

Proper 12 Year C 2019

When we hear of racial tension, of street crime and people being mugged, of people wondering where their next meal will come from or stories about evil powerfully at work we probably think about the poorer, inner city areas of our world. In fact, all these issues appear in Chapter 10 of Luke's Gospel in some shape or form. And it is out of this experience of precariousness and vulnerability that the disciples ask Jesus in today's gospel, in Chapter 11, how to pray, how they might share his resilience and serenity. And the prayer Jesus gives them (The Lord's Prayer) recognises this human vulnerability in the things it asks for – give us daily bread; do not bring us to the time of trial or into crisis, as one translation puts it; deliver us from evil and so on. But, if living in an uncertain world *was* a motivation for the disciples to go deeper into prayer what about us? Well, this morning I want to suggest three things that might encourage us to want to grow in prayer.

First, prayer is a relationship. Prayer has nothing to do with whether we have a talent for prayer or whether we have

found the right method of praying. It is simply about engaging in a relationship - which is something we can all do. And this prayer relationship is identified from the very opening of the Lord's Prayer when we say "Our Father". But, more importantly it is also modelled for us by Jesus. Jesus was completely dependent on the God he called Father and yet this healthy dependence gave him the freedom to take risks knowing that the Father's love was unwavering, ever present. This is made very clear for us in Luke's Gospel when Jesus, hanging on the cross in unimaginable suffering, instinctively turns to him: "Father forgive them"; "Father into your hands I commend my spirit". In all the agony and precariousness of life and death the Father is there utterly loving, in dependable relationship.

But, it is from John's Gospel that we learn that this dependable relationship with the Father can be ours too. When Jesus meets Mary Magdalene on the first Easter day he says: "I am returning to my Father and your Father". God is the Father of us all. What is real for Jesus can be real for us also. So when, as the Psalmist says, the foundations of life are

shaken, personally or as a society, we can turn to the everlasting arms; we too have a Father in heaven whose kingdom cannot be shaken.

Yet, we know that any relationship can only flourish if we make time to listen and engage with one another and the same is true of our relationship with the Father. We have to give our attention and commitment to this relationship. If we have never taken the trouble to find out anything about God or to deepen our faith then it is this disinterested, disengaged person who will come to pray and prayer will be a chore. How can we give genuine attention to the Father in prayer if he seems so dull to us the rest of the time? Compare such disinterest to Abraham's vital engagement in our first reading. It was Abraham's knowledge of the character of God that enabled him to converse and pray with such confidence. So the good news that prayer is a relationship in which we can all share has to be tempered with the reality that we are called to be committed friends not mere acquaintances.

The second piece of good news, though, is that if we engage, God will respond. And this assurance comes not from wishful thinking but from today's gospel passage in which Jesus compares and contrasts friends and fathers. If a reluctant friend can get up at midnight to give bread to a shameless neighbour how much more will an eager generous God respond to our prayer. And if a father can give his children good things how much more will God respond to us – God's capacity for generous parenting is so much greater than we could imagine even from the best of human fathers and mothers.

But, if God is to respond to us we must first stand at his door and knock. If that sounds merely poetic the idea is fleshed out for us by one of the great spiritual directors of the 20th century, Gilbert Shaw. He used to teach the sisters of the Fairacres Community in Oxford to begin prayer by repeating the phrase: "Here I am, Lord". It is a way of bringing one's self and one's attention before the Lord – mentally standing before him and knocking at his door. And the image here is of waiting

and trusting that the Lord will respond. If we stand unprotected before God and wait, the gospel assures that God will be with us. Whether we feel his presence or not doesn't matter because prayer is not about what we feel but about what God does, often in ways we don't perceive. Our role is simply to be there; giving our time and our fidelity and not becoming anxious because we are not in control of what happens. "Here I am, Lord" is the start of that prayer and the good news is that we are assured God will respond.

And the final encouragement about prayer is that it helps us become the person God created us to be. In today's second reading St. Paul told the Christians in Colossae to live their lives in Christ, whom he earlier described as the hope of glory. Our eternal purpose is to live in Christ and let him live in us; that is our joy and our glory and one of the ways that comes about is through prayer. In particular St. Paul mentions the prayer of thanksgiving: "Live your lives in him...abounding in thanksgiving", he says. And the reason Paul seems fixated on the prayer of thanksgiving in so many of his letters is that

this is not just about expressing gratitude to the Lord but also about absorbing his goodness, a soaking in of who Jesus is so that we become one with him. We see this worked out in the Eucharist. As we give thanks for God's blessings over the bread and wine in the Eucharistic Prayer so the bread and wine become the very presence of Jesus which we literally absorb into our souls and bodies. Thanksgiving enables us to live in Christ and let him live in us. So we consciously need to build thanksgiving into the pattern of our lives. One straightforward way of doing this is, before we go to sleep each night, to examine the day that has just past and thank the Lord for each blessing, looking especially for those small everyday things we tend to take for granted.

There is a great danger in a sermon like this which *talks* about prayer. Ultimately the only way we really learn about prayer is by doing it. So let's be encouraged by the knowledge that prayer is a relationship with the Father who loves us and longs to respond to us generously. And as we engage ever more

deeply so let us be encouraged that we are becoming the people God wants us to be – human beings who are fully alive.