Chapter 9:

Prayer: Getting Inside the Shift of Desire

In our last chapter, as part of finding ourselves inducted into a new people and exploring what that feels like, we looked at how another Other shifts us and discovers us through texts. In this chapter, we will continue exploring what it is like to find ourselves on the inside of this project of being inducted. However, this time we will attend to how it is through learning desire that we are brought into a new being. We will be looking at what is usually referred to by the term "prayer".

I'd like to start by noting something rather strange: how little there is in the New Testament on prayer. In fact, given that almsgiving, prayer and fasting are traditionally the visible pillars of what we call "religion", it is odd how little the New Testament attends to any of them. The only place where all three are treated with something like rigour is in the first eighteen verses of the sixth chapter of St Matthew's Gospel. And there they undergo, as I hope to show you, what appears to be a gross relativisation. They are entirely subordinated to, and reinterpreted by, a penetrating understanding of the workings of desire.

It would be tempting to see this as something proper to Matthew, and so to talk about "Matthew's understanding of desire". Nevertheless, the same understanding—the same intelligence of desire—can be detected at work in Luke and John as well as in St Paul. Ockham's Razor would suggest that this intelligence goes back to Our Lord Himself. When it comes to laying out that intelligence and how it works, the best guide I know is René Girard's thought. He has been my teacher throughout this book. So here I would like to show how Girard's thought—sometimes called "mimetic theory"—helps us to read these texts on prayer.

You should by now be quite familiar with his approach, since I have been using it since our very first chapter. However, in order to remind you quite what a difference his way of thinking makes, I'll begin by giving you a comparison between his approach and a reading which depends on a folk-psychology approach to desire.

I sometimes characterise the folk-psychology approach as the "blob-and-arrow" understanding of desire. In this approach, there is a blob located somewhere within each of us, normally referred to as a "self". This more or less bloated entity is pretty stable, and from it come forth arrows which aim at objects. So: "I" desire a car, a mate, a house, a holiday, some particular clothes, and so on, and so forth. The desire for the object comes from the "I" which originates it, and thus the desire is authentically and truly "mine". Let us suppose that I desire the same thing as someone else: this is either accidental—and we must be rational about resolving any conflict which may arise; or it is a result of the other person imitating my desire (which is, of course, stronger and more authentic than their secondary and less worthy desire). Since I take my desiring self—my "I"—to be basically rational, it follows that my desires are basically rational. Thus, I am unlike those people whom I observe to have clearly pathological patterns of desire: they are constantly falling for unsuitable mates and banging their heads against the consequences, or else hooked on substances or patterns of behaviour that do them no good. Those people are in some way sick, and their desires escape the possibilities of rational discourse, unlike me, and my desires.

If this is an accurate understanding of how we desire, then of course the New Testament is weirdly quaint and inaccurate—for all it would be doing when talking about prayer is urging us to whip ourselves (and how can "we" whip our "selves"?) into wanting more. Furthermore, following this view, the New Testament would contain within itself the seeds of destruction of its own teaching about prayer, for in the text from St Matthew's Gospel, at which we will look in more detail, there appears the phrase:

> When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:7-8)

The logical conclusion to this, given the premise of the blob-and-arrow understanding of desire, is to stop praying. There is literally no point in expressing your desire, since your desire is known independently of its expression, and its expression makes no difference at all. The New Testament text seems a pointer on the road towards the self-contained and religiously indifferent modern "self".

Please notice, also, that since desires are arrived at by the self without need of instruction or intervention from outside, and those desires don't need to be expressed in order to be real, the self-contained and self-starting "blob" with its arrows is also radically private. Part of the self-understanding of the "blob" is that it has a defensive role, protecting and hiding the "real me" and my "real desire", which is always under a certain amount of threat from the fundamentally "flaky" public world—the world of commerce, of business, of politics and of war, in which no forms of discourse are really truth-bearing. So, what I say in public, how I act in public, and what I say I want in public are always a certain form of dissimulation; it is only the private "self" which is real. Notice how miraculously the New Testament text, once again doing itself out of a job, seems to flatter this picture of the self: for if there is one verse from this section of Matthew that almost everyone seems to remember, it is where Jesus, having disparaged the attention-seeking public prayers of the Pharisees, says this: "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:6) Behold, the apparent Scriptural canonisation of the modern individual self! (Who is, of course: "spiritual", but not "religious"!)

Now, let's see whether we can rescue this text from its imprisonment by the blob-and-arrow understanding of the self, and learn how, rather than flattering our prejudices, it challenges them.

