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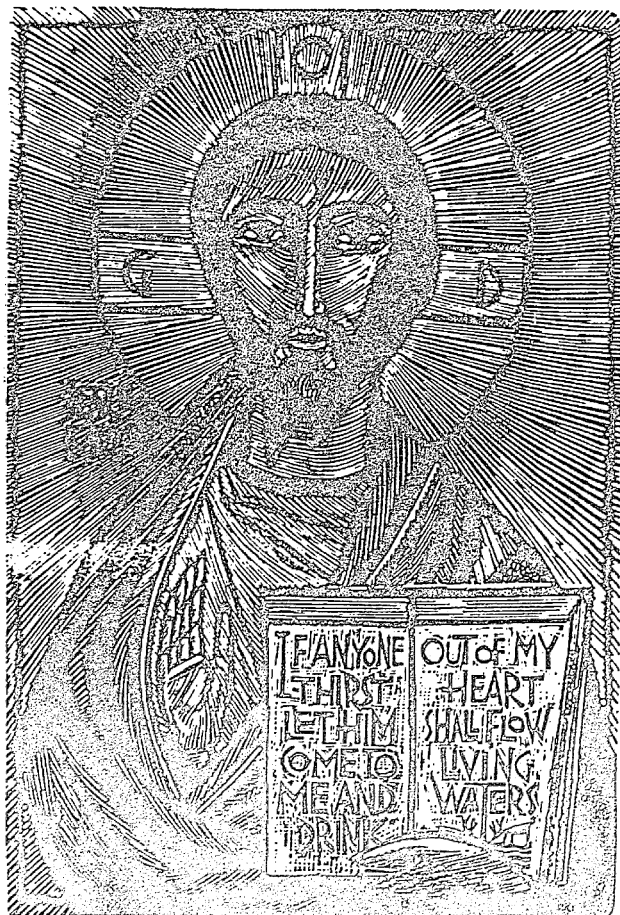
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The Essence of Prayer

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...taken from *Living Prayer*



Often, in more or less popular literature about prayer we are told that prayer is an enthralling adventure. It is commonplace to hear: "Come on, learn to pray; prayer is so interesting, so thrilling, it is the discovery of a new world; you will meet God, you will find the way to a spiritual life." In a sense of course this is true; but something very much more far reaching is being forgotten when such statements are made: it is that prayer is a dangerous adventure and that we cannot enter upon it without a risk.

As St. Paul says, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Therefore to set out deliberately to confront the living God is a dread adventure: every meeting with God is

in a certain sense, a last judgement. Whenever we come into the presence of God, whether in the sacraments or in prayer, we are doing something that is full of danger because, according to the words of scripture, God is a fire. Unless we are ready to surrender ourselves without reservation to the divine fire and become that burning bush of the desert, which burned but was never consumed, we shall be scorched, because the experience of prayer can only be known from the inside, and is not to be dallied with.



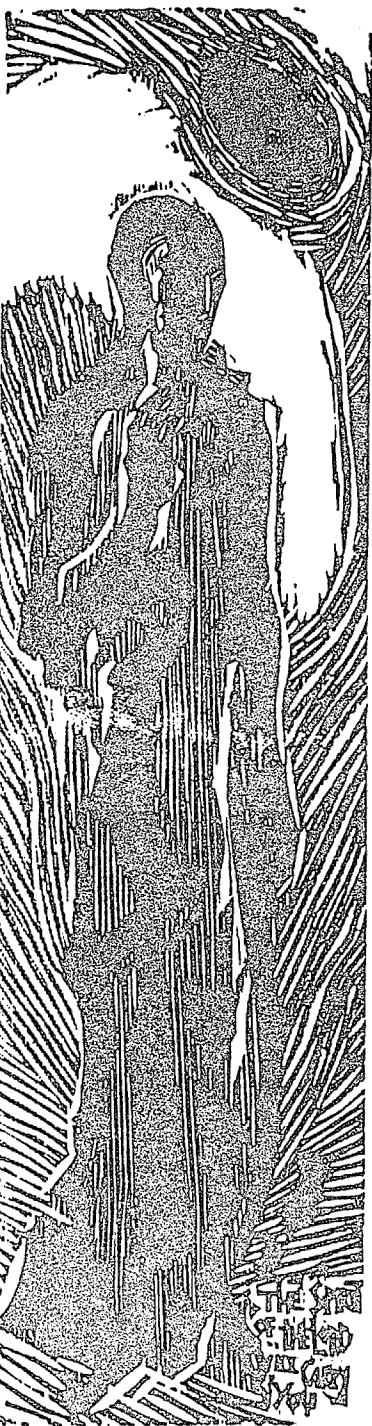
Coming nearer to God is always a discovery both of the beauty of God and of the distance there is between him and us. 'Distance' is an inadequate word, because it is not determined by the fact that God is holy and we are sinful. Distance is determined by the attitude of the sinner to God. We can approach Him only if we do so with a sense of judgement. If we come having condemned ourselves; if we come because we love him in spite of the fact that we are unfaithful, if we come to him loving him more than a godless security, then we are open to him and he is open to us, and there is no distance; the Lord comes close to us in an act of compassionate love. But

