

## Our Lord's Teaching on Prayer

### **PART I: THE OUR FATHER**

When the disciples saw Jesus praying to His Father, so profound was the communion they witnessed that it made them implore Him to teach them to pray. His answer was to give them the Lord's prayer. St Augustine has said that everything we could possibly wish to ask the Lord is summed up in this prayer. It is a 'summary of the entire Gospel', in the words of Church Father, Tertullian, and to really live it is, according to Pope St John XXIII, 'the height of Christian perfection'. When St Teresa of Avila was asked by her nuns to write about contemplative prayer, it is interesting that she did so by means of a commentary on this most famous of intercessory, vocal prayers, thereby teaching us that this prayer is a way into deep union with God.

#### **Our Father**

So what do we learn from Our Lord's teaching? First Jesus tells us what our relationship is to the One we pray to. He tells us to direct our prayer to the Eternal Father – He who revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush as 'I AM WHO I AM' (Ex. 3.14): eternal Existence, Being Itself, El Shaddai, the God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac (Gen 50.24); the One true God, who declared to Jesus 'You are my Son the beloved, with you I am well pleased' (Mk 1.11). What almost defies belief is that Jesus tells us that His Father is also *our* Father, that our relationship to Him is that of child to parent – though in Jesus' case by nature, and in ours by sheer grace. He reveals this to the Church in the person of Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection 'I am ascending to my Father and *your* Father, to my God and your God' (Jn 20.17). And He says to the disciples 'I do not say I shall pray to the Father for you, for the Father Himself loves you' (Jn 16.26-7).

St Teresa of Avila was simply bowled over by this revelation:

'You fill our hands ... O Son of God, and my Lord! How much You give us with Your first word! ... You give in the name of Your Father all that He can give us for You desire that He should regard us as His children, and Your word cannot fail. You oblige Him to fulfil it, which is no small charge. Being our Father, He has to put up with us, however grave may be our offences; if we return to Him, like the prodigal son, He has to pardon us; has to console us in our trials, has to sustain us in a manner fitting such a Father, Who must be better than any earthly father, because in Him nothing less than the perfection of goodness can be found; and besides all this, He must make us participators and co-heirs with You' (*Way of Perfection*, 29.2).

Implied in this disclosure of Who God is for us is the attitude of filial trust, confidence and reverence that we should have towards Him. We see this so clearly in St Thérèse of Lisieux, who dared to speak of sitting on God's lap, and who called Him 'Papa, le bon Dieu', yet with no diminution of respect. Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection goes so far as to speak of being nursed at the bosom of God.

#### **'Who art in heaven...'**

Jesus continues by telling us where we are to look for Him. He is in the heavens – high above us, reigning in splendour in the supernatural realm. And yet He is close – as Jesus says elsewhere 'The Kingdom of heaven is near' (Mt 3.2), and – what is more – 'the Kingdom of Heaven is within you' (Lk 17.21). As St Teresa teaches:

‘However quietly we speak, He is so near that He will hear us: we need no wings to go in search of Him but have only to find a place where we can be alone and look upon Him present within us’ (*Way of Perfection*, 28.2).

### **Hallowed be Your Name**

May God’s name be held holy. This is tantamount to saying ‘May all people revere and honour You as God. May all believe. Let all be saved. May I praise and magnify You here on earth as You deserve’. ‘In Heaven’ St Teresa tells us we will experience ‘a great interior satisfaction when we see that all are hallowing and praising the Lord and blessing His Name’ (*WP* 30.6). That the Father should receive the glory due to Him was the intention closest to Jesus’ heart: ‘Father! Glorify Your name’ (Jn 12.28).

### **Thy Kingdom Come**

May God’s reign of truth, justice and peace, mercy and righteousness prevail everywhere. We pray for the hastening of the coming of the new heavens and the new earth, the decisive defeat of all forms of evil and oppression throughout the world. We pray for this Kingdom to come in our own hearts especially.

### **Thy Will be done on Earth as in Heaven**

When Jesus teaches us to pray that God’s will may be done we are in effect praying for the triumph of goodness, the enactment of good laws, the reign of peace. St Augustine teaches that here we also pray for ourselves – that we will not resist God’s will. We pray that the Holy Spirit will inspire us, that we will recognise which inspirations come from Him and be given the strength to correspond with grace.

