

Being 'in the way'

Two completely opposite ways of interpreting the phrase 'being in the way' have struck me lately, in relation to prayer and our relationship with God. The first and probably more obvious one, has negative connotations. If I am told I'm 'in the way', it presumably means that I'm blocking somebody's access to where they need or want to go. And the appropriate response in such circumstances is to 'get out of the way' so that the desired flow of movement can be restored.

In his book *An Ocean of Light*, Martin Laird quotes an American story-teller, Flannery O'Connor, who once wrote in her journal, 'I don't know you, God, because I am *in the way*,' (my italics), (OUP, 2019, p.6).

I can remember a retreat address where our leader suggested we seek to 'get out of the way' in our prayer times, because otherwise we might be so full of our own agendas and concerns that we can block the flow and access of the Spirit of God into our hearts and minds. Having acknowledged before God all the stuff in our heads, we're invited to let it go and place everything in God's hands; in other words this means getting ourselves 'out of the way', focusing instead on Christ and entrusting ourselves and the situation to him.

Similarly in contemplative or stilling prayer, it's good to try and 'get out of the way' as we gently let go, again and again, of the thoughts that keep popping into our minds. Some teachers call this 'getting out of the light, in order to allow God's transforming light and love to pour into our deepest being.

But then, intriguingly, there's a totally opposite use of these words in our Christian life, when 'being in the way', is something entirely positive. Here it means 'being IN the Way of Jesus', WITHIN the life, love, presence and community of Jesus in the world now. It's fascinating that the term 'the Way' appears to be the first name given to the movement of Christ's followers in the early church. For example, in Acts 9:2, Saul is breathing murderous threats against all followers of 'the Way'. (There are several more such references to 'the Way' throughout Acts, e.g. 19:9, 24:14).

Martin Laird observes that we humans urgently need to do the work of becoming aware of our thoughts, choosing where we will pay attention, thus giving ourselves more mental space for what matters most. Yet this alone is insufficient to relieve our human predicament fully; as Laird reminds us, 'we cannot pull this off by ourselves. Hence, something that Christianity calls grace (God as constantly giving, constantly pouring Himself out) is an *utterly reliable necessity*. In other words, the main thing is to be immersed in the way of Christ, as a result of 'being in a living and loving relationship with God,' (p.8).

We sometimes speak of being 'ON the way' in our faith journey, moving in the right direction with our eyes fixed on Christ, and this can be very helpful. But being 'in' that same way takes us deeper, into the intimate loving relationship with God in Jesus that we call prayer. As I think I've mentioned before, all this reinforces the importance of the little word 'in', especially in St John's Gospel and the letters of St Paul:

'Abide in me and I in you; I am the vine you are the branches; apart from me you can do nothing' (Jesus in John 15: 4,5,6)

'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation' St Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17

And, of course, Jesus is himself THE WAY, the truth and the life (John 14:6)

So to lead into silence, a prayer:

Beloved God, in whom we live and move and have our being, help us to clear away the clutter of self-preoccupation, and guide and hold us in the way of your love, as we know it in Jesus, our Brother and our Saviour. Amen.

And to end the silence, a prayer incorporating some words of Thomas Merton,

Loving God, help us to 'assent to the unbounded and overflowing goodness of your love, which comes from you and reveals you to the world – a love without which we will have nothing to give others'. Help us to be fully in Christ. Amen

Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Notre Dame Press 1998, p.158