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St Benedict 2021

(Letter n°62)

“Devote yourselves to prayer,
keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.”
(Col 4:2)

The first four months of 2021 were marked by a new lock-down in Northern Ireland. It was only just before Palm Sunday that we were able to open the church building for the celebration of the Liturgy. Progressively, as restrictions were lifted, we were able to open the shop and the guest-house, operating in a limited way with healthy social distancing in place.

For the community the beginning of the year was also marked significantly by the announcement of the closure of the Monastery of Mother of the Redeemer in Louisiana. Two monks of that community were assigned to Holy Cross Abbey. Their arrival in Rostrevor has enriched our community. It was our great joy to welcome Bro. Gregory (who is from the USA) in our midst on 15 April. One week later, on 22 April, we were further blessed by the arrival of Bro. Laurent (who is Filipino-American).



Jonathan Sacks died on 7th November 2020. He was a British Orthodox Rabbi, philosopher, theologian, author, peer and public figure. He served as the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013. As the spiritual head of the United Synagogue, the largest synagogue body in the UK, he was the Chief Rabbi of those Orthodox synagogues.

We invite you to read an extract from the introduction he wrote for the new edition of the Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth.

The metaphor that, to me, captures the spirit of prayer more than any other is Jacob's dream in which, alone at night, fleeing danger, far from home, he saw a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending. He woke and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate to heaven" (Genesis 28:10-17).

*Our Sages said that "this place" was Jerusalem. That is midrashic truth. But there is another meaning, the plain one, no less transfiguring. The verb the Torah uses, *vayifgah*, means "to happen upon, as if by chance". "This place" was any place. Any place, any time, even the dark of a lonely night, can be a place and time for prayer. If we have the strength to dream and then, awakening, refuse to let go of the dream, then here, now, where I stand, can be the gate to heaven.*

Prayer is a ladder and we are the angels. If there is one theme sounded throughout the prayers, it is creation-revelation-redemption, or ascent-summit-descent. In the Verses of Praise, we climb from earth to heaven by meditating on creation. Like a Turner or Monet landscape, the psalms let us see the universe bathed in light, but *this* light is not the light of beauty but of holiness; the light the Sages say GOD made on the first day and "hid for the righteous in the life to come". Through some of the most magnificent poetry ever written, we see the world as GOD's masterpiece, suffused with His radiance, until we reach a crescendo in Psalm 150 with its thirteen-fold repetition of "Praise" in a mere thirty-seven words.

By the time we reach *Bar'chu* and the blessings of the *Shema* we have neared the summit. Now we are in heaven with the angels. We have reached revelation. The Divine presence is close, almost tangible. We speak of love in one of the most hauntingly beautiful of blessings, "Great love" with its striking phrase: "Our Father, merciful Father, the Merciful, have mercy on us". Now comes the great declaration of faith at the heart of prayer, the *Shema* with its passionate profession of the unity of GOD and the highest of all expressions of love, "with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might". Ending with a reference to the exodus, the *Shema* gives way to the *Emet* blessing with its emphasis on redemption, the exodus and the division of the sea. Then comes the *Amidah*, the supreme height of prayer. Three traditions fuse at this point: the silent *Amidah* said by individuals, reminding us of prophetic prayer; the Leader's repetition representing priestly worship and prayer as sacrifice; and then the *Kedushah*, prayer as a mystical experience.

From here, prayer begins its descent. First comes *Tachanun* in which we speak privately and intimately to the King. At this point, with a mixture of anguish and plea, we speak not of GOD's love for Israel but of Israel's defiant love of GOD: "Yet despite all this we did not forget You; please do not forget us." There is a direct reference back to the *Shema*: "Guardian of Israel, guard the remnant of Israel, and let not Israel perish who declare: *Shema Yisrael*".