Desire According to the Other

The understanding of desire which René Girard put forward for over half a century, often referred to as "mimetic", is about as far removed from this blob-and-arrow picture as you can get. The key phrase (which

I never tire of repeating) is "We desire according to the desire of the other". This "other" is the social other—the social world which surrounds us, which moves us to desire, to want, and to act. This doesn't sound particularly challenging when it is illustrated in the way the entertainment industry creates celebrities, or how the advertising profession manages to make particular objects or brands desirable. Few of us are so grandiose as to deny that some of our desires show us to be easily led and susceptible to suggestion. It becomes much more challenging when it is claimed that, in fact, it is not only some of our desires that are in question, but the entire way in which we humans are structured by desire.

Girard is pointing out that humans are those animals for whom even basic biological instincts (which are not the same thing as desires) are run by the social other, within which the instinct-bearing body is born. In fact, our capacity to receive and deal with our instincts is given to us through our being drawn towards the social other, which inducts us into living as this sort of animal by reproducing itself within us. What makes this draw possible is the hugely developed capacity for imitation, which sets our species apart from our nearest simian relatives.

Thus, to cut a long story short by recapping what we saw in our first chapter: gesture, language, and memory are not only things which "we" learn, as though there were an "I" that was doing the learning. Instead—through this body being imitatively drawn into the life of the social other—gesture, language and memory form an "I" that is one of the symptoms, one of the epiphenomena, of that social other. This "I" is much more malleable than it is comfortable admitting. And even more difficult: it is not the "I" that has desires; it is desire that forms and sustains the "I". The "I" is something like a snapshot in time of the relationships which pre-exists it, and of which it is a symptom.

This picture is severely unflattering. It seems to un-anchor the "I" from a cosily sacred certainty of being "something basically good in the midst of a somewhat 'iffy' world". Instead, it points out that we are not so much afloat on a dangerous sea as that we are the perilous sea we are afloat on. Our economic systems, our military conflicts, our erotic life, our ways of keeping law and order—all are part of each other, run by the same patterns of desire. In other words, we humans are not only

slightly affected by a culture of war and violence; we are actually run by it. We find ourselves to be the species which acts in groups to grab identity over against some conveniently designated other, and that relies on a violent contrast in order to survive, define value, and forge culture. As you can imagine, prayer is going to look somewhat different if this is the sort of animal who is doing the praying. In this picture, prayer is going to start from the presupposition that we all desire according to the desire of the other. It is going to raise the question: yes, but which other? We know there is a social other which gives us desire and which moves us this way and that. But is there another Other, who is not part of the social other, and who has an entirely different pattern of desire into which it is seeking to induct us? That, as we have seen, is the great Hebrew question: the discovery of God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods, and our texts on prayer, are part of our way into the great Hebrew answer.

Which Other?

So thoroughly do we assume the blob-and-arrow model of self and desire that we find it difficult to imagine the New Testament authors might be closer to the world of what we would consider primitive animist cults than to our own. For, in the world of animist cults, it is perfectly obvious to everybody that people are moved by what is other than themselves. Indeed, in the various trances or dances into which the participants are inducted by mixtures of music and chanting: "spirits" will "come down" and "possess" or "ride" the participants, whose normal demeanour will be temporarily displaced by the quite recognisable public persona of the spirit in question.

Given this, it is interesting to see how much closer to that world is St Paul than we sometimes imagine:

> We know that the whole Creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the Creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were

> saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:22-27)

To paraphrase: "We are part of a new social other that is being brought painfully into being amidst the collapse of a dead-end way of being human. This new social other is being brought into being through our learning to desire it—something we want, but are very poor at articulating. The tension of being pulled between two different kinds of social other is absolutely vital for us—and what enables us to live it is hope. Given that we don't know how to desire and express our desire, the Spirit is another Other desiring within us, without displacing us, so that it will actually be we who are brought into the New Creation".

Please see what Paul and the animists have in common: the understanding that we are more desired-in than desirers. This is, in itself, neither a good nor a bad thing. It is just what we are. The difference between the animist question and the Hebrew question is not whether we are moved by another, but by which other are we moved?

For "spirits", idols and so forth are merely violent disguises by which the social other moves us. Those spirits temporarily displace us, make us act "out of character" and trap us into being functions of themselves, usually while demanding sacrifice. Whereas the Spirit of God is the Spirit of the Creator, and thus is in no way at all a function of anything that is. Quite the reverse: everything that is is a function of the Creator. The Creator is not in any sort of rivalry with us, and is thus able to move us from within, bringing us into being without displacing us.

Let us not be fooled by a difference of language here: traditionally, we refer to spirits possessing people, and there is—in the word "possess"—a note of violence concerning the relationship between the spirit and the person possessed. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, we refer to the Spirit indwelling, or inhabiting, the person—words without any connotation of violence. However, please note that the human

mechanism of being moved is the same in both cases. What is different is the quality of the "other" doing the moving.

