25th September 2026

Words

"Elected Silence, sing to me, and beat upon my whorlèd ear,
Pipe me to pastures still and be the music that I care to hear.
Shape nothing, lips; be lovely-dumb: it is the shut, the curfew sent
From there where all surrenders come which only makes you eloquent."

Gerald Manley Hopkins, *The Habit of Perfection*

You'll have gathered that I've been reflecting on Kahlil Gibran's meditative piece on Prayer, from *The Prophet.* Today, I come to the final thought, an aspect of prayer I've touched on before and which Gibran puts so beautifully. Towards the end of the piece, Gibran offers us this:

> *I cannot teach you to pray in words. God listens to your words save when He Himself utters them through your lips. And I cannot teach you the prayer of the sea and the forests and the mountains. But you who are born of the mountains and forests and seas can find their prayer in your heart. And if you but listen in the stillness of the night, you shall hear them saying in silence: Our God, who art our winged self, it is thy will in us that willeth.*

"I cannot teach you to pray in words" either – not that I would begin to try. For there is no need. God will listen to our very being, and sometimes words, and our desire to find the right words, get in the way of that.

Of course, spoken prayers have a place: in public worship; when written prayers offer us just what we need to crystallise our thoughts; when the beauty of language is a wonderful offering to God. But it is not given to us – nor should it be – that we will always have the right words, or, indeed on occasions, have any words at all,

And if you still need words, perhaps these concluding words from Kahlil Gibran will suffice – slightly adapted for modern usage.

A prayer for today

Listening God, it is your desire in us that desires. It is your urge in us that would turn our nights, which are yours, into days, which are yours too. We cannot ask for anything, for you know our needs before they are born in us. You are our need; and in giving us more of yourself, you give us everything. Amen

And when you're done with that, take time in Gerald Manley Hopkins' world of a prayerful "elected silence". Walk in the stillness of the forests; gaze on the beauty of the hills; be soothed by the sounds of the sea. Know that God hears the beat of *your* heart, the gentleness of *your* breathing, the yearnings of *your* soul, the expansiveness of *your* searching, the depths of *your* desires and the mysteries of *your* mind.

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