

28th August 2022

Transcendence

“The wish for prayer is a prayer in itself.”

Georges Bernanos, *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1936)

In his play, *The Ruling Class*, first performed in 1969, the English dramatist, Peter Barnes, has this exchange between two of the characters:

Claire: *How do you know you're ... God?*

Earl of Gurney: *Simple! When I pray to Him, I find I'm talking to myself.*

Some might be appalled at such a suggestion. Others might feel it encapsulates reality. This writer has been in both places, and to be honest, I've concluded that it doesn't matter. There are times when I have a profound sense of “the other”, transcendence, that directs my prayers to an external, divine location. At other times I have no such sense, and feel, like the Earl of Gurney, that I'm talking to myself – though, unlike the noble Earl, I would *never* consider myself to be God, to Claire or anyone else.

But if the French novelist and essayist, Georges Bernanos is right, and “the wish for prayer is a prayer in itself”, then my God will make sense of what's going on, and I needn't worry. In any event, even if there is no God and I'm only talking to myself, is this time of self-reflection not going to be of benefit to me? Times of transcendence will always matter.

I recently attended an Edinburgh International Festival performance of Mahler's Third Symphony. I was in tears at the end. It was a profoundly spiritual moment. A prayer? Maybe. A wish for prayer? It could have been. A moment of beauty and transcendence that enhanced my life? Certainly that. But does it bear analysis? No, it doesn't.

Reflecting on whether his music was “about God”, Mahler said, “My work ... begins with inanimate nature and ascends to the love of God.” So it is with my prayers. They begin with me, and they may remain there for my benefit. Or they may indeed, like Mahler's music, ascend to the love of God. But, either way, they are still important prayers, such that, in moments of self-reflection and wonder, joy and transcendence, my life is enhanced, and the spiritual dimension of my living is much improved.

Moments of transcendence? How important they are, whether it means I'm talking with God or talking to myself ...

A prayer for today

Prayers are God and me in communion. Whatever that means, it's enough. Amen