

Ordinary 17C

We can be tempted sometimes to ask ourselves whether there is really any point to praying. We pray for peace in our world, but there seems to be no end to the chaos and loss of life in Iraq. We pray for people who are hungry and in need, yet every day there are people who go without their daily bread. We beg God to bring healing to someone whom we love who is sick or dying, but they don't recover from their illness.

Jesus says today that everyone who asks, will receive; the one who seeks, will find; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened, but sometimes our experience of prayer seems to be quite the opposite. It can seem like God isn't listening to us, or that our prayer isn't working, and sometimes this painful experience tempts people to question the value of prayers of petition, or even to question their faith in the God who seems not to respond to their prayers. In the face of experiences like that, how are we supposed to understand what Jesus teaches us about prayer in today's Gospel? How are we to respond to people whose experience suggests to them that voicing their needs to God doesn't really make any sense? What are we doing when we ask God to hear our prayers?

The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner said that there is only answer to these questions: Jesus himself. We pray, because Jesus prayed. We bring

our petitions to God, because when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he replied with a set of petitions: Jesus said to them, “When you pray, say this: Father, give us each day our daily bread.” Rahner explained that Jesus doesn’t give us a theoretical theological answer our very real questions about the value of prayer; Jesus doesn’t solve what Rahner called the “dark issues” of how we are to make sense of belief in God’s freedom and belief in the power of prayer over God’s heart, or we how are to reconcile the promise that every prayer of petition made in Jesus’ name will be heard, with life’s experience of unheard petitions.¹

Instead, Jesus answers our questions about prayer by the example of his own life of prayer; Jesus prays prayers of petition in a way that shows us what a fully human life lived in full communion with God looks like. We bring all of our human needs before the Father because Jesus himself, God’s Word made flesh, prayed out of the stark reality of his own human need. In the face of death, praying in the garden on the Mount of Olives, Jesus begs the Father to let the cup of suffering pass from him. At the same time, as he pleads with the Father out of the depth of his human need, Jesus is open without reservation to whatever his Father has in store for him. Not my will, but yours, be done. The prayer of Jesus shows us the mystery of the human

¹ See Karl Rahner, S.J., *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer* (Liturgical Press, 1997), pp. 48-59.

will open to complete communion with the will of God, which is another way of talking about the mystery of God's Word made Flesh for us in Jesus that is the heart of our Christian faith.

Today's gospel begins by inviting us to contemplate a powerful image: Jesus himself praying. The disciples saw Jesus praying, and they asked him to teach them to pray. Somehow the disciples recognized the intimate communion between Jesus and the Father alive in Jesus' prayer, and they were drawn to share in that relationship of life-giving communion. In response to their request, Jesus gives a simple answer: pray like I do, use words like mine. When you pray, speak to the Father in the silence of your hearts about your daily human needs, whatever they are; and at the same time, place your lives completely in the Father's hands, praying that God's kingdom may come. Boldly speak your most heart-felt desires to God, and at the same time, pray that God's will, not yours, might be done in our world, knowing that God's loving plans for you may look very different from your own plans for yourself. To pray like this, Jesus says, is to enter into his intimate relationship of communion of life with the Father. And that intimate relationship with God is what each one of us was made for; that fullness of life is what each of us longs for when we pray.

Jesus tells us that persistent prayer will be heard and answered; everyone who asks, will receive. When our asking follows the model that Jesus gives us today, when we ask in communion with Jesus, the gift we receive in response to our asking will satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts, even when what we receive doesn't look like what we thought we were asking for. When we name our needs boldly and honestly and entrust them wholeheartedly to God's loving care for us, Our Father in heaven will give us the gift of his Holy Spirit. When we pray as Jesus prayed, the gift God gives us in answer to our prayers is the gift of his own life alive in our hearts – that is what the gift of the Holy Spirit is. The point of our persistent petitioning of God is not to get God to do what we want, it's not to change God's mind; instead, the point of praying as Jesus taught us to pray is to place our lives completely in our Father's loving hands, so that our hearts might be open to sharing more completely in the great gift of God's divine life alive in us.