Then comes *Ashrei* and the subsequent passages, similar to the Verses of Praise but this time with redemption, not creation, as their theme. The key verse is "A redeemer will come to Zion". The section closes with a prayer that we may become agents of redemption as we re-engage with the world ("May it be Your will... that we keep Your laws in this world"). We are now back on earth, the service complete except for *Aleinu*, *Kaddish* and the Psalm of the Day. We are ready to re-enter life and its challenges.

What has prayer achieved? If we have truly prayed, we now know that the world did not materialise by chance. A single guiding will directed its apparent randomness. We know too that this will did not end there, but remains intimately involved with the universe, which He renews daily, and with humanity over whose destinies He presides. We have climbed the high ladder and have seen, if only dimly, how small some of our worries are. Our emotional landscape has been expanded. We have given voice to a whole range of emotions: thanks, praise, love, awe, guilt, repentance, remembrance, hope. As we leave the synagogue for the world outside, we now know that we are not alone; that GOD is with us; that we need not fear failure, for GOD forgives; that our hopes are not vain; that we are here for a purpose and there is work to do.

We are not the same after we have stood in the Divine presence as we were before. We have been transformed. We see the world in a different light. Perhaps we radiate a different light. We have spoken and listened to GOD. We have aligned ourselves

with the moral energies of the universe. We have become, in Lurianic terminology, vessels for GOD'S blessing. We are changed by prayer.

(The Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, Collins, 2007, p. XXVII-XXIX)



✠ On 21 January, in the context of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the chaplaincies of the Catholic and Protestant Churches of Queen's University, Belfast, followed our Office of Vigils on-line. The evening's Vigil Office was composed in such a way as to integrate their on-line participation, reflecting on the significance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

✠ On 28 March we learned of the death of Deirdre Frame, mother of our friend Sinead Frame. On 30 March Abbot Mark-Ephrem represented the community at her funeral liturgy and burial at Bessbrook.

✠ On Good Friday, 2 April, alongside Bishop Darren McCartney, Rector of the Anglican Parish of Kilbroney, Abbot Mark-Ephrem participated in the Way of the Cross which took place around the village of Rostrevor.

✠ From 12 April to 1 May we carried out refurbishment work in the church. The interior of the church was repainted and some adjustments made to the lighting system. During the period of the church's closure we celebrated the liturgy in the Seminar Room.

✠ On 14 April we learned the news of the death of Canon Dermot Jameson, former Vicar of Kilbroney (Rostrevor). On the 19 April, at his family's request, Abbot Mark-Ephrem participated in his funeral liturgy.

✠ On 8 May Abbot Mark-Ephrem participated in the Inter-Church wedding of Judy Hull and Niall Quinn in Saul Memorial church. Judy is the daughter of our oblate, Very Rev. Henry Hull, Anglican Dean of Down Cathedral.

✠ From 21 to 29 May, and again from 1-10 July Bishop Raymond Field, retired Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin, stayed with us.

✠ From 3 to 8 June, Bro. Vianney of the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of Bethlehem (Portglenone) was with us for a time of rest.

✠ From 18 to 26 June we welcomed Sr Emma from the Cistercian Abbey of Glencairn (Co. Waterford, Ireland) for a time of retreat to prepare her for her monastic Profession which will be celebrated on 11 July.

✠ On 27 June our Sunday Eucharist was a live broadcast which went out on the airwaves of BBC Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle.

✠ From 4 to 9 July, Bishop Toby Howarth, area bishop of Bradford in the Anglican diocese of Leeds, was on retreat at the Abbey.



If anyone wants to pray by himself,
let him go in the oratory simply and pray,
not in a loud voice but with tears and fervour of heart.

(Rule of St Benedict 52:4)

Year of St Joseph (2020-2021)

Joseph stands as an example of utter reliability and trustworthiness in strange circumstances, able to act with generosity and effectiveness. Matthew makes it clear that God communicated with Joseph principally through significant dreams. This makes him unique among New Testament characters, reminding us that God often deals with different people in different ways. God may speak to us in some totally different fashion, but we should all pray that we may be given grace to follow the example of the trusting response of God's faithful servant, Joseph.

John Polkinghorne (1930-2021)