

Inhabited by Grace

THE WAY OF
INCARNATE LOVE

William Daniel

FOREWORD BY PRINCE G. SINGH



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Grammar that Glorifies

The forms and materials which the poet uses, his images and the meanings he would give to those images, his perceptions, what is evoked, invoked or incanted, is in some way or other, to some degree or other, essentially bound up with the particular historic complex to which he, together with each other member of that complex, belongs.

David Jones

Recognizing that the language of prayer is first a posture and second a word allows us to rethink what language is altogether. Language apps on our phones have been quite helpful in this regard. Learning a secondary language has been difficult in modern society. It has been difficult because we are often taught grammatical rules before we learn how to speak the language. However, our primary language is something we acquire through exposure and repetition. Language apps do not teach us the rules of grammar; they expose us to word associations with images on the screen, just as we learned our primary language growing up. Our parents never sat down with a dictionary or the *Chicago Manual of Style* to teach us to talk; they pointed at an apple and said “apple.” We learned how to speak by association. Before anyone ever spoke to us they first held us, fed us, smiled at us, laughed with us, tossed us in the air, and through it all we learned powerful associations

about what a parent is, what it means to be their child, what it means to be alive. We learned tones of speech before we learned which words are to be spoken. We learned words by hearing them over and over again and saying them terribly wrong until our patterns of speech matched what we heard spoken.

A subtle shift occurs, however, as we are being taught to read. Billy Collins notes in his poem “First Reader” that our parents and teachers redirect our attention from the pictures that showed the story to the words lined across the page. “They wanted us to look but we had looked already / and seen the shaded lawn, the wagon, the postman . . . / we were forgetting how to look, learning how to read.”⁷⁰

When the printed word becomes our focus we begin, even accidentally, to separate words from actions. We learn objectivity. As science infiltrates our imaginations through the printed word we disassociate word from deed. We begin to forget that language, like baseball, is caught before it is taught. In the same manner, we learned to pray not by someone instructing us on what words to use or how to use them. We knelt in the pew or at the altar rail. We held hands at the dinner table. We closed our eyes, because we know that God doesn’t hear us unless our eyes are closed.

When the disciples said to Jesus, “Teach us to pray,” Jesus did not say, “Here’s a manual on prayer,” or “Take this Book of Common Prayer and study it.” Jesus said, “Pray in this way: ‘Our Father. . . .’” Yet before Jesus says any of this, Jesus first goes off alone to pray. Jesus first reveals the need to frequent the Temple and synagogue to be present with God. It is only after acquiring the habit of being present before the Father that we can know what it means to say, “Our Father.” It is only after walking around with Jesus feeding the hungry, healing the sick, comforting and caring for those left for dead on the side of the road that we can begin to say, “Our Father.” The language of prayer is a movement before it is a word.

In other words, prayer is a movement—prayer moves us. I witnessed this movement first hand when I was a child growing up in the church. Brother Baker, as I was taught to call him, would always wander around the

70. Billy Collins, “First Reader,” in *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House Inc., 2001), 39.

church waving a white hanky, shaking everyone's hands. As a child, I found this terribly amusing. As a teenager, it only got funnier. My friends and I used to bet Summit Bars on how long it would take Brother Baker to get up and start his procession around the church. I almost always won. The liturgical tradition of my childhood, which was the Church of the Nazarene, always began with a hymn, a prayer, another hymn, a special song, an altar call, the offertory, the sermon, maybe another altar call, a repeatable hymn, and some form of passing the peace mixed in between. Brother Baker always stood up somewhere in the middle of the special hymn, and almost always during the final altar call. Like taking candy from a baby.

I remember none of the sermons I heard growing up, which, as a preacher, I find entirely disconcerting. But I will never forget Brother Baker. As an adult, I miss having someone wandering around the church telling people how much God loves them. I miss seeing prayer physically move someone out of their pew to speak a word of truth. With no Brother Bakers wandering around in our churches—people captivated by prayer who are crazy enough to tell everyone that Jesus loves them—we are liable to forget that prayer is a movement. This is by no means to suggest that the little old lady sitting in the pew thumbing her rosary has no idea what prayer is. Brother Bakers of the world will always be the exception. However, these persons remind us that prayer inhabits us; prayer bubbles up within and calls us to attention—to action. Prayer is a form, a habit, before it is an utterance.

I am now an Episcopalian. There is little risk of Episcopalians standing up in the middle of the service to wander around with hanky in hand. We have the occasional child roaming the aisle, which is altogether wonderful, yet there is a movement of prayer that is distinctly Anglican—distinctly Episcopalian. It is often referred to as Episcopal calisthenics. There is a procession and return that patterns the movement of prayer among the faithful in Catholic expressions of liturgy. The procession of the cross guides us into prayer, and at the end of the liturgy it ushers us out into the world. We follow the cross to Christ at the opening procession; we follow the cross to the gospel as the Word of God enters the nave, into the belly of the church; we follow the cross to the homily; at

the offertory we follow Christ to the cross as we lay ourselves, with our wealth and talents, and with Christ on the table for consecration; our crucified and resurrected selves return to us with Christ in the Eucharist; and the cross of resurrection leads us out into the world at the recession as we are sent, following the cross, into the world to proclaim the good news of God in Christ.

Congregants may not get out of their pews to wander around the church but we do bow before the cross as it passes before us, acknowledging our participation in its procession. As a mark of our humility, we reverence the cross as if reverencing Christ, which gives meaning to our words when we say, “Glory to you, Lord Christ.” Bowing before the cross is not accidental; it is the pattern of glorifying God in our bodies.

When we fast we acknowledge that our hunger for Christ is our true craving. These bodily disciplines are movements that make our words sensible. Living without chocolate during Lent is *not* fasting. Abstaining from a meal, calculating the cost of the meal we would have eaten, and then giving this food or money to someone who is hungry—someone for whom missing a meal is not an option—is prayer-formed fasting. Disconnected from this divine form of generosity disconnects our words from the thoughts and deeds of Christ—disconnects us from the action of Christ. Fasting is one of the many ways we are to follow the cross in procession before the world. This is what speaking the language of Christ looks like. This is what our scripted prayers call us to. They are not there to stymie faith. The words on the page are not there to stifle creativity. Rather, they open us to the creative action of God in Christ, so that our bodies come mutually to inhabit and be inhabited by their procession and return in us with the heavenly host.

Our prayers will not be “felt,” however, if we do not move with them—if we do not let them stir us to make peace with our neighbor. If we do not forgive those who sin against us, praying to God, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” bears no weight. We disconnect ourselves from the forgiveness of Christ when we are not “in love and charity with our neighbors,” or do not “intend to lead a new life

following the commandments of God.”⁷¹ It’s easy to lose sight of grace and forgiveness when we read them as scripts on the page, rather than the pattern of Christian living. We must begin to recognize that we do not so much pray these prayers as they pray us—*they pray us into being*.

71. BCP, 330.