

May 7-8, 2005 The Seventh Sunday of Easter

## Praying Like Jesus

One thing that we Catholic Christians seem to be less comfortable with than some of our sisters and brothers of other Christian traditions is praying with one another. It just has not been something we do a lot or well. It is understandable from one point of view since prayer is a deeply personal part of our lives and not something we feel comfortable doing with just anyone. We also may feel self-conscious about praying aloud in the presence of others because we question whether we are doing it correctly or are concerned what others will think of my prayer. However a downside of this is that we seldom really listen to how someone else prays. There is a great richness in hearing others pray or express their prayer in words. It can inspire, encourage and teach us a lot about prayer.

In today's Gospel we have the opportunity to listen in on Jesus' prayer. This text is part of what is known as the Priestly Prayer of Jesus or Jesus Prayer for Unity which the writers of St. John's Gospel have Jesus actually praying as a final testimony at the Last Supper. With his prayer at the agony in the garden this is one of the only times we hear how Jesus pray in the Gospels. It can give us some great insight into Jesus but also into what prayer is. I'd like to pull out some things that strike me as valuable about this prayer of Jesus. Perhaps you will find them valuable too.

First of all I find the words of Jesus' prayer to be confusing. "I am in you and you are in me...." It can be hard to follow and understand. But isn't that a lot like our prayer? It's hard to get the words that exactly express what we want to say in our prayer or what we feel because prayer involves God who is surrounded by mystery. How do I get the words that feel right? Words are important in any type of communication and so they are important in prayer.

We teach our children "their prayers" which is to say we teach them the prayers of our tradition. These are the prayers that have expressed the faith of Jesus' disciples for centuries: the sign of the cross, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be etc. These are the words of others that introduce a

person to prayer. But after a while other people's words don't work so well. This appropriately happens as a person gets into teenage years when relationships take on new importance and meaning in our lives. I find my prayer becoming more my own words in conversation with God like I communicate with good friends. This is a good, normal and natural step in maturing faith. But then prayer as conversation seems to become more limited as I have trouble finding the right words and I find my prayer becoming quieter with fewer words. It's like a couple who have been married for a long time. They can sit in the same room for hours and not talk to each other. An observer might suspect that their relationship is in trouble but that is not necessarily the case. They have grown very comfortable quietly being in each other's presence, conscious of the presence of the other and trusting in the spouse's love and faithfulness.

Actually prayer is not so much about words; it's about relationship. As the relationship grows and matures I will find myself communicating differently. Jesus was so conscious of his Father's presence with him and he gave time over to his Father. We too can do that in our prayer but it takes real trust in God and God's faithful love for us. This does not mean I can run around frenetically as is becoming more and more in vogue here these days and call that prayer. "My work is my prayer." Real Christian prayer requires, like any healthy relationship, time, attention and energy from me.

And this reminds us that some of our most profound prayer is beyond words. Like the silent prayer as a parent contemplates their newborn baby or as a hiker contemplates a sunrise on a mountaintop. There is the prayer of tears that so often is the only prayer we can pray at a time of sadness or tragedy. There is the prayer of joy as I exult in the blessings of my life or the wordless prayer I make as I gaze on a crucifix, sit before the Blessed Sacrament or merely hold my rosary in my hand in my pocket as I walk. Lately as we try to bid farewell to a winter that has lasted way too long I find myself relishing the fresh spring green of the grass and trees and the spring blossoms that are all around and uttering a simple prayer of thanksgiving and awe at God's creation.

The prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper was a specific prayer. Jesus prayed for “them”, the little band of frightened and dependent disciples gathered around him that night. Often our prayer can be very specific as well as we pray for someone or something. How often we tell someone “I’ll pray for you.” Do we? What do we mean when we say that? Do we actually and specifically hold that person up in our prayer? I know someone who keeps a list of those for whom he has promised to pray and then uses it when he prays to remind himself. Some people keep it in their Bible or purse or wallet and then actually hold it in their hands as they pray, not mentioning each by name but just holding the list before God in prayer.

At Mass we also have opportunity to pray “for” people and situations. When the liturgy of the Church was restored after the Second Vatican Council the Prayer of the Faithful was brought back into the Mass. It had been part of the ritual of the early Church but for some reason was dropped at some point in time. When we pray it what do you do? What do you do when the deacon pauses at the end of each petition? That is where you are supposed to make that intention your own. Or when he mentions several people who are sick and pauses, that is where you specifically include those for whom you want to pray. At daily Mass we actually open it up to anyone who wishes to mention someone by name who is sick, in need or dead. People simply say the person’s name and it forms a cacophony of prayer from the whole gathered community.

Sometime we don’t even know what to pray for and so we become like those four friends in Mark’s Gospel who carried their paralyzed friend to Jesus. They could not get into the house where Jesus was teaching because of the crowd blocking the door so they carried the man up to the roof and took off the roof tiles. Then they lowered the man in front of Jesus. The Gospel writer notes that they did not say a thing but that Jesus “noticed their faith” and healed the man. When we pray for someone I believe that is what we need to do: place the person in front of Jesus and trust that Jesus knows what is best for him/her and also that Jesus recognizes your faith in him.

And the prayer of the Mass can never be solely for one need or one person. The prayer of the Mass is the communal, not personal prayer of the Church

and it is powerful enough to bear the prayers and intentions of the whole Church. One of the early moments when as a young priest I was scandalized happened when a woman came up to me before a Mass and asked if the Ave Maria could be sung at the Mass since the “intention” of the Mass was for her diseased mother and that was her favorite hymn. I explained that the music ministers had already chosen the music and that the Ave Maria was not an appropriate choice for the Mass. She objected claiming that she should be able to determine what hymn could be used at the Mass saying “It’s my Mass, I paid for it.” Such misunderstanding is why we have to get rid of all connection between money and Masses. You cannot buy a Mass and it can never be just for one intention.

We can learn a lot about prayer by listening in on the prayer of Jesus. Hopefully it can help us to pray more like him.