

Moments

'The two great European Narcotics – alcohol and Christianity. I know which one I'd prefer.'

Those are the opening lines of a song by British hip-hop band The Streets. It's a prayer of sorts, inspired by the death of lyricist Mike Skinner's father. 'I never cared about God,' he raps, 'when life was sailin' in the calm, so I said I'd get my head down and I'd deal with the ache in my heart. And for that, if God exists, I'd reckon he'd pay me regard.'

I'm guessing there are moments in all our lives that stop us in our tracks, moments that wake us up to a deeper need; that make us ask ourselves what really matters; what am I really living for?

It might be a death or a birth, maybe a break-up or a breakdown, a diagnosis, or an all-clear, a near miss or a crisis; split-seconds of wonder or connection with something bigger, something beautiful. Moments that reveal either how precious life is or how fragile.

I wonder when you last had a moment.

These are the moments that make us; that teach us so much about ourselves; moments when we stop to listen to our lives; when we dare to prise open that armour we grow around us.

And often these are the moments that come with tears.

Tears are one of the most extraordinary features of our human evolution. They're not only release valves; they are so often the proof of love. And it's my belief that tears actually are the deepest prayers.

Tears are made of sorrow, and frustration, of anger, wonder, compassion. Tears are made of love.

This very raw and very human prayer we heard a few moments ago from the Psalms [Psalm 56. 1-8], holds within it one incredible thought: God, however we understand that word, collects our tears in a bottle. That's poetry trying to tell us that no tear is lost; no tear wasted; no tear ever cried alone.

And Christians believe it goes even further, because God doesn't just collect tears, he cries them.

In this man called Jesus we discover a God who knows us, gets us, understands totally what it is to be one of us; you; me; a God who cries when we cry.

Tears are the cracks where the light gets through. So often they are part of our healing. And I guess that's how I see prayer. For me, prayer isn't putting a coin into some heavenly vending machine; hoping we'll strike lucky and God will pay out. Prayer is daring to show who we are; opening the armour, sharing the deepest thoughts, and questions and doubts and gratitude and dreams and insecurities, so we can heal. Prayer is holding ourselves and others and our world in that healing light that we allow through the cracks.

Prayer doesn't change God, it changes us. And there are, of course, no wrong prayers. If it comes from here (heart), even if it's a rant (like that Psalm), it's always right.

And prayer, of course, doesn't need words, because sometimes there just aren't any. Prayer is about stepping off the treadmill for a moment; hitting pause; suspending our need to be in control, listening to our lives; connecting with something, someone, bigger than us. Prayer is oxygen.

Most of us, regardless of what we believe or can't believe, find ourselves praying at some point even if it's a last resort; a hedging of bets. And some of us have felt that those prayers went nowhere; just hit the ceiling and bounced back. Like tears, however, I believe no prayer is ever wasted, no prayer ignored. God's chosen operandi of answering our prayers is so often through the hands and the kindness and the skill and the words of human beings like us. So, when we pray for ourselves or for someone else, we need to be ready to be part of the answer.

I still have a lot of questions about prayer, but in the final analysis it's not about doing it 'right' or enough; it's not about how good we are, how much faith we have; it's not an art, it's a cry; it's a reaching out; an opening up; a basic desire to connect.

Let me end with a story the artist Charlie Mackesy tells of a friend who's a hospital chaplain. Every day, as his friend would do the rounds of the wards, he would pass by the bed of one particular male patient, who would do this (V sign) every time.

The chaplain would smile, awkwardly, try not to take it personally. But then one day as he passed by, the man shouted over 'Oi. Can I have a word?'

'Sure,' said the chaplain, pulling up a chair and bracing himself.

'Why do you wear that white thing around your neck?'

'Well...' the chaplain tried to explain as best he could about how he tried to share the love of God, how, when asked, he'd pray for people.

'How do you pray?' said the man.

'That's simple,' said the chaplain, getting up from the chair. 'See that **chair...** just imagine Jesus is sitting there loving you and you can say anything you want.

What would you say?'

'I'd say I'm scared.'

'Tell him that, what else?'

'I'd say I've f'ed up my life and I'm sorry.'

'That's honest. It's okay, too, to say nothing, just sit with him in the silence, just remembering you're loved.'

After a while, the chaplain left and a few days later he was doing his rounds and noticed the bed was empty, so he asked a nurse if the man had been moved.

'No, he died,' she said.

'Okay.'

'It's funny,' said the nurse, 'that other day when you left him he was full of it, kept telling us about the chair and Jesus and stuff.'

The chaplain smiled and nodded. 'One other thing,' said the nurse, 'when we found him, he was sitting on the edge of his bed and he'd pulled that chair towards him and his chest was on the chair and he had his arms wrapped around it.'

Tears began to run down the chaplain's cheek, because he'd got it; the man had understood, this thing we struggle with, to love and be loved, he'd learnt how to rest his whole weight and fragility on this Jesus.

In his moment, that man had chosen to rest his weight and fragility on God; and that's as good a definition of prayer as we're gonna get.

You know that resting, that reaching, isn't a weakness, nor is it a narcotic, it's a homecoming.

