. And when I am happy my attitude will differ from that when I am sad.

There are several postures of praying: kneeling, standing up, bending, with folded hands, with open hands, with your arms stretched out, with your arms crossed on your breast, with your hand on your heart, with your hands covering your face, with two fists in your stomach, with one's arms akimbo.

You noticed here a smooth transition from ritual and religious attitudes to attitudes which are less ritual and less religious, but nevertheless real and authentic. I myself prefer attitudes which express openness and concern.

3. THE LANGUAGE OF PRAYING

"Praying is talking with God", as we learned in former days. Talking is just one way of communicating with each other. Often this appears to be a one-sided contact: there is talking, but there is no listening, there is no openness. And openness, we saw, is a fundamental attitude when it comes to praying. Therefore praying does not start with talking with words.

Praying starts with silence. And in this pure silence there will be an impression. So we are talking about an expectational silence: it is listening. We all know that listening is more than the perception through the ears. With listening, I mean listening with your whole body, with all your senses. This kind of listening is: to let oneself be touched within, to let oneself be moved by life itself.

So the language of praying starts with the inner attitude which expresses itself in the physical attitude. It starts with the words of young Samuel: "Speak, O Lord, your servant is listening." (1 Sam 3, 10). So often our praying is like: "Listen O Lord, your servant is speaking."

God speaks first. He speaks to us. He speaks to us from the Scriptures. He speaks to us from the poor and the outcasts. He calls out to us from His creation, that we may guard it and complete it. He is the voice of our conscience.

After the impression the expression follows. No, not yet words, not too quick. Perhaps no words at all. Perhaps there is only a gesture of devotion, of joy or sorrow. Perhaps we first light a candle, or burn incense before we begin to speak. Praying is precarious and frail, especially when it takes shape as language and tries to put into words the existence of people before their God. Then words turn out to fail: man and God cannot be caught in words. Poets know this and they don't cease to approximate as close as possible the reality of God and man. Those who pray know this too, ought to know this at least.

Their speaking is an "approximate speaking". It is never finished, never definite or final. Therefore the language of praying is the language of poets. It is an imaginative language, a symbolical language. and therefore we never cease praying.

We can make a distinction between "first language" and "second language".

The "first language" is that of science and logic. This language is exact. There can be no doubt about its meaning. It is a language which describes and draws conclusions from facts. It is a language which defines: this and not that; it is a language which deals with empirical reality. Official language is "first language", as is the language of doctrines.

The "first language" is also every language: the language of common facts, the language of assertions, and announcements, appointments and agreements.

The "second language" puts into words what hardly can be said. It is a language which reaches out into the depth or behind the horizon. It just isn't a language which makes precise and fastens down, on the contrary: it is a language which opens and evokes, which refers and represents. It is highly irritating language to those who lack a sense of mystery and fantasy. This "second language" is the language of poets and story-tellers. It is the language of fairy tales and myths. It is the language of lovers and believers, the language of prayer and benediction, of comfort and challenge. the language in which God addresses Himself to us.

4. PRIVATE-PRAYER, LITURGICAL PRAYER

A person prays in private and in community. The liturgical prayer of the community presupposes the personal prayer of those who celebrate, both within and outside the celebration. That is why, in the service there is a moment of silence after the call "Let us pray" of the leader. About the form and contents of the personal prayer there is little to say. The personal prayer reflects the faith, the ideas of God and man of the individual believer which are, today more than in the past, quite various. I come to speak about this later

on. As for the form and contents of the liturgical prayer I want to make some remarks. I want to do so because I know from my own experience that the liturgical prayer enables people to meet God, but on the other hand may alienate people from God.

First the form

"The language of prayer is the language of wonder, emotion and desire, of awe and joy, but also of lamentation and pain." (L. Loosen, *Liturgische gebedstaal, Werkmap voor Liturgie*, [1990]1,pg.9.)

Most of our prayers are supplications, appeals for help. We turn God inside out with questions. In this connection I want to quote one of our modern writers. He says:

I never came across a prayer that did not fill me with repugnance because of its greedy tone.

I rather should want to set eyes on a prayer that is seeking God, instead of badgering the life out of Him for this, that and the other."

Gerard Reve wrote this several years ago. Maybe he is exaggerating here. Maybe he didn't look very much for a prayer like the latter. But I think this quotation is still to the point.

A prayer that seeks God. A prayer that does not have God in the pocket, that does not make God a stooge. God is not so outspoken and obvious as He was some decades ago. There is a need for prayers that try to put into words who God is for us nowadays. We are facing a darkening of God: the old words are losing their meaning, the old images are going down in pieces.

