

SESSION 5 - PRAYER

PART 1 – BREAKING OPEN THE WORD (31ST SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME)

CHECK-IN FROM LAST SESSION

Questions, comments, concerns (in person and online)

(What book of the Bible did they read? What did they learn? What questions do they have?)

MATTHEW 23.1-12 (PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH)

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³ therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; **but do not do as they do**, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their **phylacteries** broad and their **fringes** long. ⁶ They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸ **But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.** ⁹ And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² **All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.**

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

WHAT IS THIS GOSPEL READING TELLING US?

(1) WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT GOD?

(2) WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT US?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS:

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THIS PASSAGE? WHEN WAS THIS MOST LIKELY WRITTEN? WHAT DID IT MEAN TO THOSE FOR WHOM IT WAS WRITTEN?

WHAT CULTURAL, LINGUISTIC, AND HISTORICAL EVENTS INFLUENCED THIS PASSAGE?

WHAT TYPE OF WRITING IS IT? IS IT A SONG, POETRY, A STORY, A PROVERB?

WHAT WAS THE AUTHOR’S PURPOSE, INTENT, AND INSPIRATION FOR THE PASSAGE?

See Also:

Mark 12.38-40 (Pharisees – shorter)

Luke 20.45-47 (Scribes – shorter, *like Mark*)

PART 2 – PRAYER (PART 1)

WHAT IS PRAYER?

EXERCISE 1

Two questions to ponder:

What is your understanding of prayer (How would you describe it? What synonyms come to mind as you think about it?)

How do we use the word, “prayer” in common language? How does that form our understanding of “prayer”?

Examples: *He does not have a prayer. We will keep you in our thoughts and prayers.*

PRAYER AS A UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE

Like the conversation about faith, *prayer* is a universal experience. The Church has always taught that humankind is *in search for God*. Put simply, as creatures we search intuitively for our Creator. Like a adopted child that at some point seeks to know more about their origin, or a lost child cries out for their parent, we all, at some point in our lives, seek to know God. *Prayer* is that cry from the wilderness (see CCC 2566).

The second thing we might say, certainly when we survey *Salvation History* (The Bible) is that though we might all be groping for God in the dark, that it is God who seeks us out. While we may seek out “God” in many lost causes, what the Bible calls *idolatry*, it is “the living and true God [who] tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer” (CCC 2567). If you imagine yourself lost in the wilderness, how long would it take before you realized that you were lost? God knows us better than we know ourselves. So, in this way, we can be assured that when we truly pray, it is God who invites us to speak our hearts and minds with Him.

JESUS AND PRAYER – JESUS *PRAYED*

The first thing that we would say, is that Jesus *prayed*. All the Gospels account for him in prayer. According to Saint Luke, Jesus’s life of prayer began at an early age...*even before he was born*, and he inspired others to pray most notably his mother Mary, and his cousin,

John the Baptist. After his baptism by John the river Jordan, Luke records his prayer like this:

LUKE 4.1-2

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

THINGS TO PONDER

THAT JESUS (THE SON OF GOD) PRAYED, WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT OUR OWN PRAYERS?

HE WAS “FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT” AND “LED BY THE SPIRIT.”

WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT THE ROLE OF FASTING, ABSTINENCE, TEMPTATION, AND SOLITUDE?

Of course, there were many other times that Jesus prayed. He calls others to remember that the Temple ... what Jews believed was God’s House, was a house of prayer and not a den of robbers. He also prayed from the Cross. His “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” just before he died on the Cross echoes through all eternity. Like many of the examples of Jesus’s personal prayer, it is a reference to the Psalms. Jesus prayed the prayers of all our ancestors! As we can recall from Session 4, the Jewish people, the People of God, thought there were times that they seemed remarkably close to God, have spent most of their existence wandering the desert, alone, abandoned, and searching for God. His cry from the Cross also speaks to the depth and intimacy of true prayer. Prayer is not a time to be shallow with ourselves, with God and with others. It is not empty ritual, but rather, a personal invitation to place ourselves in front of God. Think about it, have you ever had a prayer so deep, so personal that you could not find the words to speak it?

JESUS AND PRAYER – JESUS TAUGHT HIS DISCIPLES TO PRAY

The second thing that we would say about Jesus and prayer is that he also taught others to pray. In the Christian Church his response to the disciples’ “teach us to pray” amounts to our most common prayer. Luke’s Gospel records the encounter this way:

LUKE 11.1-4

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, **teach us to pray**, as John taught his disciples.” ² He said to them, “When you pray, say:

THINGS TO PONDER

THE DISCIPLES ASKED GOD (THE SON OF GOD) HOW TO PRAY, AND JESUS ANSWERED THEM WITH THE “OUR FATHER.” WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS PRAYER?

