

14th September 2024

Lifting

“Every wish is like a prayer – with God.”

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*

Today, as I return to musing on the meaning and purpose of prayer, I start with a question: “When does prayer begin?”

I came across this in *The Gospel Without Compromise*, a 1976 book by the late Catholic social activist and author, Catherine Doherty –

Every third grader knows that prayer is the lifting up of one's mind and heart to God. But there are many ways of lifting. It begins with vocal prayer, the one all of us are so familiar with. It goes on to mental prayer and meditation, a prayer that all too many people are unfamiliar with. This "lifting" also includes the prayer of silence, the prayer of the heart, contemplative prayer, unknown to still more people.

I like that analysis, for the writer is pointing us to the “width” of prayer and encouraging us to be comfortable with styles that may have been under-utilised by many of us for too long. But I take issue with one thing, and that’s the use of her phrase “It begins with”. For I believe she’s got the process the wrong way round. Let me explain why.

Our church has a prayer-group, dedicated people who meet weekly on Zoom (an arrangement from the Covid lockdowns, which has continued successfully ever since). Members of the congregation are encouraged to submit prayer-requests. At the end of each pew in church are “prayer cards” on which people can write names, places and situations for prayer. These anonymous requests are popped in a box and prayed for during the weeks that follow. As I was stretching for a card a few Sundays ago to offer a name for prayer, I wondered: When does my prayer begin? When does it *actually* become a “lifting of one’s heart and mind to God”?

Is it when the prayer-group gathers, and the name is included in a “vocal prayer”? When my card is taken out of the box? As I put my card in the box? When I’m writing the name on the card? When I reach for a card and try to find a pen? When I think about the person? When they know they’re being prayed for? When I hear about their circumstances? When they know that I love them, no matter what?

When does prayer begin? As I’m lifted by the first thought, it seems!

A prayer for today

Today, I'm lifting my mind and heart to God – in whatever way is possible. Amen