I hope that we are now in a better position to look at some Gospel texts on prayer.

The Public Nature of Desire

The first thing I want to point out about the Gospel texts is that they take for granted the public nature of human life and relationships—including prayer. As one would expect, given the understanding of desire which I've been trying to flesh out with you, it is not the case that there are two equal and opposed realities: who I am in public and who I am in private. Rather, there is one reality: who I am in public. Privacy is a temporary abstraction from an essentially public way of being. Jesus, and the New Testament as a whole, simply takes for granted the public nature of religious, cultural and political life.

Given that, it becomes more plausible to see why Jesus is described in various places as withdrawing to pray. Typically, these moments of withdrawal come in the immediate aftermath of a major interaction with a crowd, following a miracle. It is not hard to see why: any leader, especially one who is enjoying a certain success, risks becoming infected by the desires of their followers, allowing themselves to believe what their followers believe about them, and to be flattered into acting out those followers' projections. Thus, they become the puppets of their crowd's desires.

Jesus' moving off to pray shows that he understood his need to detox from the pattern of desire which threatened to run him: people wanting to make Him King, or proclaim him as Messiah in a way that was far from what he was trying to teach them. He was acquainted with what we call temptation—the risk of being lured by the social other into a pattern of desire which is presented under the guise of being good, but which is not good. Jesus needed to spend time having his "I" strengthened by receiving his pattern of desire from another Other.

(One classic recognition of Jesus' being tempted, and his refusal to be beguiled by it, comes when he tells Peter "Get thou behind me,

Satan!" (Mark 8:33). He rejects Peter's attempt to dissuade him from entering into the pathway of suffering that will lead to his death. Peter is linked to the Tempter, the stumbling block, and is told that his mind is disposed according to the culture of men, not according to the culture of God).

Given this, let us turn to Jesus' explicit teaching about prayer—especially as we find it in Matthew 6, with some reference to Luke as well. The first thing we notice is that Jesus' comments on prayer are embedded in a teaching about patterns of desire:

> Beware of practising your piety before others *in order to be seen by them*; for then you have no reward from your Father in Heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, *so that they may be praised by others*. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:1-4, italics mine)

Before he gets to talking about prayer, Jesus is already demonstrating an understanding of desire. He presupposes that we are all immensely needy people who long for approval and rewards. He doesn't say: "Really, this is too infantile. You shouldn't be wanting approval or rewards. Grow up and be self-starting, self-contained heroic individuals who act on entirely rational grounds". On the contrary, he takes it for granted that we desperately need approval. The question is: whose approval is going to run us? The danger of seeking approval from the social other is that you will get it, and thereafter, you will be hooked on that approval. It will literally give you to be who you are and what you will become. You will act out of the pattern of desire which the social other gives you.

I used to think that the phrase "Truly I tell you, they have received their reward"—especially when pronounced in booming tones by a Scots-accented Calvinist preacher—was a euphemism for sending someone to Hell. But it makes much more sense if you see it as an an-

thropological observation: the trouble with seeking the social other's approval is that you will get it! You will act in such a way as to get that approval, and then become its puppet. And because of that, you will be selling yourself short. You won't be wanting enough—you will have too little desire. Your "self" will be a shadow of what you could be if you allowed the Creator to call you into being.

(As an aside: isn't it interesting that Jesus' example of how one should give alms is physiologically almost impossible? What on earth does it mean, in practice, for the left hand not to know what the right hand is doing? It suggests a lack of personal coordination that can only be managed by a person who isn't a stable self. I'm not quite sure what is being recommended here, but I got a hint some time ago. After going along with the seemingly endless requests for money from a friend I had been supporting, I was tempted to do some accounting and work out how much I had given him over time, to put some parameters around what my giving and our relationship might look like in the future. Mercifully, I'm not a very good accountant, but halfway through my record-checking exercise, I realised I was, as it were, grasping onto my own generosity—attempting to make of it something that defined me over against him, such that it became a bargaining chip in a relationship. I also realised that, in that very moment of grasping, what I had been doing had ceased to be an act of generosity, and I had ceased to be someone through whom another Other's generosity might flow).

When Jesus turns to prayer, the understanding of desire is identical. What people really want is approval, a particular reputation in the eyes of others, and this leads them to act out in such a way that they will get that approval. And that is the problem: they get the approval, and with it, they are given a "self" that is a function of the group's desire. Belonging and approval go together. This means, incidentally, that someone is thereafter exceedingly unlikely to be self-critical about their group belonging. They will agree to cover up whatever in themselves and in other group members needs covering up, in order for the group to maintain its unanimity and to keep their own reputation—their "self".

