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Tom Ryan SM

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At Worship with Dag Hammarskjöld.

By Tom Ryan sm

'True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth' (Jn 4:23).

How are those words from John's Gospel true of Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations—the only person to have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize posthumously—who died in a plane crash in 1961? We look to his personal journal, translated and published in 1964 as *Markings*. The collection had a surprising impact, with certain passages often quoted, both then and now.

Markings could be rendered as 'guideposts' or 'cairns' used by mountaineers (a pastime of the author) as reference points on an uncharted mountain. With its Swedish and Lutheran background, the journal captures Hammarskjöld's cultivated practice of conscious (and honest) self-scrutiny, a poetic sensibility, a persistent desire for truth and, significantly, for a relationship with God centred on the person of Jesus Christ.

From 1954 onwards, Hammarskjöld's journal was something akin to his personal Book of Common Prayer—reflecting his regular access to the Anglican version, the Scriptures and medieval mystical writers. To return to the opening question: in what sense does *Markings* reveal how Hammarskjöld was a 'true worshipper', honouring and appreciating God from the deepest recesses of his mind and heart? Let's ponder this text from 1954.

Thou who are over us,
Thou who art one of us,
Thou who *art* –
Also within us,
May all see Thee – in me also,
May I prepare the way for Thee,
May I thank Thee for all that shall fall to my lot,
May I also not forget the needs of others,
Keep me in Thy love
As Thou wouldest that all should be kept in mine.
May everything in this my being be directed
to Thy glory
And may I never despair.
For I am under Thy hand,
And in Thee is all power and goodness.

Give me a pure heart – that I may see Thee,
A humble heart – that I may hear Thee
A heart of love – that I may serve Thee,
A heart of faith – that I may abide in Thee.¹

The first thing to note is how the first and the last four lines mirror each other. There is a balance of adoring wonder and needy prayer— so that the life of the Trinity may radiate in Hammarskjöld's person, attitudes and dispositions in his relations with others and in his conduct. The entry, as with the one below, is couched in exquisitely

simple language. The last verse is very easy to memorise and repeat silently whenever you want to.

Again, this prayer reminds us that the Trinity is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived and shared. It is a reminder that, through baptism, 'we are 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4). Again, if we are open to love, Jesus promised that the Father, Son and Spirit would love us in return and come to make their 'dwelling place' or home in us (Jn 14:23).

Consider a second entry from 1961, about two months before his death.

Have mercy
Upon us.
Have mercy
Upon our efforts,
That we, Before Thee,
In love and in faith,
Righteousness and humility,
May follow Thee,
With self-denial, steadfastness and courage,
And meet Thee
In the silence.

Give us
a pure heart
That we may see Thee,
A humble heart
That we may hear Thee
A heart of love
That we may serve Thee,
A heart of faith
That we may live Thee,

Thou

Whom I do not know
But Whose I am

Thou

Whom I do not comprehend
But Who hast dedicated me
To my destiny
Thou—²

This prayer's context comes from Hammarskjöld efforts, as Secretary-General, to resolve situations of conflict, for instance, in the Congo and Tunisia in 1961. Still, it is a prayer for 'us', of a person of action in collaboration with others.

Starting with what Lipsey describes as a 'Kyrie eleison', Hammarskjöld asks that all action be guided by goodness and courage. Repeating words found in the first entry above, his closing lines evoke his faith that 'God is unknown yet we belong to Him, beyond comprehension yet He takes a hand in our destinies and we can speak with him intimately as Thou'.³

Even though belonging to God may be to the God who is hidden (the dark side of faith), there is a sense of a daring familiarity in Hammarskjöld's use of *Thou* in both entries. It is a mix of intimacy ('one of us, 'within us') but also of wonder. For that reason, the repetition of 'Thou' suggests a sense of distance between God and humanity, an expression of reverential awe. God is beyond and over us. Union with God is to be under God's hand. God gives but also makes demands on us. For Hammarskjöld, within both mystery and reverential friendship, there is peaceful surrender to a sacred task, a form of belonging that calls for a consecration.

Hammarskjöld's entries remind us how much 'true worship' must find its origins in the 'heart' – in the biblical sense of the deepest core of the person embracing mind, will, decisions and freedom that is open to God. Worship can be present in someone prayerfully reflecting through the entries of a pen in a journal at the end of the day. But, also, in their willingness to share such personal secrets and intimate thoughts with others.

For Reflection

1. As you read these prayers, what did you resonate with?
2. Is there a particular phrase that appeals to you?
3. Do these prayers draw you to make them (or parts of them) your own?
4. Do you see your belonging to God as involving a 'sacred task' in life?

¹ Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, translated by W.H. Auden and Leif Sjöberg (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), 93.

² *Markings*, 176.

³ Roger Lipsey, *Hammarskjöld: A Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 522.