

**March 2016**

**1. WHAT IS PRAYER?**

What does the story from Luke's Gospel (18:9-14)—about the Pharisee and the tax collector going to the temple to pray—teach us about prayer? The key seems to be in the last verse: "all who humble themselves will be exalted." If prayer is conversation with God along with being attentive to God's conversation with us, then this story indeed teaches us a great deal. To be in relationship with anyone is to be aware of who we are and what the other is about. For it is only in this awareness that true dialogue, conversation, and sharing can take place. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector are caught up in prayer, conversing with God. But what exactly is the difference between them? What makes the latter justified and the former not? The key is self-awareness. Humility is all about self-awareness. Being humble does not mean dragging oneself down. Rather it is being aware of who we truly are and what God is all about. The Pharisee is doing all the right things but is missing the very thing required for a genuine conversation: a sense of self-awareness. To know self is to know both the good as well as the limitations and shortcomings. To know self in relation to God is to know our creatureliness before our awesome God, and our need for one another as members of God's family. To put oneself above others is not acknowledging the human dignity or worth of the other. The tax collector is obviously aware of how his actions affect God and others. Out of this stance, he realizes the need for God and the need for right relationship with God as well as with other people. He has self-knowledge and asks forgiveness of God for failing to work for right relationship with God and others. An important aspect of prayer, then, is asking and allowing God to help us develop a self-awareness that moves into right relationship with God and all created reality. Is this something you ask for when you converse with God?

How aware are you of your need for God and for one another?

How does your prayer lead to greater self awareness, as well as greater awareness and relationship with God and others?

**2. PRAYER IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Abram is a great model in our life of prayer because he put his trust in the Lord. Prayer is essentially that simple—putting our faith in the Lord. What exactly does this mean? Often we view prayer from the perspective of asking God to do something for us. Prayer of petitions abound with the hope that God will see things our way. When things don't happen the way we view them or expect them, we feel that something went wrong in the way we asked, in how hard we prayed, in the faith we had, and so on. If we had done things the right way, then God would have responded to our request for help. But Abram does none of this. When the Lord asks him to leave and go to a foreign land, he does not object. He believes and he does, trusting that the Lord will take care of the rest. When Abram asks God how things are going to work out with his descendants, since he has no children, God again reiterates the fact that it will work out on God's timeline. All Abram has to do is trust and believe that things will work out the way God wants them to. Our prayer is not to cajole God to our way of thinking and wanting. Rather prayer is attuning ourselves to what God wants and thinks. No matter what life brings, prayer should attune us to taking on the mind and heart of God. Our God is a God who has promised to be there no matter what. Such is our sure anchor and our hope. Often we feel that God has abandoned us because we do not perceive God working with our objectives or timeline. Faith is set aside and we try to work things out by ourselves. But God is the faithful one who can be trusted. God's timeline and objectives will be achieved. Our task is to trust, have faith, and continually bond with God in prayer. Prayer helps us to refine our perspective. Do we dare to pray?

How do you respond when God seems distant and far away, removed from your concerns and needs?

- What role does faith play in your prayer experiences?

### **3. TEACH US TO PRAY**

How should we pray? When should we pray? When we look to the life of our great teacher Jesus for answers, we find a very rich teaching and example. While he was with us on this earth, sharing our humanity and showing us the way we are to live and treat each other, Jesus prayed, to be sure. He prayed the ritual prayer of his faith tradition in the synagogue. He sang psalms, took part in reflection on the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures, prayed prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and petition. He also participated in the feast day rituals in the temple. Jesus prayed at home with his family. Later, in his public life, he prayed with his community. He went to weddings, which, like ours, combine festivities with community prayer. And at the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples observed the Passover Seder Meal and its ritual and prayers. Jesus also prayed alone. We know he went on “retreats” to the desert, to take time away and be still. We know he painfully prayed alone in the Garden of Gethsemane while his friends slept, and he prayed for strength in the time of great difficulty. And we know of his spontaneous and generous prayer on the cross asking forgiveness for those who killed him. How much richer a life that is knitted together with prayer! Celebrations with our community at Mass, Baptisms, weddings, and funerals help us mark the most important transitions of life. There are ordinary times when we are grateful and lift up our hearts in a silent thank-you prayer before we break bread, a thank-you whispered in our hearts when we discover we can open our eyes for another day, and prayers for help when we feel alone and afraid. There is no time that is not a good time for prayer, however simple. A mother of three little children spoke about her time in the shower as the only time she is really alone all day. That’s when she prays, she says. Jesus prayed, not because he was Jesus, but because he valued prayer. And we pray, not because God needs our prayer, but because we do.

- Name as many different ways of praying as you can.
- Why do you think it’s important for children to see their parents praying?

