

“Lord, Teach Us To Pray”

“Lord, teach us to pray”. Asks one of Jesus’ disciples in the Gospel today. If we’re honest, isn’t that the request in the hearts of us all? Don’t we all ask ourselves, what is prayer anyway? Am I doing it right? Is it working? Is there anybody there? Is reciting Our Fathers and Hail Marys and saying rosaries enough? Is that real prayer or shouldn’t prayer be some more intimate conversation with God? Do we need to use any words at all? What on earth is prayer and how do we do it right?

Well, I’m no expert, but I think it’s true to say that prayer isn’t any one thing or one particular kind of experience or that there’s a right and a wrong way of doing it. Jesus gives a pattern and a method to guide our prayer in the Gospel and we’ll be taking a closer look at the Lord’s Prayer in the newsletter over the next few weeks. It has to be useful and effective because it comes from Jesus himself. But I hope he won’t mind if I say it isn’t the only way of praying. A wise old monk who oozed prayerfulness, when asked once “what is prayer?” replied “there are as many ways of praying as there are people who pray”. And I think that is a profound and simple truth.

When I look back on my childhood and how we spent our Sundays, it was so different from today. My mother was a devout Catholic but she never laid it on thick. She was quietly devout and somehow she managed to impart to her children a deep love of the faith. In addition to going to Mass on Sundays we would come back to church again in the evening for holy hour and benediction. This consisted mostly in kneeling in front of the exposed Blessed Sacrament for an hour in silent prayer. Sure, the rosary was recited and there was benediction at the end, but mostly it was kneeling in silent prayer. I found it very tedious and couldn’t wait for it to end. But I also wished I could pray like all the people around me who seemed to be deep in personal prayer throughout the holy hour and I wondered what their secret was. What did they know that I didn’t about prayer? What were they doing that I wasn’t?

It wasn’t until I was in my mid fifties that I thought I should find out. I was on a thirty day retreat and each day we would spend half an hour in front of the exposed Blessed Sacrament. Again, I wasn’t sure what you do - and bear in mind, I had been a priest for thirty years by this stage - so one day when the people on the retreat were all together and were allowed to talk I asked them what exactly they did during Adoration because they all seemed to be deep in prayer and to know what they were supposed to be doing. I was astonished to find out that they didn’t really know either but were just content to be still and quiet in the presence of the Lord. “I don’t think there’s any special way of being during adoration or anything you need to do or say”, one of them told me, and I found that immensely helpful.

I remember talking to Leonard Cheshire once when we got onto the subject of prayer. He mentioned that he always tried to spend an hour in quiet prayer each morning first thing. He said he would bring before God in his mind people he knew who were ill or suffering, difficulties he was facing in his charitable work, that sort of thing, “but most of all”, he said, “I just sit quietly in the presence of the Lord and offer that time to him. I find If I don’t get the hour”, he said, “somehow the day starts off on the wrong foot and I never feel I’m in control”.

Another great advocate of the hour in peace before the Lord each day is Henri Nouwen, the great Dutch priest and prolific writer on prayer and the spiritual life. He said he sometime feels his prayer is useless because he gets so often distracted, but it is nevertheless very important to persevere and not give up, he says. In his Book, *The Road to Daybreak*, he writes

“WHY should I spend an hour in prayer when I do nothing during that time but think about people I am angry with, people who are angry with me, books I should read and books I should write, and thousands of other silly things that happen to grab my mind for a moment?

The answer is: because God is greater than my mind and my heart, and what is really happening in the house of prayer is not measurable in terms of human success and failure.

What I must do first of all is be faithful. If I believe that the first commandment is to love God with my whole heart, mind, and soul, then I should at least be able to spend one hour a day with nobody else but God... The remarkable thing, however, is that sitting in the presence of God for one hour each morning — day after day, week after week, month after month — in total confusion and with myriad distractions radically changes my life. God, who loves me so much that He sent His only son not to condemn me but to save me, does not leave me waiting in the dark too long.

I might think that each hour is useless, but after thirty or sixty or ninety such useless hours, I gradually realise that I was not as alone as I thought; a very small gentle voice has been speaking to me far beyond my noisy place.

So: Be confident and trust in the Lord.”

Following the wise advice of these great ‘pray-ers’ I try to spend an hour at the beginning of each day before the Blessed Sacrament. Sometimes I feel really in touch with God and find myself crying with joy with the sense of his love for me. Other times I feel absolutely nothing and can’t wait to get out of there. But the most important thing, whether you decide to give the Lord an hour, twenty minutes or ten, is to stick at it every day and always resist the temptation to cut your chosen time short. Slowly but surely, as Nouwen says, you will begin to change because you are keeping an appointment faithfully with the Lord which he will always honour because he is always faithful; and he will find his own way of entering the depths of your heart and transforming you into a child of God in the truest and purest sense. As Henri Nouwen says, ‘so, be confident and trust in the Lord’ and trust in the power of prayer too.