In my opinion this is not alarming, it is even healthy. Because in this manner we are dependent on what is from old and essential element of prayer: anamnesis - the remembrance of the Name of God, a regular part of biblical praying. Not only a regular part, but a necessary part of our praying. For if we don't call to mind the Name, faith will die in us and with faith, hope and love. We are facing here a deadly self-evidence and routine, like we are in human

relationship. This remembrance is not a kind of thinking back to former days like looking into a photograph album. No, we call into mind who God is for us and who we are for Him. We colour God's Name in a manner that this Name starts to live among us.

Praying should be anamnesis in the first place. Afterwards it may turn into supplication or thanksgiving or benediction, or lamentation, but always based on this anamnesis.

Second: the contents of our praying

Praying is not instruction in faith, nor is it a sermon and it surely should not be a moralistic chat in the direction of the congregation. We all know that, but again and again it appears so difficult to listen to oneself, to the people, to the world and to dig up from our hearts what really matters.

So the contents of our praying should be: remembrance, sure, and then joy and sadness, hope and despair, benediction and curse, praise and lamentation. Life itself should be the content of our praying.

5. THE DIFFICULTIES WE MEET

Recently the Social and Cultural Planning-office published the results of research into secularisation in the Netherlands. It is a survey on twenty-five years religious life in our country. I'll give you some data in order to illustrate the prevailing practical circumstances under which we try to believe and to build church-communities.

Fifty-five percent of the Dutch population regards itself religious or somewhat religious. Forty-three percent of the population belongs to a church. Looking at the youth in the age from 17 to 24 years old, this percentage is twenty-eight. The expectation is that in the year 2020, the average percentage will be decreased to twenty-seven. In our days twenty-five percent of the population attends at least once a month, a church activity. More than twenty percent of the population belongs to the category "former Catholics".

This process of Church evaporation has been going on for several decades now and there are no indications that it will stop or can be stopped. A clue factor in this process seems to be the incapacity of the parents and educators to religious socialisation of their children, for research has shown that religious education in the family is a necessary condition for the development of the children's' religious contemplation of life and their involvement with church activities. This incapacity is caused in the first place by the fragmentation of our society: we belong to different communities or groups. My family and friends form a group that is different from the group formed by my colleagues in the Institute. And this group is different from the people I meet in church or at the concert in the school of music attended by my children. More than ever people are on their own, instead of members of a community, especially in matters of norms and values, in matters of vision of life and faith. These have become private matters, like the personal conscience that is the most important touchstone for the personal behaviour of two-thirds of our population. People chose at random and to their taste.

In this highly fragmented society conventional religious practices, both in and outside our liturgy, and conventional religious language are no longer a common property.

This incapacity of parents and educators is in the second place, caused by the fact that we live in a highly urbanised and technologicalised society in which the language of the Church, both the language of prayer as the speech of competent authorities, are experienced as out of date, as having no meaning to daily life. The wrong words, the wrong images, the wrong symbols, the wrong tone, the wrong emotion. Not wrong in former days when parents of my age grew up and felt at home in a coherent system of meaning and significance, but later on along the road to adulthood, when they discovered Church language as inadequate to put into words their discovery and knowledge of life, their faith and their doubt, their seeking and their finding.

This is not an encouraging outline of today's religious situation in our country, but it shows how the crisis in faith and religion is linked with what is going on in society, history and culture. Therefore there is no point in blaming Christian or Catholic parents or even priests or bishops. There is no point in blaming a country, because research into norms and values in North Western

Europe shows that there is going on a likewise development in other countries.

Do I see a way out?

I see ways to go. Not a retreat to the beautiful past or on a holy remnant, because in the desert the past always looks better and only God is holy. Not a rigid clinging to eternal truth, ecclesiastical power or given rules. The ways that I see are:

open eyes and ears, an open mind for God's reality; but also for our modern world;
no definitive or quite ready answers, but an atmosphere of dialogue, of seeking and tasting;
encouraging and supporting people, parents and educators in the first place, to explore their own faith and to require an adequate religious language and behaviour in which they can communicate their vital questions, their feelings and emotions;
religious services that are celebrations of life;
exemplary behaviour as a basis of all education.

With this introduction I hope to have prepared the way for some short presentations from different sections of our Institute. We want to show you different ways of praying, our trying and efforts. I can assure you: on this matter we have more questions than answers. I hope we will find some of the latter.