

ERIK BORGMAN

Response to:

*The Day is Yours Fifteen Years On* by Ian Stackhouse

---

1.

If there is one cliché that Ian Stackhouse contradicts, tonight as well as in the book that brings us together, it is the idea that evangelicals are, if not happy-clappy, than at least overly optimistic and always claiming to be on the brink of the final breakthrough of the Kingdom of God. Having been a grumpy old man by character even before I became one by age, this alone made *The Day is Yours* an appealing read for me. Now for us, Dominicans, what sometimes is called 'grace-optimism' is part of our spirituality. Grace-optimism is, however, ultimately less a subspecies of optimism than of hope. As the Apostle writes:

In hope we were saved. Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance' (Romans 8:24-25).

We have to hope with endurance, and therefore we pray – we have to pray. At least that is my experience and has become my conviction.

For me, as a Lay Dominican, praying the Divine Office is not a recent discovery. If something, it was for a long time a pain in the neck! It was something I considered important, something I genuinely felt I ought to do and I sometimes succeeded in actually doing for more than a few days or weeks. Ultimately, however, I always failed. We all probably know how it works: it is early in the morning and you are still sleepy, or it is late at night and you had a busy day and you are tired, and you think: this already was I day well lived, or at least well spend, and the Psalms and Canticles will still be there tomorrow – and so they will, but will I than be present? It is prayer in the tone of the invitation of the two disciples of Jesus to the man they had encountered on the road to Emmaus: 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over' (Luke 24:29). He has been good company, and it would be nice to have him around a little longer. They really want him to stay, the even urged him to stay, says the Gospel text, but they want him for his comforting company.

But what is ultimately given to them, is far beyond their wildest expectations. Their unknown companion reveals the very the presence of the one they so direly missed, the one whom they had hoped that He would be the one to redeem Israel, but also the one whom the chief priests and rulers had handed over to a death sentence and crucified (verse 21 and 20). He became present again in a radically different manner, but that only came to pass because He was invited and He accepted the invitation. I from my part, I am ashamed to admit, always ultimately stopped inviting Him – until at some moment I needed his company again badly and the whole process of trying, growing weary and stopping to invite, started all over again.

2.

But then came Covid! Everything closed down, we were locked in and obliged to stay as close to home as possible. After a while I started to notice that I went to bed later and later, and as a consequence I woke up later and later; after a while I had the feeling that I was always late, from the beginning of my day onwards to the evening. But when I had finally completed everything I had planned to do and it was already late, I did not like to go to bed instantly however. Instead I

started reading a new book or watching a film and went to bed even later than the day before. After a while I decided this should stop. I felt I needed something to regulate the beginning and the ending of my days. So together with my wife we started singing and praying the Divine Office in the church next door – I live in its rectory – lauds and vespers. During the first month we had the plan just to do it together, the two of us, to see if it worked. But somebody found out and asked if he could join us, and of course he could.

It is almost two years ago now, at the beginning of advent 2020, that we made our plans and our prayer rhythm public. Ever since, with a very few exceptions, we are in the church twice a day. Cancellations are highly exceptional and it is very seldom that we are alone, normally we pray with between five to ten participant. For some people in our neighborhood daily prayer clearly was also something they deep in the heart wanted, but just as me myself, they simply did not think of just starting. Now daily prayer is there, and if either me or my wife is not available, someone else stands in. Because people are counting on it and may come to the church, the question whether I feel like praying has become irrelevant. It has become a standing invitation, to them, to Jesus, to God – to myself. Of course I sometimes do not really feel like it and the early morning still is not my favorite time of day. To be honest, more often than not, if we speak the prayer at the beginning of lauds,

The night had ended  
and the day is opening itself for us.  
Let us pray, with one heart and mind ...  
As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,  
through the light of your presence  
in flame our hearts in love for you.  
Now and forever – Amen

the joy still has to come and the rejoicing still has to start. But miraculously, after we sang a Psalm or two and said a Canticle, after we read a passage from Scripture and have been silent for seven minutes, by the time we start singing the Benedictus, the song of Zachariah, the joy is usually is there and the rejoicing has started. The same holds true for vespers at the time we are beginning to sing the Magnificat.

3.

However, it is an uncommon joy. It encompasses anxiety, sadness, and disappointment. Praying the Divine Office makes it possible, in my experience, to truly have the feeling that, as it was stated almost sixty years ago at the Second Vatican Council, that

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ; indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1).

I started reading Ian Stackhouse book not when it was first published, but because I read about it in Timothy Radcliffe's *Alive in God* in 2019. I was surprised, as was Ian himself I understand, that a Dominican friar who must have been praying the Divine Office for most of his life – and he has been the Master of the Dominican Order at that! – referred to a book of a Baptist pastor in order

to make clear what daily prayer means. Timothy's suggestion was that Ian made clear how daily prayer was not just an activity, but how it could and should change the feel and the ordering of your days. So I order the book and started reading.

