

19th February 2022

Dishonesty

**"PRAY: v. To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled
on behalf of a single petitioner, confessed unworthy."**

Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary (1911)

I want to tackle a difficult and disturbing issue that's been on my mind for a while – what I've come to label "dishonesty in prayer". As with much in his "Devil's Dictionary", the jibe by Ambrose Bierce above contains a truth. Why should we pray for the annulment – or even the temporary suspension – of a universal law just because it suits us, whether we are "confessed unworthy" or not? To seek to do so is, I believe, fundamentally dishonest.

For me, the purpose of prayer is to enter into the mind of God. To be a petitioner places us in the role of asking, or, even worse, telling God what wishes we desire to have fulfilled. If we are Bierce's "single petitioner", we are surely directing our own appeals. This is dishonest. For it means we have no need for God. The "petitioner" issue has negative consequences. If our prayer is successful and we deem that our petition has been granted, we win. *We've* decided it is God's will. We're in control. But, where is God in this? If, on the other hand, our prayer is unsuccessful and we deem that our petition has been refused, we complain that our God is not what we expected. Both are dishonest – about ourselves and the nature of God. Honesty in prayer, whether thanksgiving, intercession, supplication or petitions, should be based on our need to enter into the mind of God.

The prayer below is attributed both to the 7th century "Gregorian Sacramentary" and to an 11th century Leofric missal. It's more familiar to us from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer as the "Collect for Purity" in the Eucharist. Our relationship with God should always be founded on a desire for the cleansing of the heart, not on the granting of petitions. Bierce was right in this regard – the honest approach to prayer is that we should always be "confessed unworthy". We should have at the forefront of our approach to God a desire for greater purity. Might everything else be dishonest?

A prayer for purity today

*Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and
from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by
the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and
worthily magnify thy holy name: through Christ our Lord. Amen.*