> And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners,

so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:5-6)

Jesus urges his disciples to receive their "self" from "another Other" (and the Matthean code for "another Other" is "your Father who sees in secret" or "your Father who is in Heaven"—the Creator who is absolutely not part of the give and take, the tit-for-tat reciprocity of the social other).

The image Jesus uses here is curious, since our translations mostly refer to a "room" into which we are supposed to go, which we, in turn, tend to associate with our bedroom, assuming that to be a private place. Yet the word is more accurately rendered as "storeroom": "larder", or "pantry". In an ancient Middle Eastern house, this room was totally enclosed inside a building, with no windows. The purpose of such a space, in a culture which had neither central heating nor refrigeration, was to ensure that perishable food stored in it would be less susceptible to extremes of either cold or heat. It also meant that, once you had shut the door from inside, you could neither see out nor be seen.

In short, Jesus is recommending the psychological equivalent of the physiological dislocation we saw in the previous example. He is saying: "You are addicted to being who you are in the eyes of your adoring public (or your execrating public, it doesn't matter which, since crowd love and crowd hate give identity in just the same dangerous ways). So, go into a place of detox from the regard of those who give you identity, so that your Father—who alone is not part of that give and take—can have a chance to call your identity into being".

The Interface of Desire and Voices

Now, here's the trouble with spending time in the larder, removed from the eyes of your public, unable to act out: you gradually start to lose "who you are". You begin to dwell in the strange place which I call the interface between your "own" desire—very small, and only tentative-

ly coming into being, timidly and somewhat shamefacedly—and the voices which run you, which you have so perfectly ventriloquised. I presume I'm not unique in having, after spending some time alone, occasionally detected the person who was speaking through me—the voice of my father or mother, or a headmaster, or some admired teacher, or a political or religious leader. In other words, I had been giving voice to a pattern of desire taken on board from someone else, with all the conviction of it being really me who was talking and desiring.

That can be quite a shocking moment: I realise how easily I have allowed myself to put aside—indeed trample on—whatever delicate hints were pulling me in other, less strident directions. I have instead rushed headlong into the first "persona" that seemed to give me a chance at being someone who counts. It is only with time spent in the larder that I may find the One who sees me in secret is actually calling forth a quite different and richer set of desires, without such an easy and narrow straitjacket as my current persona. Furthermore, the One who sees in secret seems to be in much less of a hurry for me to avoid shame and "measure up" than I am.

Imagine, if you will, a childhood scene. Little Johnny is about to go to bed. A parent comes to tuck him in, and the following dialogue takes place:

> —Little Johnny, did you say your prayers?
>
> —Yes, I did.
>
> —Good, little Johnny. And what did you ask for in your prayers?
>
> —I asked for… chocolate pudding tomorrow, and for Arsenal to win on Saturday.
>
> —Oh no, little Johnny, you shouldn't ask for chocolate pudding tomorrow and for Arsenal to win on Saturday! You should be praying for an end to the war in Ukraine, relief for the famine in Gaza and the Holy Father's Mission intentions for the month of May!

Well, of course, little Johnny will take this on board. His smelly little desires have been treated with contempt. He has been taught to despise them and to want much more "noble" things instead, things that

will make him stand tall in the world of his parents. In fact, he has been taught St Matthew's Gospel in reverse: desire according to the social other, so as to get approval.

Here's the thing: little Johnny is fast on the road to becoming a perfect puritan, a dweller in a world of things that are nice but naughty: things you want but shouldn't say so. But also a world of things which are good but boring: things which you don't really want, but should at least say you do.

The curious thing is that, if we are to believe the Gospel, this is the reverse pattern of what God wants. It would appear that "Your Father who sees in secret" doesn't despise our smelly little desires. In fact, God suggests that, if only we can hold on to them and insist on articulating them, we will actually find over time that we want more than those desires—that we really do want something with a passion. In other words, he takes us seriously in our weakness and unimportance, even when we don't. Suppose we learn to give some voice to those desires: then there's a chance that we may move through them organically, over time, until we find ourselves the sort of humungous desirers who throw ourselves into peace work in dangerous war-zones, or into famine-relief in some newly devastated region, or even into being the sort of missionary for whom the Holy Father wants people to pray in May. But we'll be doing so because we—who start from not really knowing what we want, by not despising our little desires, and learning to articulate them—have discovered from within that this is what we really want and, in our wanting will be who we come to be.

The Importunate Widow

Before returning to our Matthew text, let me give a couple of further examples of the pattern of desire the Gospel texts on prayer point to, for they fit well into this larder (or pantry) where we find ourselves dwelling: the interface between our desires and our internal "voices"—the voices of the social other which we have internalised.

Here is the model for prayer Jesus puts before us in Luke's Gospel: an importunate widow (Luke 18:1-8).

> Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

OK, hold that thought. At first blush, this sounds as though Jesus is giving advice about not becoming discouraged. I suggest that it is rather more than that. It is about how, through becoming insistent desirers, we will actually be given a heart—be given to be. If we do not desire, we will not have a heart.

> He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people."

Please notice that this judge is a perfectly non-mimetic person.

In fact, he is more like a concrete block than like a person, since neither the social other, nor the other Other can move him.

> In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent."

Now we have an inconvenient person, the sort of person who has no one to stand up for her. She is not held in high regard, and her satisfaction is of no importance to those living in the city. In her extreme vulnerability, she is the equivalent of little Johnny's smelly desire. However, she is persistent, and just keeps on with her demand:

> For a while he refused; but later he said to himself: "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."

The judge has an enviable degree of self-knowledge, for he understands perfectly well that he is a concrete block, hermetically sealed from mimetic influence.

Even so, he eventually concedes, anxious to avoid a drubbing at the hands of this redoubtable widow. (I say "drubbing", for the word

which we translate as "wear out" was apparently the language of the wrestling arena or the boxing ring).

> And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?"

Does Jesus really think that God is like an unjust judge? Indeed not. But he knows how all of us are inclined to have an unjust judge well-installed in our consciousness. In fact, as part of our socialisation, we acquire a voice or set of voices which seem completely impervious to anything. Should we be so bold as to want something, this voice (or voices) will quickly send down little messages to us: "Shouldn't want that if I were you—better not to want much, so as not to be disappointed!" or "Getting above our station are we?" Or, as in the famous Oliver Twist scene: "More?!!" The point of these messages is to shut down our desire—to get us to mask our discontent with remaining mere puppets of our group. Our unjust judge is internal to each of us, a glowering "no" in the face of our potential happiness.

Yet what Jesus recommends is a long-running, persistent refusal to have our smelly little desires put down—to instead engage in a constant guerrilla warfare of desiring, so that, eventually, even the block in our head starts to yield, and what is right for us starts becoming imaginable and obtainable. God is not like a judge, a hermetic block; God is like an irritating desire that gets stronger and stronger. It is only through our wanting something that God is able to give it to us:

> Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on Earth?

Curiously, at the end of this teaching, Our Lord shows a certain ambivalence about us. Imagination and desire feed each other positively, and this is a vital element of faith: becoming able to imagine something good, and thus able to want it. Then, as one wants it more, finding it possible to imagine it more fully.

Here, however, God seems aware that, despite what he is attempting to implode in our midst, we are frighteningly likely to be content with far too little, to go along with our internalised unjust judges and so not dare to imagine a goodness which could be ours—and thus not dare to want it, let alone become crazed single-minded athletes of system-shattering desire. God wonders whether we will really allow ourselves to be given heart.

Before moving on from this image, I'd like to point out an important part of the way the new "self" of desire is brought into being. That is by saying: "I want". Please notice that this simple act of saying something—and in fact, saying it frequently—is much more psychologically crucial than it seems. For it is not that there is an "I" which has such-and-such a desire, which it is now expressing. Rather, among the patterns of desire which are running this body, this body is finding the humility to recognise that it needs to be brought into being in a certain way. By making, as it were, an act of commitment to being directed. "I want such and such" is an act of commitment, found in a certain becoming—an act of alignment. "I" am agreeing that, in my malleability, the desire according to the other (which precedes me, and which I'm agreeing to take on board) will bring me into being. Language makes this public, which is why it can be such a relief finally to be able to say "I want such and such", even "privately", because saying it has involved me in getting over the shame of being found out as the sort of person who wants such a thing.

A couple of final examples from the Gospel, teaching the same pattern of desire as regards prayer: in Luke 6:28, we read:

> Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

I hope it now makes much more sense why this is emphatically not a way of saying: "Jesus wants me as a doormat". On the contrary, Jesus knows very well how we become intimately involved with that subsection of the social other which are our enemies, in just the same ways that we become intimately involved with those whose approval we seek. God knows how susceptible we are to taking our enemies on board, becoming just like them by reciprocally acting out towards them. So God

offers us this recipe for freedom: do not allow yourselves to be run by those who do you evil. This involves a refusal of negative reciprocity, a learning to move from the heart, towards them, in a way which has nothing to do with what they have done to you. In fact, He is saying: "Step out of the pattern of desire in which you are enthralled by—and which enthrals you to—your enemies. Step arduously instead into a pattern of desire where you are not over against them at all, but are able to be—as God is—for them, towards them, without being their rival".

In case you think I'm making this up, Matthew's version of the same saying is perfectly instructive:

> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *so that you may be children of your Father in Heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.* (Matthew 5:44-45, italics mine)

The rationale for praying for those who persecute you is set out clearly: it is so that you will become part of the other Other's pattern of desire. One which is not part of the reciprocity, the tit-for-tat, the good and evil of the social other, but is entirely outside it—not in rivalry with it, and perfectly generous towards it.

