

Seventeenth Sunday C 2013

Prayer

To live the Christian life in a vibrant way, we must learn to pray. To live in communion with God and Jesus Christ, we must learn to pray. But how should we pray? In the gospel we have just heard, Jesus teaches us to pray in three ways: (1) with simplicity, (2) with perseverance, and (3) with confidence.

First, Jesus teaches us to pray with simplicity. Prayer does not require elaborate and complicated formulas. Prayer does not mean assaulting God with words, as if God does not already know what we need. Prayer requires only a few words, and at its best no words at all. Prayer is *being* in God's presence and asking for what is truly important: (1) that God's name will be sanctified, (2) that God will bring us into the kingdom; (3) that God will give us the food we need for this day; (4) that God will forgive our sins; and (5) that God will protect us from all evil.

Secondly, Jesus teaches us to pray with perseverance without losing heart. We need to pray again and again. Not because God does not hear us. Not because God does not care for us. Not because God does not know what we need. All to the contrary God already knows what we need before we ask it. But we need to ask God again and again. For it is in asking that we begin to understand God's will. It is in asking that we begin to conform ourselves to God's will. It is in persevering in prayer that we understand what we truly need, not just what we want. It is in persevering in prayer that we understand what is important, not what we think is important. By approaching God in prayer in this way we imitate Jesus who, on the night before he died, prayed that God's will, not his will, be done.

Third, Jesus teaches us to pray with confidence that God will answer our prayer, even if God does not answer our prayer in the way we want. We need to approach God as we would approach a loving parent whose only concern is for the good of his or her children. We need to approach God as “our Father,” as the one who begot us, the one who sustains and loves us. We need to approach God with the boldness that Abraham displays in today’s first reading, confident that God will respond to his petition. We need to approach God with the confidence of the Psalmist: “The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs.”

Finally, we need to pray at all times, in good times and in bad, when we find it easy and when we find it difficult to pray, when we experience the presence of God and especially when we do not.

It is natural to pray in moments of tragedy, sorrow, or crisis. It is natural to pray when we are faced with personal sickness or with the sickness of another. And all of us can pray to God when we are filled with awe and wonder and experience God’s presence. But the true test of prayer is to pray always, to pray every day, whether we experience God’s presence or not. The true test of our prayer is to pray daily, not only in moments of sickness and death, but in times we do not feel the need for God’s help. The true test of prayer is to carry on a daily conversation with God, placing ourselves in God’s presence to thank, to praise, to worship and to glorify the Giver of all life.

Thomas Merton, one of the great religious writers of the 20th century once wrote: “All true prayer somehow confesses our absolute dependence on the Lord of life and death. . . . It is when we pray that we truly are. . . . when we cease to pray, we tend to fall back into nothingness.” Put another way, we are most truly ourselves when we are at

prayer, and when we cease to pray we cut ourselves off from the source of our life. Pray then with simplicity, with perseverance, with confidence. Pray always.