

**17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 25, 2010
5:30 pm**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

This is my third outing of the weekend preaching about the Lord's Prayer. Between the first two, there were minor changes. But I could not bring myself to preach the exact same homily this evening. (Besides Tom has been cantoring at all three liturgies and I couldn't abide the thought of his having to listen a third time either.)

So, the content will be much the same but the style is more like condensed version. Think of it as the CliffsNotes rendition. Besides it's hot out there. (The longer version will be posted on our website.)

Just about everyone knows this prayer by heart—even non Christians. It is sung, chanted, mimed, danced, acted, and performed in all sorts of ways. It is prayed in every language on the face of the earth. It is the most familiar prayer for lots and lots of people. And it has been for centuries.

But because it is so familiar to us there are things we can miss about it, and some of these things can be very helpful and are interesting. After the 10 am liturgy this morning, someone reminded me of a retort attributed to St. Theresa of Avila, the great 16th century Spanish mystic. When asked by novice at prayer how to become a person of great mystical prayer, St. Theresa replied:

“ Pray the Lord’s Prayer. But take at least an hour to do so!”

Some interesting things you may not have noticed. There are two versions of the Lord’s Prayer in the gospels. St. Matthew’s version takes place at the end of the great sermon on the mount. St. Luke’s comes in today’s gospel. There are word changes between them and there is a very different context in Luke’s account.

The disciples have watched Jesus pray before. This time he is alone again in prayer while they wait for him to finish. Then they ask the fateful question: “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples to pray.”

Notice a few things: First, Jesus is praying by himself. He is not praying in a prescribed place (temple or synagogue); he is not praying at a prescribed time (like sunset or daybreak). He is just by himself. This is not “official prayer;” it is regular prayer for regular people.

Second, the disciples do not ask for a dissertation *on* prayer. They want to know how to pray the way Jesus prays. They have noticed that *how* Jesus connects with God may explain the sometimes strange attitudes and behaviors he shows. It may make it easier to follow him if they can connect with God the way he does.

Third, Jesus’ prayer lack solemnity. In fact it is very simple and direct.

It is familiar to them. Listen to the great Jewish Kaddish prayer: “Exalted and hallowed be his great name....May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days.” It’s a Jewish prayer. Simple, direct. But Jesus addresses the prayer in a peculiar way, to Abba, the diminutive and quite familiar nickname for one’s Dad. That’s Jesus signature piece: his trust.

Forth, Jesus prayer does not begin with human need. Rather it begins by uniting itself with God in God’s most mysterious and hallowed Presence. The “hallowing” then becomes the bread that Jesus needs for life, bread he needs every day. It is the action of God’s Spirit that Jesus simply recognizes and celebrates. It is not just a petition for unmet needs.

So much for the words Jesus leaves us. But he does not stop there. He then tells the humorous parable about the friends calling at midnight for a party. This is to illustrate the attitude one should have in prayer. If friendship is not enough to get the party going, then cause a divine ruckus. Keep pounding on the door. Not to change God, but to change yourself, to allow yourself to become more open to the Spirit of God already pouring herself out at every moment of your life. Jesus assures us the sleepy homeowner will eventually respond—and so will God.

Abraham models the same tenaciousness in the first reading. It is an

equally humorous passage. Just keep bothering God; it always works. “How about if I can only find 10 just, good men?” I think of the candid prayers of Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof.” “Would it ruin some vast eternal plan, if I were a wealthy man?”

So, you want to be a mystic? You want to be really good at prayer? There’s a lot to learn from St. Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. It is, after all, the *Lord’s Prayer*. There’s a lot to learn from St. Theresa too. Use the words Jesus left us. Use the attitude Jesus joked about. And pray the prayer—for at least an hour. Try it sometime! You might be surprised.