Jesus Himself uttered this prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking the Father to remove the chalice of suffering ‘yet not my will, but Thine be done’ (Lk 22.42). It is a prayer He must (in His humanity) have learnt from His Mother, Mary, who began her life mission – that would both fill her with grace, and pierce her heart with sorrows – with the words ‘I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be done to me according to Thy Word’ (Lk 1.38). We ask that the divine will may take total possession of us, that He may speak and think, pray and act in us.

St Teresa tells us we must not be surprised if the lot marked out for us as servants of God is the Cross, since this is what God gave His own beloved Son, and since it is suffering that He seems to unerringly mete out to His saints. Indeed, she says the measure of our love for God is our willingness to carry a large Cross or a small one. ‘What better sign of friendship is there than for Him to give you what He gave Himself?’ (*Way of Perfection*, ch 17).

‘Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour?’ No, it is for this purpose that I have come to this hour.’ Jesus rises from His anguish stepping above it to ask the Father, ‘Father glorify Your Name’, to which the Father responds, ‘I will glorify it’ (Jn 12.27). The Cross – and Christ’s willing acceptance of it for our salvation – is the means by which God is glorified.

### **Give us this day our daily bread**

In this petition we ask for our material bread (at the lowest level), and we also ask God to feed our mind and spirit with the Scriptures, the Word of God (His teaching for us for today), and with the supernatural food of Christ’s Body and Blood in the Eucharist. St Teresa of Avila made it her

practice at Holy Communion to welcome our Lord into her heart, as if into her house. She assures us 'He will work miracles when He is within us, if we have faith'. 'He will give us what we ask of Him since He is in our house' (WP 34.9).

Jesus says after evangelising the Samaritan woman at the well 'My food is to do the will of the Father' (Jn 4.34). In this we see that doing the work of God, discerning and then obeying His will is another type of nourishment for which we ask in this petition.

### **Forgive us our sins and we forgive those who sin against us**

These two petitions form our covenant with God – He forgives us, if and when we forgive others. 'Should you not have shown pity to your fellow servant, even as I showed pity to you?' asks the King of the servant whose debts he has written off (Mt 18.33). As evangelist J. John said in an interview 'not to forgive is to destroy the bridge over which we ourselves must walk'.

St Teresa says that real contemplatives 'pay little attention to things which pass away'. Rather they see persecutions as favours from God, and an opportunity to offer Him something back. 'They know they have been forgiven much, and therefore readily forgive others.

'I cannot believe that a soul which has approached so nearly to Mercy Itself, and has learned to know itself and the greatness of God's pardon, will not immediately and readily forgive, and be mollified and remain on good terms with a person who has done it wrong ... It is glad that the occasion presents itself for showing Him some love in return' (WP, 36.12).

### **And lead us not into temptation...**

'Lord, knowing my weakness, don't let me be tested beyond my strength. Give me the grace to overcome temptation and don't let me give in to it'. In this way temptations can make us stronger.

### **But deliver us from evil...**

St Mariam of Jesus Crucified prayed: 'From all evil, from all illusion, from all danger preserve us'. The battle we are engaged in is a very real one, and the enemy of our soul wishes to destroy us. We ask for protection for ourselves, for the needy, the Church, and the whole world.

## **PART II: LEARNING FROM HOW JESUS LIVED**

It is not only through His teaching that we learn about prayer from Jesus. He modelled prayer to His disciples by His whole demeanour and way of speaking.

### **Solitude and Silence**

Jesus 'went up the mountain by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone' (Mt 14.23). From this we learn the need to go apart, to be alone, in order to connect with God. We also need a certain amount of interior solitude to pray – we need to leave behind people and projects that can crowd our imagination: 'Go into your inner room and shut the door' (Mt 6.6). Silence the inner chatter: 'Do not pile up many words' (Mt 6.8).

### **Humility**

Jesus was 'meek and humble of heart' (Mt 11.29). He extols the humility of the publican, who beats his breast and dares not raise his eyes to heaven, simply praying: 'God be merciful to me a sinner' (Lk 18.13).

