

Silent Reflections

Tuesday 27 April 2021

What brings you to your knees?



Photograph by Ben White

Introduction to the theme:

The expression 'bringing someone to their knees' means that they have been overwhelmed in a way that prevents them from carrying on, either temporarily or permanently. There are many reasons why we might be brought to our knees, either literally, or metaphorically. For example, we may be overpowered by awe, fear, or exhaustion.

We have heard a lot recently about 'taking the knee', an expression common in American football, but given heightened awareness outside of the USA, when Colin Kaepernick knelt down at the beginning of a match in 2016 when the Stars and Stripes was being played, in protest at the racism still prevalent in America, and taken up again in the recent Black Lives Matter movement. It caused many to recall Martin Luther King kneeling in prayer with his supporters for those who had been arrested after a peaceful demonstration in 1965.



Historians will also have recalled this stance being taken even earlier. A drawing from the 1780s of an enslaved black man became an emblem of the British abolitionist movement in the 1800s.

So, what does that position signify? It is certainly not an aggressive stance, although, as seen here, it can still be a powerful sign of protest or intent. Stooping down in some way, making ourselves smaller, portrays an attitude of submission, of acknowledging the presence of a greater power over one's life whether for good or ill.

We once knelt more than we do now, in church and elsewhere. Certainly, it was common to kneel before a monarch to offer service, to swear allegiance, or to ask for protection. Those asking for alms once knelt to plead with passers-by, but now tend to sit with bowed heads at the side of the street, in England anyway, but almost always assuming a submissive pose.

People still kneel at the altar rail in some Anglican churches to receive the Eucharist, but few people kneel to pray. Is it just to do with the removal of pews with built-in kneelers, or our own ageing knees? Some of us fear that, if we got down on our knees, we wouldn't be able to get up again without help; for others it has always been an impossibility to physically kneel down. In your private prayers, did you as a child kneel by your bed to say your prayers? Perhaps you still do. Maybe it is now more generally felt that taking another stance shows just as much respect.

In everyday life, we might bend down, or kneel to get to a child's level, or for exercise in a Pilates class. **But this is very different to being brought to our knees, because we can do no other.**

The Catholic journalist, Joseph Serwach, writes about kneeling as a sign of surrender, our last port of call in need (which is often God):

When all else fails, we surrender, hands up, falling to our knees. Many good people have their own story of total surrender: We spend years doing things our way, looking everywhere for love, for fun, and answers. When all else fails, we try the one last thing: surrendering. Usually, it involves a relationship, one door slamming shut: someone is dying or already dead, a job is lost, a dying marriage, animosity within families, a time of public humiliation, or a time when we are out of money and hope, a moment when the world seems almost united against us. We surrender, falling on our knees, pleading, "What do you want me to do, God? I'll do whatever You want me to do. Give me the strength, send me a sign, please show me The Way." That moment of surrender is when the impersonal relationship (thinking of God as a force of nature or maybe a kind, good teacher) turns into a personal relationship, where respect turns into a close encounter, getting to know Him.

Below are some examples of people having a sudden overwhelming sense of the presence of God, and feeling that their only response can be to fall on their knees:

Timothy Radcliffe (*Alive in God*)

...our faith offers us an ancient tradition of what to do when we are touched by the infinite and the world is full of glory. We kneel down.

Bede Griffiths (*The Golden String*)

Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look at the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.

Etty Hillesum (*An interrupted Life*)

A desire to kneel down sometimes pulses through my body, or rather it is as if my body had been meant and made for the act of kneeling. Sometimes, in moments of deep gratitude, kneeling down becomes an overwhelming urge, head deeply bowed, hands before my face....Sometimes, when I least expect it, someone suddenly kneels down in the corner of my being when I am out walking, or just talking to people, and that someone, the one who kneels down, is myself.

The Summer's Day (Mary Oliver)

...
*I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,*
...



Elizabeth Goudge in her book, *Green Dolphin Country*, describes this scene of an elderly nun with arthritic knees coming to pray:

No doubt Reverend Mother had known what she was doing when she commanded the oldest of her nuns to pray at this hour for the children of the world. No doubt one prayed more effectively for the weak if one was weak oneself...Mère Madeleine recollected and strengthened herself with all the will and courage that she had. As a punishment for wandering thoughts she dragged herself off her chair and knelt down, groaning with the pain, to pray for all children in danger...So she murmured and prayed and rocked herself, until at last the will triumphed, the soul shook herself free of the body's pain and mounted like a bird into that clear air of contemplation where words are caught away by the wind, where the soul listens, hovering with spread wings, while through the silver feathers the light falls as sun through the rain, and men on earth look up and see the brightness and know that they are saved. Mère Madeleine rocked herself no more. Her lips were still, her hands quiet, her face an old cameo carved from ivory. Any one entering the Chapel would have seen her only as a motionless shadow before the statue of the Holy Child...

Malcolm Guite's Ninth Station – Jesus falls for the third time

*He weeps with you and with you he will stay
When all your staying power has run out
You can't go on, you go on anyway.
He stumbles just beside you when the doubt
That always haunts you, cuts you down at last
And takes away the hope that drove you on.
This is the third fall and it hurts the worst
This long descent through darkness to depression
From which there seems no rising and no will
To rise, or breathe or bear your own heart beat.
Twice you survived; this third will surely kill,
And you could almost wish for that defeat
Except that in the cold hell where you freeze
You find your God beside you on his knees.*

The Gospel song, *Let Us Break Bread Together*, has the chorus:

When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me. (on me)



In Jesus day, prostrating oneself or kneeling was more common, and still is in the East. Adult children will stoop to touch the feet of their elderly relatives in respect, and the kneeling prayer and prostrations of Muslims would be more familiar to Jesus than our own church worship.

Here are some examples from the Bible of people falling to their knees, or prostrating themselves:

In recognition of the holiness of God

Genesis 17:1-3

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' Then Abram fell on his face;

Matthew 2:10-11

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.

Matthew 17:5-6

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

Mark 3:11

Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!' But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

To worship

Psalms 95:6

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

Matthew 4:8-10

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'

Philippians 2:10

so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

Revelation 19:4

And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God who is seated on the throne, saying, 'Amen. Hallelujah!'

To plead for release

Matthew 18:26-27

So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

Matthew 26:39

And going a little farther, he (Jesus) threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me;'

To make a confession

Luke 8:46-7

Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me." When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed.

To ask a favour

Matthew 20:20-21

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.'

To beg for healing

Mark 1:40

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.'

Mark 5:22-23

Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.'

Mark 7:25-26

... a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

To give thanks

Luke 17:15-16

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

To invite consolation

John 11:31-33

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

Settling down for meditation, we are encouraged to become aware of our bodies and to acknowledge any tensions, to try to find a posture that helps us to focus on our prayer and not to distract us unnecessarily. It may be necessary, at times, as it was for Mère Madeleine, to literally kneel down even though for her the pain was initially excruciating. Or we may take some other stance to offer ourselves: in worship with hearts full of joyful thanks and praise, in surrender, in penitence, or in desperation. Perhaps we stand, or bow our heads, or raise our arms, as our own way of 'falling on our knees'.

Points to ponder:

- Have there been times when you have been 'brought to your knees' in any of the ways mentioned above? Reflect on the circumstances and how you felt at the time.
- You may want to come to God now 'on your knees' whether it be in great anxiety, in exhaustion, or in immense joy.
- How do you position your body when you come to pray? Is your position for private prayer different from your position for public prayer? Why is that? How does your posture affect your prayer?