I was not disappointed: Ian wrote a book on prayer that is not just about how to pray well – in fact there is not too much in the book suggesting its readers what to pray and how exactly to pray it – but it tells its reader above all of the possible effects of intertwining the activities of the day with regular prayer. This makes prayer real, something not of necessity, but also not something you may and may not do. Prayer can become something of profound and deep meaning, returning fullness of meaning to life. Morning, evening and night prayer restores us in being subjects of our lives, Ian tells us, our lives that are so often stolen from us through the pressure of work, fragmented by social obligations and scattered by media addiction and dedication to the will to always know everything that is going on everywhere, mistaking that for being truly related and connected. The title, *The Day is Yours*, seems purposely ambiguous. It suggests that by dedicating our days to God – the day is His – we again will be in charge of our time of day, and the day becomes ours. It becomes dedicated to our well-being and living the good life instead of to mandatory tasks or self-imposed routines and duties.

Here I am starting to hesitate a little. I think about the man I once saw at the airport. I was waiting for an early morning flight and he was cleaning the floor and wiping the tables. But then he apparently had a short break and sat down at one of the tables, took his Bible from his pocket and started reading and praying. I am sure it did not make his days any less a series of work routines, cleaning the same floors and wiping the same tables over and over again – probably threatened in working harder from time to time or else lose his job: Amsterdam Airport Schiphol has a well-deserved bad reputation on paying and treating its personnel. The day was definitely not his, but he effectively reminded himself that ultimately 'this is the day the Lord has made' (Psalm 118,24), and that he is made in the image of God, although momentarily he may live like a slave. The day is not restored as his, except in these small breaks of fifteen minutes reading Scripture, but he is restored to his true essence as a child of God by so passionately longing for the restoration, the redemption of the world and his own life, that he dedicates every free moment to this longing. It made Schiphol Airport not into a holy place necessarily, but a place to which God and God's Kingdom are near.

Although of course my life is on the outset totally different from the life of this man, the aspect of giving voice to the longing, to the yearning, the craving of redemption is of crucial importance for both of us. To speak with the apostle Paul again, as I did early in this response:

In hope we were saved. Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance' (Romans 8:24-25).

Prayer is the expression of being redeemed into prayer for and anticipation of redemption.

4.

The Israeli writer David Grossman will be awarded the Erasmus Prize, coming month. In an interview in a Dutch weekly (*De Groene*, 20 Oct. 2022, 48-53) he commented on what it is to be a writer in a way that helped me to understand what it means to pray. 'I have found the place', Grossman says, 'where I can simultaneously be in the utmost vitality of life and in the total darkness of nothingness, death: by writing prose or poetry or making music.' To which he adds:

'In total submission', which means: by not taking charge, but being totally in service of what asks to be voiced. I think I can say I have found this place of being simultaneously in the utmost vitality of life and in the total darkness of nothingness in prayer and meditation, including intellectual meditation, theological study, that is supposed to characterize Dominican spirituality. From there I rediscover it in the rest of my life. 'I believe', Grossman says elsewhere in the same interview,

that together we, writers, can weave an elusive web that has tremendous power, a world-changing and world-creating power, the power to make the dumb speak and the power that the Jews call *tikkun ha olam*, the repair of the world.

To me this expresses very adequately how prayer should be understood as participating in the work of redemption: as weaving a elusive web that has a world-changing and world creating power. Prayer is participation in restoring our disorderly world and lives not to order, but to parts of a world that is in the definitive process of becoming redeemed.

Today a week ago, at the 17<sup>th</sup> of October, the South-African Dominican friar Albert Nolan died, 88 years of age. Nolan was an activist against Apartheid, and in his view the struggle against injustice and suffering was ultimately a spiritual struggle. It was based on faith, Nolan wrote: 'Faith is a particular kind of consciousness, the consciousness of God, or the divine, as loving and caring towards us. Jesus as able to do the things He did, because He put all his trust in God. And the lives of others were transformed if they learned to trust God' (*Jesus Today*, 87). This trust in God can only be acquired through personal transformation, which begins, Nolan writes, 'when we follow Jesus into the desert, by setting aside time for silence and solitude' (99). We have to break away from our tendency to be busy, because 'business is the supreme distraction', according to Nolan.

It distracts us from self-awareness and from awareness of the *real* world. Busyness leaves us stranded in the upside-down world that Jesus tried to turn right side up (90-91).

We have to become open to what actually happens in order to see what might happen if the Kingdom of God would really and fully arrive.

Prayer is opening us up, our days, our lives, our selves. Not just our days will then be ours and God's again, we will be God's again. It could be the title of a new book on prayer: 'We will become Yours, day by day'.