## **Gratitude**

Jesus also praises gratitude: ‘were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner’ (Lk 17.17). Jesus Himself often thanked His Father in His prayers: ‘I thank You Father, Lord of heaven and earth...’ (Lk 10.21). St Thérèse teaches that gratitude for every favour draws down more graces.

## **Faith**

Let us not forget that Jesus is also the recipient of prayer in the Gospels. As God He heals people who come asking for His help. From this we can learn the kinds of disposition that simply melt his heart. Uppermost is faith. The faith of the haemorrhaging woman who touches the hem of His garment is something He seems powerless to resist (Lk 8:43-8). Offer Him this glance of faith. The faith as well as the boldness of the Canaanite woman makes Him override His initial protestation that He has been sent only to the lost children of the house of Israel. Faith unites us to God. According to St John of the Cross faith is the means by which the intellect comes to know God, in obscurity – without seeing Him.

## **Audacity and Trust**

The boldness of the man who wakes his friend to ask for bread in the night, and of the widow who perseveres in pestering the judge for justice are both commended by Jesus as attitudes that will get an answer: ‘I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours’ (Mk 11.24). St Teresa of Avila calls this ‘determined determination’.

St Thérèse was a great exponent of boldness in prayer, and loving trust as the way to take Jesus by the heart:

‘I imitate the conduct of Magdalene: her astonishing—or rather her loving audacity—that charms the Heart of Jesus, charms my own. Yes, I feel it, even if I had on my conscience all the sins that can be committed, I would go—my heart, broken in repentance—throw myself in the arms of Jesus because I know how much He cherishes the prodigal child who comes back to Him. It’s not because the good God, in His prevenient mercy, has preserved my soul from mortal sin that I raise myself to Him through trust and love...’ (*Story of a Soul*).

## **Let Him Look at You**

Not only do we see the attitudes in the pray-er that Jesus appreciates, we see in Him God’s response. When the rich young man comes to Him asking ‘what must I do...?’ Jesus ‘looked at him and loved him’ (Mk 10.21). Let Him look at you... and, as St Elizabeth of the Trinity taught, ‘Let Yourself be Loved’.

## **Virtue helps prayer**

Most of Jesus’ teaching is not about prayer *per se*, even though He was a man of prayer, and expected His disciples to pray. Most of His teaching is about loving and forgiving one another, humility, detachment, mercy and generosity to the poor, peace and reconciling with enemies. From this we can infer, as St Teresa of Avila did, that these virtues must help the life of prayer and ultimate union with God, and that, conversely, anger, unforgiveness, attachments, lust and greed block this relationship.

## **Prayer is completed in sacrifice**

When the disciples are stymied by a case of demon possession that is beyond them, Jesus responds: ‘This kind cannot come out except by prayer and fasting’ (Mt 17.21). Here Jesus teaches that prayer has to be backed up by sacrifice. Prayer for Jesus culminates in the total gift of His life. On the Cross, we hear Jesus cry, ‘I thirst’ (Jn 19.28). He is thirsty for souls. We hear Him abandon Himself into the Father’s hands, ‘Into Your hands I commend my spirit’ (Lk 23.46). We hear Him intercede and forgive: ‘Forgive them Father, they know not what they are doing’ (Lk 23.34). Here are words of prayer, still. Yet in this moment, Christ’s appointed hour, He prays less by words and more by deeds, by His offering of His life in sacrifice. ‘Greater love has no man than to lay down His life for His friends’ (Jn 15:13).

We will see in the series of pen-portraits on Carmelite saints on prayer that will follow, that *to pray is to love*, and therefore *to love is to pray*. Love ultimately is to lay down your life for others: ‘Greater love has no man than he who lays down his life for his friends’ (Jn 15:13). On the Cross, Jesus not only *is praying*, He has *become prayer*. Our Carmelite saints, by entering into the prayer of Jesus, enter into His very being, and His experience is repeated in them. The way leading there is sacrifice, and the end of the road is sacrifice – for Edith Stein most dramatically in a life poured out as holocaust in the concentration camp of Auschwitz.

God’s will is always love, and prayer opens our hearts to follow that will. And so, sacrifice when required of us, ultimately leads to joy – the joy of following the Lord’s own way more closely, of assisting Him in His grand project of Love, and of slaking His thirst for His poor creatures’ love in return for Love.

**by Dolgellau Carmel, Wales**

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