

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary time

I can get easily distracted while I am celebrating the Eucharist. One of the things that sometimes distracts me is when I look at children who come to Mass and then try to read if they have been taught how to pray. I can't see into their hearts and I must often get it wrong. But I do notice if children seem to have a sense of where they are. That this is where we can meet Jesus in a special way. I notice if they are listening or not.

Did you notice the way that today's gospel begins? "Jesus was in a certain place praying, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'" Two things seem to be happening. The disciples of Jesus noticed that Jesus himself was a man of prayer. They noticed too that prayer is not something that just happens. Praying is something that we need to learn how to do. As we have been reading St. Luke's gospel this year we have come to realise how prayer is so central to all that Jesus does. His disciples noticed that. They wanted to learn how to pray in the way that Jesus prayed.

If prayer is important in our lives, how did that happen? Who influenced us to become people of prayer? Who taught us how to pray? Many of us who are older may have memories of growing up in families where prayer was part of every day. Our family prayed the Rosary

each night kneeling over the kitchen chairs. And yet we were not so good at Grace before Meals. Prayer at the end of the day kneeling beside my bed was a ritual I learnt well. I was fortunate to go to Catholic Schools where we were taught by men and women who knew how to pray.

Do others see us as prayerful people? Do we pray now with members of our family? Do our grandchildren ask us to pray with them or pray for them? The world has changed in fifty years and it not as easy to pray publicly as it was when we were younger. And yet in the aftermath of tragic events in our world people feel that they need to gather to pray and to honour those who have died. There is often a sea of candles and flowers to cover where blood has been shed and lives lost. Something deep within people that cannot be fully suppressed by the secularism of our world is stirred up again, like tears that well up in us when we are hurt.

It seems that some people want to be able to pray, but don't quite know how to do it. When did someone last ask you to pray for them? How did we feel about that? Were we confident enough to pray with them there and then or did we say something like, "Yes, I will light a candle for you?" Or "I will remember you in my prayers tonight."

Jesus teaches his disciples to pray with a prayer that we have become familiar with in the form in which it is found in Matthew's Gospel. The prayer in Luke is simpler, just five petitions. The first two concern the holiness of God and the establishment of his kingdom. The final three ask for necessary provisions, forgiveness of sins, and freedom from testing. What Jesus prays in his prayer expresses the deepest reality of his own relationship with God. When we pray the Lord's Prayer we express who we are as disciples of Jesus, who desire to be in union with God and completely dependent upon the one who provides for all our needs.

The second part of our gospel helps us to remember that we need to be persevering in prayer even when our prayers do not seem to be heard. Jesus wants us to be like that friend who comes at midnight, trusting that the door on which we knock will be opened for us. Jesus assures us that if a father can only give to his child what is good, then surely God will only give us what is good. That good is described as the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus does not explain what that means at this point of the gospel, but as we keep reading Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, we will come to understand what that Gift of the Holy Spirit means.

Our first reading today is a very delightful story of how Abraham was very persevering in his prayer for the

people of Sodom and Gomorrah. It sounds more like what might happen at a marketplace when someone is trying to haggle for something that they want to buy at the lowest possible price. But that Abraham could talk like that to God is a sign of the intimacy that Abraham shared with God. It shows too that God is very tolerant and has an unbelievable willingness to forgive.

To me it says something about what I learned when I was taught to pray. There is nothing that we cannot say to God. The more we know Jesus, the more we know his Father, the freer we are to bring to them whatever we want them to hear. Learning how to pray is not so much about learning the words that we use to pray. Learning to pray is more about getting to know the one we are praying to. It is when we know Jesus to be someone who is very close to us, someone who loves us no matter what we do, that we can pray to Him. It is when we know our need for his love and protection that we can call upon his help. It is when we have some sense of how gifted we are that we can thank him for all that we have received. Learning to pray is part of understanding who we are and coming to know our relationship with the one who called us into being and holds us in his hands with love.