if we stand before God wrapped in our pride, in our assertiveness, if we stand before him as though we had a right to stand there, if we stand and question him, the distance that separates the creature and the creator becomes infinite...



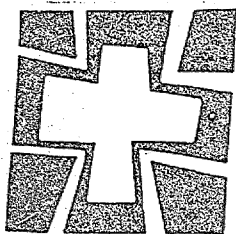
Every time we come near God, it is either life or death we are confronted with. It is life if we come to him in the right spirit, and are renewed by him. It is death if we come to him without the spirit of worship and a contrite heart; it is death if we bring pride or arrogance. Therefore, before we set out on the so called thrilling adventure of prayer, it cannot be too strongly stated that nothing more significant, more awe-inspiring, can occur than meeting the God we set out to meet. It is essential to realise that we will lose our life in the process: the old Adam we are must die. We are intensely attached to the old man, afraid for him, and it is very difficult, not only at the outset but years after we have begun, to feel that we are completely on the side of Christ against the old Adam.





Humility . . . is absolutely necessary if a man is to avoid acting like a baby all his life. To grow up means, in fact, to become humble, to throw away the illusion that I am the center of everything and that other people only exist to provide me with comfort and pleasure. Unfortunately, pride is so deeply embedded in human society that instead of educating one another for humility and maturity, we bring each other up in selfishness and pride. The attitudes that ought to make us "mature" too often only give us a kind of poise, a kind of veneer, that make our pride all the more suave and effective. For social life, in the end, is too often simply a convenient compromise by which your pride and mine are able to get along together without too much friction.

That is why it is a dangerous illusion to trust in society to make us balanced, realistic, and humble. Very often the humility demanded of us by our society is simply an acquiescence in the pride of the collectivity and of those in power. Worse still, while we learn to be humble and virtuous as individuals, we allow ourselves to commit the worst crimes in the name of "society". We are gentle in our private life in order to be murderers as a collective group. For murder, committed by an individual, is a great crime. But when it becomes war or revolution, it is represented as the summit of heroism and virtue. □ THOMAS MERTON



Miracle of the Transfiguration

THE TRANSFIGURATION or "Metamorphosis" of Jesus is . . . , no doubt, an anticipatory glimpse of something to come. He is seen conversing with two of the ancient dead. The change which His own human form had undergone is described as one to luminosity, to "shining whiteness." A similar whiteness characterizes His appearances at the beginning of the book of Revelation. One rather curious detail is that this shining or whiteness affected His clothes as much as His body. St. Mark indeed mentions the clothes more explicitly than the face, and adds, with his inimitable naivety, that "no laundry could do anything like it." Taken by itself this episode bears all the marks of a "vision"; that is, of an experience which, though it may be divinely sent and may reveal great truth, yet is not, objectively speaking, the experience it seems to be. But if the theory of "vision" (or holy hallucination) will not cover the Resurrection appearances, it would be only a multiplying of hypotheses to introduce it here. We do not know to what phase or feature of the New Creation this episode points. It may reveal some special glorifying of Christ's manhood at some phase of its history (since history it apparently has), or it may reveal the glory which that manhood always has in its New Creation: it may even reveal a glory which all risen men will inherit. We do not know.

C. S. LEWIS