Seeing Myself Through the Eye of Another

Let us step back now, into our larder or pantry, to consider further the oddity of this interface between our desire and the voices which run us. So far, I've emphasised the negative, the rupture, what we are being dislocated from—the way we have been run by the regard of the social other.

Now, please note that there is no alternative to being run by the regard of another. It is not the case that we can strip off the false-selves given us by the social other—that there, underneath it all, radiantly, will be our true self, untrammelled by the social other. No, we always receive ourselves through the eye of another. The truly challenging aspect of prayer is learning to receive ourselves through the eyes of an-

other Other. For what on earth is it like to be looked at by another Other? What does that "regard" tell us of who we are, and who we are becoming?

My sense is that the collapse of the "self-of-desire", which begins when we step temporarily outside the regard of the social other, is much easier to notice than the much quieter and more imperceptible calling into being of a new self-of-desire—one without any flashy "over againsts", or bits of grasped self, sodden with the wrong sorts of meaning. But it is here that the work of imagination, to which Jesus was appealing in his example of the importunate widow, has its proper place, for it is as we stretch the boundaries of our imagination, formed by the social other, that we may catch glimpses of being looked at by One who is not part of that imagination at all.

What, for instance, is meant by the "deathlessness" of God? Here, I don't mean the usual associations which come with "immortality" or "eternity"—something like invulnerability or going on for an awfully long time. Rather, part of what we mean when we talk about being looked at by God is that we are held in the regard of someone who is… deathless. Someone for whom, unlike for anyone we know or have ever known, death is not a parameter, a reality, a limit, a circumscription. Someone, therefore, for whom mortality—existence in limited time, our reality—looks entirely different. Someone who can wish us into acting as if death were not. This is the sort of regard that can suggest into us the possibility of believing it is worthwhile to undertake projects whose fruition we may not see. The sort of regard that is unhurried enough not to be bothered by my failure, that empowers me to share the space of those who are despised, because I am secure about my long-term prospects. It is the sort of regard for whom Keynes' famous phrase: "in the long term, we're all dead", is simply meaningless, for the only long term that exists is one in which death has no incidence.

Or again, what does it mean to be looked at through eyes that only know abundance, for whom scarcity is simply not a reality, for whom there is always more? Please think of the rupture this produces in my patterns of desire! They say "If you want more, there won't be enough to go round", or "There's no free meal at the end of the universe", or "Grab what you can before it all runs out", or just the gloomy, depressed

drawn out "Meh" of disappointment with things, with life and so on not matching up to my expectations. The ancient Hebrews referred to this way of perceiving and of being in the world as Vanity, or futility. What does it look like to spend time in the regard of One for whom it is not (as the whole of our capitalist system presupposes) scarcity that leads to abundance by promoting rivalry, which we then bless and call competition? Rather, a hugely leisured creative abundance underlies reality, and an endless *magis*—"more"—is always on the way.

What does it look like to spend time in the regard of One for whom daring and adventure, not fear and caution, underlie the whole project of Creation? For whom everything that is, is open-ended, and pointing to more than itself, and for whom we are invited to share in the Other's excitement and thrill, to want and to achieve crazy and unimaginable things?

What is it like to sit in a regard which is bellowing at us "Something out of nothing, something out of nothing"? Our pattern of desire says "Unnhh, nothing comes from nothing", and feels sorry for itself. Yet the heart of the difference between atheism and belief in God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods is not an ideology; it is a pattern of desire which thrills to hear "Something out of nothing". The wonderful verses of Second Isaiah, fresh from the great breakthrough into monotheism in the sixth century BCE, shout this out:

> Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. (Isaiah 55:1-3)

This is a definition of God as quite outside the pattern of desire into which the social other inculcates us: "something out of nothing".

These terms—deathlessness, abundance, daring, something out of nothing—are just a few of the sorts of phrases by which the Scrip-

tures attempt to nudge our imaginations into undergoing a regard that is not the regard of the social other. A regard which has a wish, a longing, a heart that is much more for us than we are for ourselves and which we can trust with our long-term interests. In each case, spending time in the regard of the other Other will work to produce in us a way of being public which seems directly counter to the expectations arising from the patterns of desire which the social other produces in us. Our temporary abstraction from public life will not have made us private; it will have empowered us to be public in a new way, a way whose precariousness and vulnerability rests on an unimaginable security.