### **4. FORMS OF PRAYER**

The introductory verses of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians offer us a great model of how we are to pray. The prayer begins with a blessing of God. We usually do not begin prayer blessing God. Usually we begin by asking God to bless us with something. But the insight of this prayer is rich in theology and communicates a profound understanding of God. It has roots in Jewish prayer and spirituality. The mode of Jewish daily prayer is structured around the benedictions. The benedictions or blessings of God always begin with a phrase such as: “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for....” The blessing of God—for all he has done and continues to do—is the constant theme of Jewish daily prayer. From the time one awakens to the time one returns to bed, the whole day is focused on what God has done for us. The fact that one is alive once more to a new day is cause for celebration and blessing of God. The ability to rise, walk, eat, and relate with others, once more is a gift that calls for the continual blessing of God. The ability to relish the beauty of the changing weather, along with all of God’s creation is a great opportunity for blessing God. Even the ability to go to the bathroom becomes once more an occasion to bless God. Each day provides many occasions for perceiving God’s abundant presence and action on our behalf. Each occasion provides another opportunity to relate to our loving God by continually blessing God for all of his gifts to us. The blessing of God can be an individual’s response to God’s unique gifts. But that blessing of God takes on even greater significance when linked to blessing expressed in the context of family and community. For us Christians, the total favor of God is seen in the gift of Christ, the one who came for all creation, so that we might know the exuberant abundance of God. What a great reason indeed to bless God each moment. “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for the many and abundant gifts you continually shower upon us.”

Examine how you begin your prayer to God. What does it say about how you relate to God and what prayer is all about?

- Name some of the many things for which you would like to bless God, both as an individual and as a member of a group or community.

## 5. THE SOURCES AND WAY OF PRAYER

In growing up, we are usually told that boasting is something that we should not practice. It is a sign of egotism and possibly self-centeredness, and has a tendency to make us come across as better than others. Yet in Romans 5:1-5, Paul seems to have no problem with boasting at all. As a matter of fact, Paul seems to relish it as an indication of what it means to be in relationship with God and to be justified by God. "Justified" by God simply means that God has first loved us totally and completely. Jesus came to manifest that total love to us, even when we, sinners that we are, did not merit or deserve it. It is the recognition and acknowledgment of this overwhelming reality that encourages Paul's boasting. Boasting is Paul's way of publicly acknowledging what God has and continues to do for us in Christ. Paul boasts in hope of the glory of God. But Paul also boasts in his afflictions because, properly handled, afflictions can become a source of strength leading to greater union with God. Why boast even in our afflictions? When we experience affliction, pain, or injustices in our lives, we often question the goodness of God. We find ourselves asking why God is doing this or allowing this to happen in our lives. Those times have the potential of moving us away from God, or even moving us toward losing hope or confidence in God. So, especially during such times of affliction, Paul encourages us to boast in the Lord even more. The Lord is our sure hope and confidence, no matter what life brings. In prayer, in all that we do, we are to boast of that love that God continues to give totally and freely. We can never lose that love. God never gives up on us. Such love brings us peace and confidence in the Lord. Thus Paul encourages us to boast constantly and continually so that we may never give up on God, but rather continually praise, thank, and acknowledge God as our Lord and our lover.

- Name times when you were deeply aware of God's love for you. What feelings surfaced and how did you respond?
- During times of affliction and suffering, how have you related to the Lord?
- How do you feel about publicly boasting in the Lord?

## 6. GUIDES FOR PRAYER

Why become persons of prayer? Because God created and chose us to be special people in deep relationship with God and with all creation. The way to respond to such love is to love in return, growing in that love relationship daily and deeply. Such is the natural desire of any human being in any love relationship. One is willing to sacrifice much for the sake of maintaining and growing in that love. Prayer is one of the ways of growing in that love relationship. The beginning of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians gives us a number of clues toward our becoming persons of prayer. First and foremost, prayer involves a recognition and acceptance of the fact that God has loved us first and has given us every good gift. For Paul, as for us, that gift is totally expressed in the person of Jesus, our hope and our model in prayer. Modelling ourselves on Jesus, and on all those who live these gospel values, is the best start in becoming people of prayer. Like Jesus, we need to take time to pray daily so as to enter deeply into the mind set and worldview of God. But prayer, essential as it is, involves not just the words, time, or communication we have with God. Prayer requires the very incarnation of those words in our daily lives, clearly seen and experienced by others. "See how they love one another" should be the exclamation of anyone who experiences persons or communities of prayer. As we continue to delve deeper into our conversations with God, and as we put those conversations into practice in our daily lives, we too will begin to be models of persons of prayer. Like Paul says of the Thessalonians, others will be able to say the same thing of us: "from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth." This is an excellent description of people of prayer. They are people who live the Word of the Lord. That Word resonates in their lives and in the lives of all those with whom they come into contact. Francis of Assisi summed it up rather well when he stated that a person of prayer is one who is to "preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words."

- When and how do you make time for prayer in your daily life, no matter how hectic it may be
- What part will you play in making your family a family of prayer?