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
3 Give us each day our daily bread.
4 And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone
indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

WHAT THIS PRAYER SAY ABOUT OUR OWN
PERSONAL “REQUESTS” OF GOD?

LOOKING BACK AT SESSION 4 (THE BIBLE),
WHAT DOES THIS PRAYER SAY ABOUT THE
WHOLE STORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE?

PRAYER IS A GIFT

When we think of the routine of prayer (we call this a *prayer* life) how do we approach the subject? Is it just one more thing that we do, or must do, in our already busy lives? Many in our modern world might be inclined to think of prayer in this way. In a culture as individualistic as ours, we might also be inclined to neglect the communal opportunities for prayer, for example, participating in the Mass, in favour of a few minutes to ourselves.

Prayer is first and foremost a gift. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, “if you only knew the gift of God!” (John 4.10). Prayer always begins when we are humble enough to know that we need to pray. Think about it, in our lives, when do we ask God for help, or thank God for the many graces in our lives. Prayer is not the place, time, or behaviour of the rude, the arrogant, and proud. The expression, “He does not have a prayer,” while commonly understood, “He does not have any hope,” or “there is no hope for him,” may be better understood as, “he is the kind of person who does not think that he needs to pray.”

“Prayer is the response of faith to the free promise of salvation” (CCC 2561). It is the great “I love you,” from God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A life without prayer is akin to responding to those who love you the most with. “Meh, I do not really need you.” For most, the first true sign of Grace, the Holy Spirit in their lives, after repentance, and humility, come *gratitude*.

PRAYER AS COVENANT – A MATTER OF THE HEART

Where does prayer come from? Prayer involves the whole of who we are. We can express it in many ways, words, songs, gestures, and even in silence. If we think of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3). In prayer we are like the burning bush. Aflame but not consumed. In the end of Luke’s Gospel on the road to Emmaus, Cleopas and the other disciple say to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24.32).

Prayer then, is first, a matter of the heart (aside, explain the ways of knowing – *biblically*, mind, heart, body). While we commonly speak of body and soul, spirit, psyche, mind, and so on; our tradition almost always understands prayer as a matter of the heart. This is not to say that prayer is purely and emotional experience, or that it is an emotive act, of course this is not the case. If we go back to the earlier conversation about, “In our thoughts and prayers,” this expression suggests a relation, a necessary relationship between our prayers, and our way of thinking, and ... with that, our way of being, and behaving.

“Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ” (CCC 2564). When we think of the word “covenant” today we often think of a marriage – *an agreement or contract blessed by God or made with and before God*.

COVENANT – MEANS A LEGAL CONTRACT OR AGREEMENT. SALVATION HISTORY IS REVEALED IN THE BIBLE THROUGH A SERIES OF COVENANTS: (1) ADAM (GENESIS), (2) NOAH (GENESIS), (3) ABRAHAM (GENESIS), (4) MOSES (EXODUS, LEVITICUS, NUMBERS AND DEUTERONOMY), (5) DAVID (1 AND 2 KINGS ... AND THE REST OF THE HISTORICAL BOOKS, ALMOST ALL WISDOM LITERATURE, AND THE PROPHETS), AND FINALLY (FULLY) IN (6) JESUS CHRIST (THE NEW TESTAMENT).

PRAYER AS COMMUNION

As Christians we do not understand prayer as something that is exclusively personal. We are the Body of Christ. Neither do we think of justice, salvation, hope ... even the future in exclusively personal ways. Prayer is not about my time with God. As the Body of Christ, prayer is, in a sense, always our prayer. As Christian we share our prayers with one another. We lift one another up in prayer. This is the substance of family, and married life; it is what defines Christian friendship. Baptism bestows upon us the greatest of gifts: to become one with Christ *and his body* ... all who have, do, and will believe in him.

If you want a great example of what the prayer as communion means, think of the Prayers of the Faithful after the homily, and Nicene Creed. Together we pray for, and with one another.

TYPES OF PRAYER

While prayer takes many different forms. As Christians we categorize prayer into three different kinds:

Vocal (*Oratio*) – this means “spoken” or sung prayer.

Meditation (*Meditatio*) – this involves reflection, *thinking and feeling seeking insight*, on Scriptures, in spiritual writing, life events ... for Catholics one of the most common forms of this prayer can be the Holy Rosary.

Contemplative (*Contemplatio*) – this involves suspending our own prayer and letting God pray with and within us. It involves long periods of silence. Not only silence outside of ourselves, but also, silence within ourselves. “Be still and know that I am near.”

CLOSING REMARKS

1. *Journal Entries – notes for next week*
2. *Online followers*
3. *Prayer*
4. *Session 6 – The Liturgical Life of the Church (The Seasons of Prayer)*

+Final Blessing