Not Leaving Las Vegas

Let us get back, finally, to Matthew, and to Jesus' concluding remarks about prayer. I hope that they will read somewhat differently now:

> When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6: 7-8)

I remember standing on a hill overlooking Lake Titicaca and watching the local Yatiris—shamans or priests—plying their wares. You could go to them and, for an appropriate offering, they would then light candles around little portable shrines, burn incense, and recite the requisite prayers or incantations, which were in an amazing mixture of Latin, Quechua, Aymara and Spanish. The prayers or incantations were for a fairly repetitive list of things: protection from a neighbour's evil eye, quick riches, the death of a troublesome mother-in-law, to get an unwilling prospective love-match to fall for me, or various forms of vengeance.

The pattern seemed to be simple: God, or the gods, are a sort of celestial Las Vegas slot machine, full of amazing bounty, but inclined to be retentive. So prayer is the art of conjuring this capricious divinity, by precisely the correct phrases repeated exactly the right number of

times, into parting with some of its treasure. As if the priest were a particularly expert puller of the slot machine handle—one who could ensure that three lemons or five bars line up and so manipulate the divinity into disgorging its riches.

What this presupposes is a pattern of desire where we are subjects in control, and God is an object who must be manipulated. We are back to the blob-and-arrow picture of desire. What Jesus is teaching is exactly the reverse of this. In Jesus' picture, it is God who is the subject—who has a desire, an intention, a longing, who knows who we are and what is good for us. And we, who are capricious and somewhat inert slot machines, are always getting our handles pulled by the wrong players. In this picture, it is precisely because our Father knows what we need before we ask God that we must learn to pray: our Father's only access to us, the only way God can work our slot-machine handle, is by our asking him into our pattern of desire.

You remember that, with the blob-and-arrow understanding of desire, Jesus' phrase: "your Father knows what you need before you ask him", renders prayer pointless. But with the mimetic understanding of desire—which I hope to have shown at work throughout this passage—the same phrase works in precisely the opposite way. It becomes the urgent reason why we need to pray: to allow the One who knows what is good for us (unlike we ourselves), whose desire is for us and for our fruition (unlike the social other and its violent traps), to gain access to us, re-creating us from within, and giving us a "self", an "I of desire" that is in fact a constant flow of treasure. We are asking to become a symptom of his pattern of desire, rather than that of the social other, which ties us up into becoming so much less.

The Our Father

It is with this, then, that Jesus leads up to teaching the "Our Father":

> Pray then in this way: Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:9-15)

Before we go into a line-by-line reading, I ask you to imagine yourself not as standing stably on a firm surface, being instructed about words to say; rather, imagine yourself as highly malleable, as being stretched between two force-fields, two patterns of desire. What the "Our Father" is doing is inducting you into a pattern of desire within which you may be found, one which will enable you to inhabit the "being stretched". The "being stretched" is how the desire of the other Other brings into being the daughter or son who is learning to pray.

So, line by line:

Our Father in Heaven, (…)

Here—entirely without rivalry with anything that is, in no way part of the push and pull, the tit for tat of human togetherness—is the other Other. But not merely Other in a distant and removed way: Father. One who is for us, below us, young and excited about who we might come to be.

The very ground of possible familiarity, the guarantor that—prior to any of our fear, resentment and shame at ourselves and each other—there is a way for us to be sisters and brothers that will be a delight to us.

…hallowed be your name; (…)

Most special invocation of the stretched-between world! You remember how God gave Himself a non-name Name for Moses, and how Jesus' acting-out in going to the Cross was so that he would be given the Name that is above every other name (Philippians 2:9)? So here, we are being urged to desire "cause your reputation, your personality, who you are really like, to become visible, detectable, reverenceable in our midst". Anything more solid than the Name of the Holy One—a con-

stantly flickering hologram of revelation—would quickly become an idol we could grasp. Anything less visible, less capable of being sensed and revered, would leave us without hints that this world is marked, loved, projected, and owned; we would be left adrift in the vast impersonality of an unowned universe.

Part of how we find ourselves is in longing to see the visible signs in our midst of the personal, named, directed ownership of everything that is.

…your Kingdom come; (…)

The project of the other Other is already on the way. All that realisation, that fruition, that effective and purposeful building-up of something that is to be and which doesn't know shading down into futility, disappointment and abandonment: all that is the sign of a Kingship quite unlike anything we can imagine while borrowing the terminology derived from "glorious rulers" here on Earth. It presupposes a pattern of desire quite unlike anything we are used to, one which is way prior to any pattern of desire we know and yet which can move us to want and to create hints of that kingdom now.

So we need to be inducted into wanting it: being on the inside of it means having our pattern of desire re-created so that we become the project's conscious agents:

…your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.

