



February 5, 2023

Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans

Psalm 46:1-10a

Marking the Hours with Prayer:

Be Still and Know That I Am God



Golden Verse: Isaiah 9:2

“As you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians 5:19-20

Today we explore the prayer pattern known as *Compline* which draws from the Latin for “completion, fulfillment or closing the circle”. It comes at the close of the day, as we turn in for the evening rest, traditionally at 9:00 p.m. Listen to St. Augustine’s prayer:

Watch, O Lord, those who wake or watch or weep tonight, and give Your angels and saints charge over those who sleep. Tend Your sick ones, O Lord Christ. Rest Your weary ones, bless Your dying ones, soothe Your suffering ones, shield Your joyous ones, and all for Your love’s sake.

It is a time of utter peace, and sheer gift. A slightly adapted form of *The Serenity Prayer* is another one that reflects well the time of Compline:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I could not change today, the courage tomorrow to change the things I can, and wisdom, always to know the difference.

But in order for this prayer to take hold at the end of the day we must begin the day with

more moxie than mere acceptance. True and lasting peace will not come without the fight.

Though cancer robs us of so very much, at times it can offer this gift, peace through the fight. Tragic sudden deaths are so hard because lack of closure adds anguish on the top of the torturous emptiness we feel.

But with an illness that stretches across months or even years, there can be many phases that, like our lives in general, include hard-fought moments and ones of release.

At first flush response to cancer comes with Dylan Thomas (renowned Welsh poet of the early 20th century) like ferocity. Possibly penned in the midst of his father’s dying, he implores, *“Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”*

The Serenity Prayer is the antithesis to his rage and there are times when we should rage; rage against injustice, rage against senseless tragedy, rage against apathy and evil. The great Biblical women and men were not mere obsequious sycophants when it came to God but showed us how and when to rage.

Moses did not ask for wisdom or acceptance, but for a God of action to commit His lordly duties and fix history.

That little boy, Calvin's, prayer of comic-strip-fame says it very well to his imaginary tiger friend, Hobbes:

*Know what I pray for? (Calvin says)
The strength to change what I can,
the inability to accept what I can't,
and the incapacity to tell the difference.*

Calvin suggests relentless fight against the shadow forces of life. And at times this is just what is needed. Like Jesus on the cross when He pled and perhaps even raged, *"My God, My God why has thou forsaken me."*

A dear friend and member of my church in Spartanburg, Claircy Purinton, with a meek heart of gold, felt forsaken, and saw her family and friends rage at the dread word *cancer*. And so she decided not to go gently, and she fought.

Together we prayed prayers of anger, and confusion, of imploration. She wanted to give in. But she thought of her daughter, her son, her husband. She was too young, and they were not ready, and she would not go quietly nor give in quickly, and in her way, she raged. For several hard-fought years she endured. And, in time, she found health and strength once again, for several years, and so the time of raging and fighting was good and cleansing.

But the cancer came back. And she was so very tired. She talked about wanting to see her parents again, who a few years before left this life for the Church Triumphant.

This now is the time of Compline, of completion, and it even came for the Christ.

As we pray through the day by focusing on the phases of the life of Christ, this is the moment in which everything but the final, final death is done.

He has miracled crowds and storms.

He has poured forth deep holy wisdom.

He has stood up for the oppressed.

He has raised people from the dead.

He has restored purpose and hope.

He has incessantly loved and disciplined his friends.

He has fought the religious authorities who legislate love out of religion.

He has prayed. And prayed. And prayed.

And it has all come to an end.

The agony of the cross is about to be finished, the agony of pain, of betrayal; the taunts from the crowd...all is receding.

It is the moment in which Jesus is ready to embrace the absolute finality of His work and has unbelievably risen beyond the pain into a place of compassion. In addition to other interpretive problems, this was a key weakness in Mel Gibson's, *The Passion of Christ*. The Jesus whom he betrayed was utterly overwhelmed by the cross and utter victim. But the Bible shows us something more, a strength in the midst of suffering in which His love for others rose above the agony and fear.

This comes in two places. One for the man crucified next to him. The man who is filled with fear, feeling the full weight of his sins. Jesus, knowing the agony in his soul, gives him an eternal gift, *"Today you will be with me in paradise."* Second, even though it is the crowd who shouted for His death, the Romans who are killing Him, He prays forgiveness, *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."* This is a Compline prayer, no resentment, no anger, only mercy, only forgiveness, only love...

Not only had the cancer come back but the doctor told Claircy it had ravaged her. Her friends told her to fight, but she did not want to hear it, and she shut them out. Her family told her it was okay to not fight any longer and that is all she needed. She was so tired.

Claircy had finally let go of holding on. Her rage, her fear, her anger, in Christlike fashion, had all receded. Like Christ, she was already in transition.

In the final moments Jesus offers one last prayer, *"Father into your hands I commend my spirit."* And then He breathed His last.

Though Compline commemorates Jesus' death, the closing of His life, it is not a somber, quiet yes time but one in which the prayers are filled with the confidence of the Lord.

It is a most hopeful time of prayer because we have raged and we now know, whatever the day has brought, Jesus has the power to cleanse it, forgive it, redeem it – as He did at the cross. Compline is a release of all that holds us back from God's peace...

Claircy, by God's grace, had finally come to this place. And all that was left was her love for her family and her desire to reunite with her parents in heaven. And so, Claircy in so many words, like the one on the cross next to Jesus, prayed to our Lord, *"Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom."* Amen.