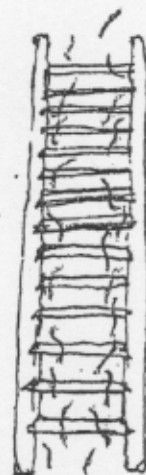


Jacob's Ladder ~ contemplative prayer

Jacob's ladder is an apt symbol for prayer – a symbol of the reciprocal love of God and humankind. Is it God's initiative? Does *God* put the desire in our hearts? Or is it our longings, our desires that bring down God's love? Whatever Angels are in themselves, the word *angel* means *messenger* – they are entities, energies, in this instance ascending and descending, a connection between heaven and earth, whether heaven be spatial, an actual place, or a state of existence, does not matter, we are speaking in metaphorical terms. Our Lord himself speaks in metaphorical language when he says to Nathaniel, "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man". (John 1:51)



What is this connection? Why do some people find it so natural, even necessary, as necessary as the air we breathe, to connect with God, while others are not aware of their need and do not begin to realise this other dimension to life. Personally I believe a lot of people are praying, are connecting with their creator, God, without realising it. Mendelssohn said "Music is the language of the soul" and I think the same could be said of all artistic, creative pursuits – we are in touch with something beyond ourselves, communicating from the depth of our being.

Having been a musician myself, and realising I had been pouring out my soul, my deepest self, to God all my life, it seemed strange, almost artificial to try to pray at certain set times and in a more cerebral way. It has been said that there are as many ways of praying as there are people who pray and mercifully our community has never demanded or taught set methods of prayer. Nevertheless prayer is a two way traffic, a giving out and a receiving – an expressing and a listening, and in the early days of our journey into deeper prayer most of us need to learn to be still in mind and spirit, in order that we may receive. Various means can enable this, and they can act as yardsticks in this uncharted territory – an assurance that we are on a well-trodden path, and not just wandering off in a fantasy.

There comes a point where nothing seems to help, methods are useless. This is the stripping part of the journey when all our feelings and imaginings and self-pleasing are purified. The Holy Spirit is our guide and teacher and in this darkness our faith grows deeper and our desire, though we cannot feel it, grows stronger, and we learn to abandon everything to God. On the way the Spirit will open our eyes to all sorts of things about ourselves, things that will only surface when the heart and mind are silent and calm. "The gate is narrow and the road is hard" (Matt. 7:14) and we will need to shed much baggage on the journey. Sometimes in the early stages we can wonder if it is worthwhile, but if we have once glimpsed the Kingdom, even from afar, our desire is kindled and no earthly substitute can satisfy us.

Here the symbolism of Jacob's ladder breaks down because the path seems to fork as it takes us inward to God in our deepest self, outward in love of God in our neighbour and all creation, and upwards to God *out there*. Theologians would speak in terms of *immanence* and *transcendence*. It is our love of self, love of neighbour and even our love of God in our feelings and imagination that have to be purified in this part of the journey, and then gradually we find that the three paths are actually different lanes on the same highway and eventually they merge into one and God is all in all.

The Contemplative Life is a lifestyle which tries to enable this journey for all who feel called to it. When several people come together in community on the same quest the place can become a powerful house of prayer, a "gate of heaven" where others can come and benefit from this ladder, set up from earth to heaven.

Margaret Mary SPB