So, may Your pattern of desire be achieved, here in our midst, amongst all these things that we are so quick to reject, to despise, to tire of, be bored of, that make us despair. Your pattern of desire—which already has and is a tremendous rejoicing and delight, an immense benevolence and peaceful longing, a real reality upon which our small reality rests and from which it so often seeks to cut itself off, incapable of perceiving itself as the symptom of so much glory. May we be taken into the inside of this pattern.

Remind us that we are the slot machine, and you the delighted player, so happy and lucky to have found us, fine-tuning us into disgorging far more treasure than we ever knew we had.

Give us this day our daily bread; (…)

I think there are two references here: the people of Israel were told to gather Manna in the desert, but only what was sufficient for the day; they were instructed not to collect more to store or save, except on the eve of the Sabbath when they could collect for two days. This too is a teaching about desire: those who know they are loved don't need to be anxious for more, but can relax into knowing they can ask for and will be given what they need by someone who knows their needs more than they do themselves. To learn to trust the goodness of the giver, day by day, is a constant shift in our pattern of desire.

However, just as longing for God to cause his Name to pulsate in our midst, even in the circumstances of this Earth, is part of opening up our pattern of desire, so too is longing for the bread of Heaven, the food which deepens hunger even as it satisfies. I think the reference here is to the Blessed Bread in the Temple, understood to be the sign, coming down into our midst, of the one who longs for us to want more, to eat more, in a way which pulls us out of our smaller wantings and cravings. For we who are living the Temple as the Body of Christ, it is the Eucharist—suspended, like the Name, midway between this world and the one which is breaking in—which symbolizes and makes present a simultaneous deepening and satisfying of desire which draws us onward.

…and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors; (…)

Surprise, surprise: Our Lord takes for granted that we are entirely mimetic animals. It is only in our letting go of the "social other" that we can find ourselves let go. It is as we find ourselves able to unbind others—to let them go, rather than be tied into them with ever-tighter violent reciprocity—that we find ourselves being let go. And, in finding ourselves being let go, we actually find ourselves.

Who we are is formed relationally, and it is strictly in our relation with what is other than us that we will be found to be.

…and do not bring us to the time of trial, (…)

Once again, think yourself inside the pattern of desire we are being asked to inhabit. One of the ways we avoid trusting someone who likes us is by holding them at a distance, by considering that they may be capricious, may have hidden intentions, and may lead us in a particular way just to test us—not because it is good for us, but because we are playthings, and it is good for them. In fact, as humans, we are surrounded by a social other that treats us in just such ways. Part of learning that the other Other is not part of the social other is learning that there are no hidden intentions in God: the other Other is totally for us. We can allow the other Other to take over our whole heart without fear. We don't need to hold back a tiny bit, so as to take an "adult" distance and second-guess his project for us.

Linked to this is our tendency to grasp identity through the excitement of a challenge: it seems so exciting to grasp at identity by comparison with some convenient other over against whom I can become a hero—or a victim, it doesn't really matter which. In either case, at least I get to be, to have an identity, however much of a junk identity it turns out to be. So much more exciting than agreeing to the slow business of being given an identity as a daughter or son of God, without any "over against"! Yet this need for identity by grabbing for a quick fix masks a despair about there being any real "me" that is being called into existence over time. Here, we are inducted into a pattern of desire whereby we agree to lose the quick-fix identities we might grab through "tests", so as to be given something much richer and deeper which will hold us up, but which we cannot grab.

…but rescue us from the evil one.

Continuing with the same pattern of desire, Our Lord situates us with relation to what is evil. There is nothing evil in God, and any attribution of evil to God works to prevent us from trusting God whole-

heartedly. If God is two-faced, Janus, we will always be shadowboxing, never allowing ourselves to be indwelt. Evil is real, but we are not to seek it out, face it down. The thing about evil is that the more we try to define it and face it, the more real it gets—and the more we become it. Think how easily people fixate on their enemies, becoming, without realising it, more and more like them, until they are mirror-images of each other. The pattern of desire into which the Lord's prayer is inducting us recognises evil, but only as that from which people can be delivered. Rather than being a thing in itself, it is only known in being left behind to curve down on itself, never to be dignified with a concentrated gaze. The real force in the universe is not evil but love, and love really does want to rescue us, to bring us out of our tendency to enclose ourselves in smaller and smaller spaces—to bring us into being.

And then finally:

> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Our Lord here repeats and emphasises the central anthropological point around which the whole of his teaching has been built: it is in our letting go of the social other that we find ourselves let go by the other Other. This is the pattern of desire, the shape of our being stretched into being.

I hope you will agree then that "desire according to the desire of the other" and the absolute, mechanical, mimetic working of our desire do not seem to be foreign imports into these texts on prayer, but offer a rich reading of them that goes with their flow. May they help us to be found on the inside of the adventure of prayer, as part of the shift by which we are inducted into a new people.